

OMNIBUS

LAND AND OVERLAND

**BOB
SHAW**



THE RAGGED ASTRONAUTS

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THE WOODEN SPACESHIPS

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THE FUGITIVE WORLDS

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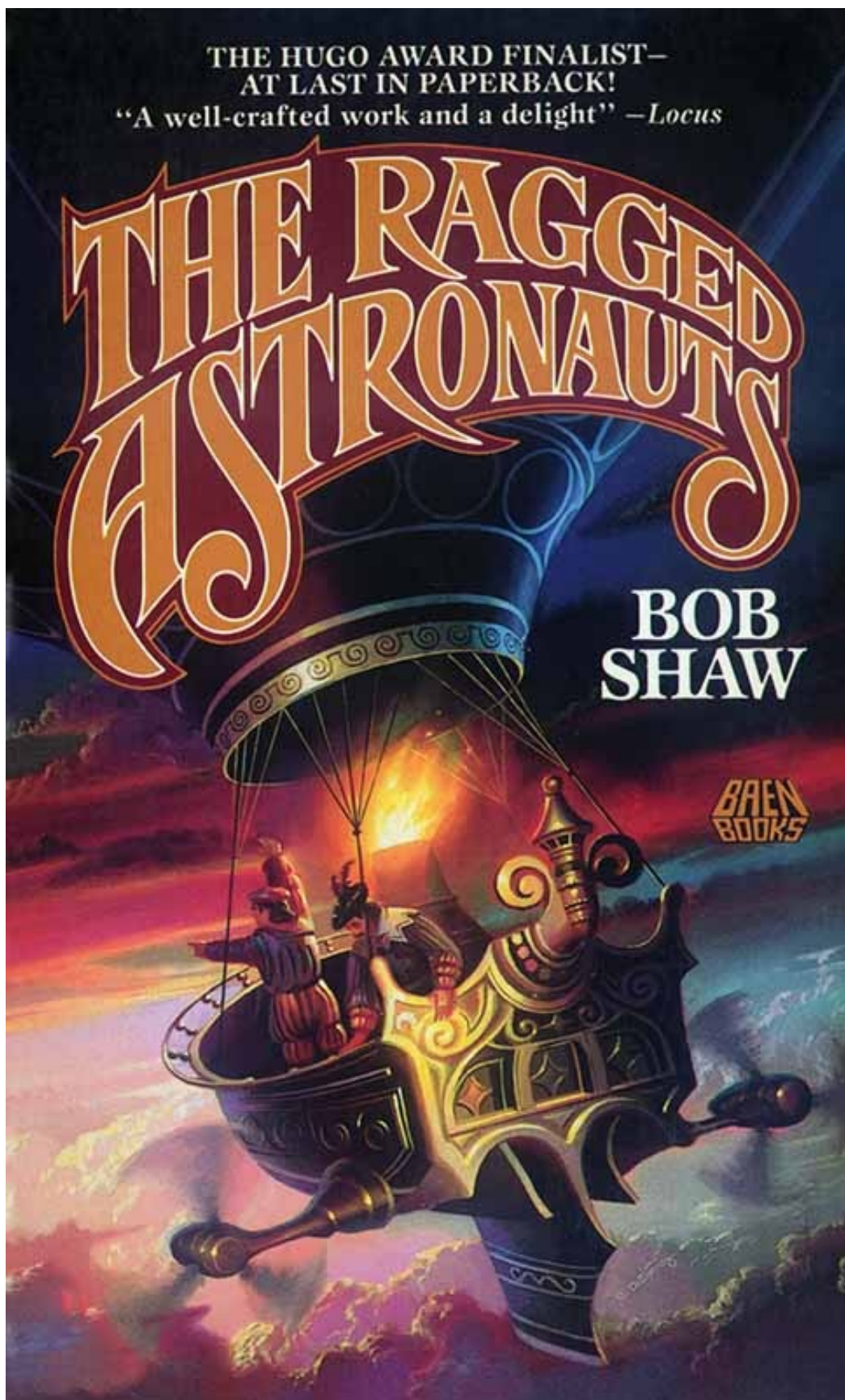
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THE RAGGED ASTRONAUTS

BOB
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BOB SHAW

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ASTRONAUTS**



THE RAGGED ASTRONAUTS

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PART I
Shadow at Noon

CHAPTER 1

It had become obvious to Toller Maraquine and some others watching on the ground that the airship was heading into danger, but—incredibly—its captain appeared not to notice.

“What does the fool think he’s doing?” Toller said, speaking aloud although there was nobody within earshot. He shaded his eyes from the sun to harden his perception of what was happening. The background was a familiar one to anybody who lived in those longitudes of Land—flawless indigo sea, a sky of pale blue feathered with white, and the misty vastness of the sister world, Overland, hanging motionless near the zenith, its disk crossed again and again by swathes of cloud. In spite of the foreday glare a number of stars were visible, including the nine brightest which made up the constellation of the Tree.

Against that backdrop the airship was drifting in on a light sea breeze, the commander conserving power crystals. The vessel was heading directly towards the shore, its blue-and-grey envelope foreshortened to a circle, a tiny visual echo of Overland. It was making steady progress, but what its captain had apparently failed to appreciate was that the onshore breeze in which he was travelling was very shallow, with a depth of not more than three-hundred feet. Above it and moving in the opposite direction was a westerly wind streaming down from the Haffanger Plateau.

Toller could trace the flow and counterflow of air with precision because the columns of vapour from the pikon reduction pans along the shore were drifting inland only a short distance before rising and being wafted back out to sea. Among those man-made bands of mist were ribbons of cloud from the roof of the plateau—therein lay the danger to the airship.

Toller took from his pocket the stubby telescope he had carried since childhood and used it to scan the cloud layers. As he had half expected, he was able within seconds to pick out several blurry specks of blue and magenta suspended in the matrix of white vapour. A casual observer might have failed to notice them at all, or have dismissed the vague motes as an optical effect, but Toller’s sense of alarm grew more intense. The fact that he had been able to spot some ptertha so quickly meant that the entire cloud must be heavily seeded with them, invisibly bearing hundreds of the creatures towards the airship.

“Use a sunwriter,” he bellowed with the full power of his lungs. “Tell the fool to veer off, or go up or down, or...”

Rendered incoherent by urgency, Toller looked all about him as he tried to decide on a course of action. The only people visible among the rectangular pans and fuel bins were semi-naked stokers and rakers. It appeared that all of the overseers and clerks were inside the wide-eaved buildings of the station proper, escaping the day’s increasing heat. The low structures were of traditional Kolcorronian design—orange and yellow brick laid in complex diamond patterns, dressed with red sand-stone at all corners and edges—and had something of the look of snakes drowsing in the intense sunlight. Toller could not even see any officials at the narrow vertical windows. Pressing a hand to his sword to hold it steady, he ran towards the supervisors’ building.

Toller was unusually tall and muscular for a member of one of the philosophy orders, and workers tending the pikon pans hastily moved aside to avoid impeding his progress. Just as he was reaching the single-storey building a junior recorder, Comdac Gurra, emerged from it carrying a sunwriter. On seeing Toller bearing down on him, Gurra flinched and made as if to hand the instrument over. Toller waved it away.

“You do it,” he said impatiently, covering up the fact that he would have been too slow at stringing the words of a message together. “You’ve got the thing in your hands—what are you waiting for?”

“I’m sorry, Toller.” Gurra aimed the sunwriter at the approaching airship and the glass slats inside it clacked as he began to operate the trigger.

Toller hopped from one foot to the other as he watched for some evidence that the pilot was receiving and heeding the beamed warning. The ship drifted onwards, blind and serene. Toller raised his telescope and concentrated his gaze on the blue-painted gondola, noting with some surprise that it bore the plume-and-sword symbol which proclaimed the vessel to be a royal messenger. What possible reason could the King have for communicating with one of the Lord Philosopher’s most remote experimental stations?

After what seemed an age, his enhanced vision enabled him to discern hurried movements behind the ship’s foredeck rails. A few seconds later there were puffs of grey smoke along the gondola’s left side, indicating that its lateral drive tubes were being fired. The airship’s envelope rippled and the whole assemblage tilted as the craft slewed to the right. It was rapidly shedding height during the manoeuvre, but by then it was actually grazing the cloud, being lost to view now and again as it was engulfed by vaporous tendrils. A wail of terror, fine-drawn by distance and flowing air, reached the hushed watchers along the shore, causing some of the men to shift uneasily.

Toller guessed that somebody on board the airship had encountered a ptertha and he felt a thrill of dread. It was a fate which had overtaken him many times in bad dreams. The essence of the nightmare was not in visions of dying, but in the sense of utter hopelessness, the futility of trying to resist once a ptertha had come within its killing radius. Faced by assassins or ferocious animals, a man could—no matter how overwhelming the odds—go down fighting and in that way aspire to a strange reconciliation with death, but when the livid globes came questing and quivering, there was *nothing* that could be done.

“What’s going on here?” The speaker was Vorndal Sisstt, chief of the station, who had appeared in the main entrance of the supervisors’ building. He was middle-aged, with a round balding head and the severely upright posture of a man who was self conscious about being below average in height. His neat sun-tanned features bore an expression of mingled annoyance and apprehension.

Toller pointed at the descending airship. “Some idiot has travelled all this distance to commit suicide.”

“Have we sent a warning?”

“Yes, but I think it was too late,” Toller said. “There were ptertha all round the ship a minute ago.”

“This is terrible,” Sisstt quavered, pressing the back of a hand to his forehead. “I’ll give word for the screens to be hoisted.”

“There’s no need—the cloud base isn’t getting any lower and the globes won’t come at us across open ground in broad daylight.”

“I’m not going to take the risk. Who knows what the...?” Sisstt broke off and glared up at Toller, grateful for a safe outlet for his emotions. “Exactly when did you become empowered to make executive decisions here? In what I believe to be my station? Has Lord Glo elevated you without informing me?”

“Nobody needs elevation where you’re concerned,” Toller said, reacting badly to the chiefs sarcasm, his gaze fixed on the airship which was now dipping towards the shore.

Sisstt’s jaw sagged and his eyes narrowed as he tried to decide whether the comment had referred to his physical stature or abilities. “That was insolence,” he accused. “Insolence and insubordination, and I’m going to see that certain people get to hear about it.”

“Don’t bleat,” Toller said, turning away.

He ran down the shallow slope of the beach to where a group of workers had gathered to assist in the landing. The ship’s multiple anchors trailed through the surf and up on to the sand, raking dark lines in the white surface. Men grabbed at the ropes and added their weight to counter the craft’s skittish attempts to rise on vagrant breezes. Toller could see the captain leaning over the forward rail of the

gondola, directing operations. There appeared to be some kind of commotion going on amidships, with several crewmen struggling among themselves. It was possible that somebody who had been unlucky enough to get too close to a ptertha had gone berserk, as occasionally happened, and was being forcibly subdued by his shipmates.

Toller went forward, caught a dripping rope and kept tension on it to help guide the airship to the tethering stakes which lined the shore. At last the gondola's keel crunched into the sand and yellow-shirted men vaulted over the side to secure it. The brush with danger had evidently rattled them. They were swearing fiercely as they pushed the pikon workers aside, using unnecessary force, and began tying the ship down. Toller could appreciate their feelings, and he smiled sympathetically as he offered his line to an approaching airman, a bottle-shouldered man with silt-coloured skin.

"What are you grinning at, dung-eater?" the man growled, reaching for the rope.

Toller withdrew the rope and in the same movement threw it into a loop and snapped it tight around the airman's thumb. "Apologise for that!"

"What the...!" The airman made as if to hurl Toller aside with his free arm and his eyes widened as he made the discovery that he was not dealing with a typical science technician. He turned his head to summon help from other airmen, but Toller diverted him by jerking the rope tighter.

"This is between you and me," Toller said quietly, using the power of his upper arms to increase the strain on the line. "Are you going to apologise, or would you like your thumb to wear on a necklet?"

"You're going to be sorry for..." The airman's voice faded and he sagged, white-faced and gasping, as a joint in his thumb made a clearly audible popping sound. "I apologise. Let me go! I apologise."

"That's better," Toller said, releasing the rope. "Now we can all be friends together."

He smiled in mock geniality, giving no hint of the dismay he could feel gathering inside him. It had happened yet again! The sensible response to a ritual insult was to ignore it or reply in kind, but his temper had taken control of his body on the instant, reducing him to the level of a primitive creature governed by reflex. He had made no conscious decision to clash with the airman, and yet would have been prepared to maim him had the apology not been forthcoming. And what made matters worse was the knowledge that he was unable to back down, that the trivial incident might still escalate into something very dangerous for all concerned.

"*Friends*," the airman breathed, clutching his injured hand to his stomach, his

face contorted with pain and hatred. “As soon as I can hold a sword again I’ll...”

He left the threat unfinished as a bearded man in the heavily embroidered jupon of an aircaptain strode towards him. The captain, who was about forty, was breathing noisily and the saffron material of his jupon had damp brown stains below his armpits.

“What’s the matter with you, Kaprin?” he said, staring angrily at the airman.

Kaprin’s eyes gave one baleful flicker in Toller’s direction, then he lowered his head. “I snared my hand in a line, sir. Dislocated my thumb, sir.”

“Work twice as hard with the other hand,” the captain said, dismissing the airman with a wave and turning to face Toller. “I’m Aircaptain Hlawnvert. You’re not Sisstt. Where is Sisstt?”

“There.” Toller pointed at the station chief, who was uncertainly advancing down the slope of the shore, the hem of his grey robe gathered clear of the rock pools.

“So that’s the maniac who’s responsible.”

“Responsible for what?” Toller said, frowning.

“For blinding me with smoke from those accursed stewpots.” Hlawnvert’s voice was charged with anger and contempt as he swung his gaze to encompass the array of pikon pans and the columns of vapour they were releasing into the sky. “I’ve been told they’re actually trying to make power crystals here. Is that true, or is it just a joke?”

Toller, barely clear of one potentially disastrous scrape, was nonetheless affronted by Hlawnvert’s tone. It was the principal regret of his life that he had been born into a philosophy family instead of the military caste, and he spent much of his time reviling his lot, but he disliked outsiders doing the same. He eyed the captain coolly for a few seconds, extending the pause until it was just short of open disrespect, then spoke as though addressing a child.

“Nobody can make crystals,” he said. “They can only be grown—if the solution is pure enough.”

“Then what’s the point of all this?”

“There are good pikon deposits in this area. We are extracting it from the soil and trying to find a way to refine it until it’s pure enough to produce a reaction.”

“A waste of time,” Hlawnvert said with casual assurance, dismissing the subject as he turned away to confront Vorndal Sisstt.

“Good foreday, Captain,” Sisstt said. “I’m so glad you have landed safely. I’ve given orders for our ptertha screens to be run out immediately.”

Hlawnvert shook his head. “There’s no need for them. Besides, you have already done the damage.”

“I...” Sisstt’s blue eyes shuttled anxiously. “I don’t understand you, Captain.”

“The stinking fumes and fog you’re spewing into the sky disguised the natural cloud. There are going to be deaths among my crew—and I deem you to be personally responsible.”

“But...” Sisstt glanced in indignation at the receding line of cliffs from which, for a distance of many miles, streamer after streamer of cloud could be seen snaking out towards the sea. “But that kind of cloud is a general feature of this coast. I fail to see how you can blame me for...”

“Silence!” Hlawntvert dropped one hand to his sword, stepped forward and drove the flat of his other hand against Sisstt’s chest, sending the station chief sprawling on his back, legs wide apart. “Are you questioning my competence? Are you saying I was careless?”

“Of course not.” Sisstt scrambled to his feet and brushed sand from his robes. “Forgive me, Captain. Now that you bring the matter to my attention, I can see that the vapour from our pans could be a hazard to airmen in certain circumstances.”

“You should set up warning beacons.”

“I’ll see that it’s done at once,” Sisstt said. “We should have thought of it ourselves long ago.”

Toller could feel a tingling warmth in his face as he viewed the scene. Captain Hlawntvert was a big man, as was normal for one of a military background, but he was also soft and burdened with fat, and even someone of Sisstt’s size could have vanquished him with the aid of speed and hate-hardened muscles. In addition, Hlawntvert had been criminally incompetent in his handling of the airship, a fact he was trying to obscure with his bluster, so going against him could have been justified before a tribunal. But none of that mattered to Sisstt. In keeping with his own nature the station chief was fawning over the hand which abused him. Later he would excuse his cowardice with jokes and try to compensate for it by mistreating his most junior subordinates.

In spite of his curiosity about the reason for Hlawntvert’s visit, Toller felt obliged to move away, to dissociate himself from Sisstt’s abject behaviour. He was on the point of leaving when a crop-haired airman wearing the white insignia of a lieutenant brushed by him and saluted Hlawntvert.

“The crew are ready for your inspection, sir,” he said in a businesslike voice.

Hlawntvert nodded and glanced at the line of yellow-shirted men who were waiting by the ship. “How many took the dust?”

“Only two, sir. We were lucky.”

“Lucky?”

“What I mean, sir, is that but for your superb airmanship our losses would have been much higher.”

Hlawntvert nodded again. "Which two are we losing?"

"Pouksale and Lague, sir," the lieutenant said. "But Lague won't admit it."

"Was the contact confirmed?"

"I saw it myself, sir. The ptertha got within a single pace of him before it burst. He took the dust."

"Then why can't he own up to it like a man?" Hlawntvert said irritably. "A single wheyface like that can unsettle a whole crew." He scowled in the direction of the waiting men, then turned to Sisstt. "I have a message for you from Lord Glo, but there are certain formalities I must attend to first. You will wait here."

The colour drained from Sisstt's face. "Captain, it would be better if I received you in my chambers. Besides, I have urgent..."

"You will wait *here*," Hlawntvert interrupted, stabbing Sisstt's chest with one finger and doing it with such force that he caused the smaller man to stagger. "It will do you good to see what mischief your polluting of the skies has brought about."

In spite of his contempt for Sisstt's behaviour, Toller began to wish he could intervene in some way to end the little man's humiliation, but there was a strict protocol governing such matters in Kolcorronian society. To take a man's side in a confrontation without being invited was to add fresh insult by implying that he was a coward. Going as far as was permissible, Toller stood squarely in Hlawntvert's way when the captain turned to walk to the ship, but the implicit challenge went unnoticed. Hlawntvert side-stepped him, his face turned towards the sky, where the sun was drawing close to Overland.

"Let's get this business over and done with before littlenight," Hlawntvert said to his lieutenant. "We have wasted too much time here already."

"Yes, sir." The lieutenant marched ahead of him to the men who were ranked in the lee of the restlessly stirring airship and raised his voice. "Stand forward all airmen who have reason to believe they will soon be unable to discharge their duties."

After a moment's hesitation a dark-haired young man took two paces forward. His triangular face was so pale as to be almost luminous, but his posture was erect and he appeared to be well in control of himself. Captain Hlawntvert approached him and placed a hand on each shoulder.

"Airman Pouksale," he said quietly, "you have taken the dust?"

"I have, sir." Pouksale's voice was lifeless, resigned.

"You have served your country bravely and well, and your name will go before the King. Now, do you wish to take the Bright Road or the Dull Road?"

"The Bright Road, sir."

"Good man. Your pay will be made up to the end of the voyage and will be

sent to your next-of-kin. You may retire.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Pouksale saluted and walked around the prow of the airship’s gondola to its far side. He was thus screened from the view of his former crewmates, in accordance with custom, but the executioner who moved to meet him became visible to Toller, Sisstt and many of the pikon workers ranged along the shore. The executioner’s sword was wide and heavy, and its brakka wood blade was pure black, unrelieved by the enamel inlays with which Kolcorronian weapons were normally decorated.

Pouksale knelt submissively. His knees had barely touched the sand before the executioner, acting with merciful swiftness, had dispatched him along the Bright Road. The scene before Toller—all yellows and ochres and hazy shades of blue—now had a focal point of vivid red.

At the sound of the death blow a ripple of unease passed through the line of airmen. Several of them raised their eyes to gaze at Overland and the silent movement of their lips showed they were bidding their dead crewmate’s soul a safe journey to the sister planet. For the most part, however, the men stared unhappily at the ground. They had been recruited from the crowded cities of the empire, where there was considerable scepticism about the Church’s teaching that men’s souls were immortal and alternated endlessly between Land and Overland. For them death meant death—not a pleasant stroll along the mystical High Path linking the two worlds. Toller heard a faint choking sound to his left and turned to see that Sisstt was covering his mouth with both hands. The station chief was trembling and looked as though he could faint at any second.

“If you go down we’ll be branded as old women,” Toller whispered fiercely. “What’s the matter with you?”

“The barbarism.” Sisstt’s words were indistinct. “The terrible barbarism... What hope is there for us?”

“The airman had a free choice—and he behaved well.”

“You’re no better than...” Sisstt stopped speaking as a commotion broke out by the airship. Two airmen had gripped a third by the arms and in spite of his struggles were holding him in front of Hlawntvert. The captive was tall and spindly, with an incongruously round belly.

“...couldn’t have seen me, sir,” he was shouting. “And I was upwind of the ptertha, so the dust couldn’t have come anywhere near me. I swear to you, sir—I haven’t taken the dust.”

Hlawntvert placed his hands on his broad hips and looked up at the sky for a moment, signifying his disbelief, before he spoke. “Airman Lague, the regulations require me to accept your statement. But let me make your position

clear. You won't be offered the Bright Road again. At the very first signs of fever or paralysis you will go over the side. Alive. Your pay for the entire voyage will be withheld and your name will be struck from the royal record. Do you understand these terms?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Lague tried to fall at Hlawnvert's feet, but the men at his side tugged him upright. "There is nothing to worry about, sir—I haven't taken the dust."

At an order from the lieutenant the two men released Lague and he walked slowly back to rejoin the rank. The line of airmen parted to make room for him, leaving a larger gap than was necessary, creating an intangible barrier. Toller guessed that Lague would find little consolation during the next two days, which was the time it took for the first effects of ptertha poison to become apparent.

Captain Hlawnvert saluted his lieutenant, turning the assembly over to him, and walked back up the slope to Sisstt and Toller. Patches of high colour showed above the curls of his beard and the sweat stains upon his jupon had grown larger. He looked up at the high dome of the sky, where the eastern rim of Overland had begun to brighten as the sun moved behind it, and made an impatient gesture as though commanding the sun to disappear more quickly.

"It's too hot for this kind of vexation," he growled. "I have a long way to go, and the crew are going to be useless until that coward Lague goes over the side. The service regulations will have to be changed if these new rumours aren't quashed soon."

"Ah..." Sisstt strained upright, fighting to regain his composure. "New rumours, Captain?"

"There's a story that some line soldiers down in Sorka died after handling ptertha casualties."

"But pterthacosis isn't transmissible."

"I know that," Hlawnvert said. "Only a spineless cretin would think twice about it, but that's what we get for aircrew these days. Pouksale was one of my few steady men—and I've lost him to that damned fog of yours."

Toller, who had been watching a burial detail gather up Pouksale's remains, felt a fresh annoyance at the repetition of the indictment and his chiefs complaisance. "You don't have to keep on blaming our fog, Captain," he said, giving Sisstt a significant glance. "Nobody in authority is disputing the facts."

Hlawnvert rounded on him at once. "What do you mean by that?"

Toller produced a slow, amiable smile. "I mean we all got a clear view of what happened."

"What's your name, soldier?"

"Toller Maraquine—and I'm not a soldier."

“You’re not a...” Hlawnvert’s look of anger gave way to one of sly amusement. “What’s this? What have we here?”

Toller remained impassive as the captain’s gaze took in the anomalous aspects of his appearance—the long hair and grey robes of a philosopher combined with the height and blocky musculature of a warrior. His wearing of a sword also set him apart from the rest of his kin. Only the fact that he was free of scars and campaign tattoos distinguished him in physique from a full-blooded member of the military.

He studied Hlawnvert in return, and his antagonism increased as he followed the thought processes so clearly mirrored on the captain’s florid face. Hlawnvert had not been able to disguise his alarm over a possible accusation of negligence, and now he was relieved to find that he was quite secure. A few coarse innuendoes about his challenger’s pedigree were all the defence he needed in the lineage-conscious hierarchy of Kolcorron. His lips twitched as he tried to choose from the wealth of taunts available to him.

Go ahead, Toller thought, projecting the silent message with all the force of his being. Say the words which will end your life.

Hlawnvert hesitated, as though sensing the danger, and again the interplay of his thoughts was clearly visible. He wanted to humiliate and discredit the upstart of dubious ancestry who had dared impugn him, but not if there was serious risk involved. And calling for assistance would be a step towards turning a triviality into a major incident, one which would highlight the very issue he wanted to obscure. At length, having decided on his tactics, he forced a chuckle.

“If you’re not a soldier you should be careful about wearing that sword,” he said jovially. “You might sit on it and do yourself a mischief.”

Toller refused to make things easy for the captain. “The weapon is no threat to *me*.”

“I’ll remember your name, Maraquine,” Hlawnvert said in a low voice. At that moment the station’s timekeeper sounded the littlenight horn—tonguing the double note which was used when ptertha activity was high—and there was a general movement of pikon workers towards the safety of the buildings. Hlawnvert turned away from Toller, clapped one arm around Sisstt’s shoulders and drew him in direction of the tethered airship.

“You’re coming aboard for a drink in my cabin,” he said. “You’ll find it nice and snug in there with the hatch closed, and you’ll be able to receive Lord Glo’s orders in privacy.”

Toller shrugged and shook his head as he watched the two men depart. The captain’s excessive familiarity was a breach of the behavioural code in itself, and his blatant insincerity in embracing a man he had just thrown to the ground was

nothing short of an insult. It accorded Sisstt the status of a dog which could be whipped or petted at the whim of its owner. But, true to his colours, the station chief appeared not to mind. A sudden bellowing laugh from Hlawnvert showed that Sisstt had already begun to make his little jokes, laying the groundwork for the version of the encounter he would later pass on to his staff and expect them to believe. *The captain loves people to think he's a real ogre—but when you get to know him as well as I do...*

Again Toller found himself wondering about the nature of Hlawnvert's mission. What new orders could be so urgent and important that Lord Glo had considered it worth sending them by special carrier instead of waiting for a routine transport? Was it possible that something was going to happen to break the deadly monotony of life at the remote station? Or was that too much to hope for?

As darkness swept out of the west Toller looked up at the sky and saw the last fierce sliver of the sun vanish behind the looming immensity of Overland. As the light abruptly faded the cloudless areas of the sky thronged with stars, comets and whorls of misty radiance. Littenight was beginning, and under its cover the silent globes of the ptertha would soon leave the clouds and come drifting down to ground level in search of their natural prey.

Glancing about him, Toller realised he was the last man out in the open. All personnel connected with the station had retreated indoors and the crew of the airship were safely enclosed in its lower deck. He could be accused of foolhardiness in lingering outside for so long, but it was something he quite often did. The flirtations with danger added spice to his humdrum existence and were a way of demonstrating the essential difference between himself and a typical member of one of the philosophy families. On this occasion his gait was slower and more casual than ever as he walked up the gentle incline to the supervisors' building. It was possible that he was being watched, and his private code dictated that the greater the risk of a ptertha strike the less afraid he should appear to be. On reaching the door he paused and stood quite still for a moment, despite the crawling sensation on his back, before lifting the latch and going inside.

Behind him, dominating the southern sky, the nine brilliant stars of the Tree tilted down towards the horizon.

CHAPTER 2

Prince Leddravohr Neldeever was indulging himself in the one pursuit which could make him feel young again.

As the elder son of the King, and as head of all of Kolcorron's military forces, he was expected to address himself mainly to matters of policy and broad strategy in warfare. As far as individual battles were concerned, his proper place was far to the rear in a heavily protected command post from which he could direct operations in safety. But he had little or no taste for hanging back and allowing deputies, in whose competence he rarely had faith anyway, to enjoy the real work of soldiering. Practically every junior officer and foot soldier had a winestory about how the prince had suddenly appeared at his side in the thick of battle and helped him hew his way to safety. Leddravohr encouraged the growth of the legends in the interests of discipline and morale.

He had been supervising the Third Army's push into the Loongl Peninsula, on the eastern edge of the Kolcorronian possessions, when word had been received of unexpectedly strong resistance in one hilly region. The additional intelligence that brakka trees were plentiful in the area had been enough to lure Leddravohr into the front line. He had exchanged his regal white cuirass for one moulded from boiled leather and had taken personal control of part of an expeditionary force.

It was shortly after dawn when, accompanied by an experienced high-sergeant called Reeff, he bellied his way through forest undergrowth to the edge of a large clearing. This far to the east foreday was much longer than aftday, and Leddravohr knew he had ample reserves of light in which to mount an attack and carry out a thorough mopping-up operation afterwards. It was a goad feeling, knowing that yet more enemies of Kolcorron were soon to go down weltering in blood before his own sword. He carefully parted the last leafy screen and studied what was happening ahead.

A circular area some four-hundred yards in diameter had been totally cleared of tall vegetation except for a stand of brakka trees at the centre. About a hundred Gethan tribesmen and women were clustered around the trees, their attention concentrated on an object at the tip of one of the slim, straight trunks. Leddravohr counted the trees and found there were nine—a number which had

magical and religious links with the heavenly constellation of the Tree.

He raised his field glasses and saw, as he had expected, that the object surmounting one of the trees was a naked woman. She was doubled over the tip of the trunk, her stomach pressed into the central orifice, and was held immovably in place by cords around her limbs.

"The savages are making one of their stupid sacrifices," Leddravohr whispered, passing his glasses to Reef.

The sergeant examined the scene for a long moment before returning the glasses. "My men could put the bitch to better uses than that," he said, "but at least it makes things easier for us."

He pointed at the thin glass tube attached to his wrist. Inside it was part of a cane shoot which had been marked with black pigment at regular intervals. A pacebeetle was devouring the shoot from one end, moving at the unchanging rate common to its kind.

"It is past the fifth division," Reef said. "The other cohorts will be in position by now. We should go in while the savages are distracted."

"Not yet." Leddravohr continued watching the tribesmen through his glasses. "I can see two look-outs who are still facing outwards. These people are becoming a bit more wary, and don't forget they have copied the idea of cannon from somewhere. Unless we take them completely by surprise they will have time to fire at us. I don't know about you, but I don't want to breakfast on flying rock. I find it quite indigestible."

Reeff grinned appreciatively. "We'll wait till the tree blows."

"It won't be long—the top leaves are folding." Leddravohr watched with interest as the uppermost of the tree's four pairs of gigantic leaves rose from their normal horizontal position and furled themselves around the trunk. The phenomenon occurred about twice a year throughout a brakka tree's span of maturity in the wild state, but it was one which as a native of Kolcorron he had rarely seen. In his country it was regarded as a waste of power crystals to permit a brakka to discharge itself.

There was a short delay after the top leaves had closed against the trunk, then the second pair quivered and slowly swung upwards. Leddravohr knew that, well below the ground, the partition which divided the tree's combustion chamber was beginning to dissolve. Soon the green pikon crystals which had been extracted from the soil by the upper root system would mingle with the purple halvell gathered by the lower network of roots. The heat and gas thus generated would be contained for a brief period of time—then the tree would blast its pollen into the sky in an explosion which would be heard for miles.

Lying prone on the bed of soft vegetation, Leddravohr felt a pulsing warmth

in his groin and realised he was becoming sexually excited. He focused his glasses on the woman lashed to the top of the tree, trying to pick out details of breast or buttock. Until that moment she had been so passive that he had believed her to be unconscious, perhaps drugged, but the movement of the huge leaves farther down the trunk appeared to have alerted her to the fact that her life was about to end, although her limbs were too well bound to permit any real struggle. She had begun twisting her head from side to side, swinging the long black hair which hid her face.

“Stupid bitch,” Leddravohr whispered. He had limited his study of the Gethan tribes to an assessment of their military capabilities, but he guessed their religion was the uninspired mishmash of superstitions found in most of the backward countries of Land. In all probability the woman had actually volunteered for her role in the fertility rite, believing that her sacrifice would guarantee her reincarnation as a princess on Overland. Generous dosages of wine and dried mushroom could render such ideas temporarily persuasive, but there was nothing like the imminence of death to induce a more rational mode of thought.

“Stupid bitch she may be, but I wish I had her under me right now,” Reeфф growled. “I don’t know which is going to blow first—that tree or mine.”

“I’ll give her to you when we have finished our work,” Leddravohr said with a smile. “Which half will you take first?”

Reeфф produced a nauseated grimace, expressing his admiration for the way in which the prince could match the best of his men in any branch of soldiering, including that of devising obscenities. Leddravohr turned his attention to the Gethan look-outs. His field glasses showed that they were, as he had anticipated, casting frequent glances towards the sacrificial tree, upon which the third pair of leaves had begun to rise. He knew there was a straightforward botanical reason for the tree’s behaviour—leaves in the horizontal attitude would have been snapped off by the recoil of the pollination discharge—but the sexual symbolism was potent and compelling. Leddravohr was confident that every one of the Gethan guards would be staring at the tree when the climactic moment arrived. He put his glasses away and took a firm grip on his sword as the leaves clasped the brakka’s trunk and, almost without delay, the lowermost pair began to stir. The flailing of the woman’s hair was frenetic now and her cries were thinly audible at the edge of the clearing, mingled with the chanting of a single male voice from somewhere near the centre of the tribal assembly.

“Ten nobles extra to the man who silences the priest,” Leddravohr said, reaffirming his dislike for all superstition-mongers, especially the variety who were too craven to do their own pointless butchery.

He raised a hand to his helmet and removed the cowl which had concealed its

scarlet crest. The young lieutenants commanding the other three cohorts would be watching for the flash of colour as he emerged from the forest. Leddravohr tensed himself for action as the fourth pair of leaves lifted and closed around the brakka's trunk, gentle as a lover's hands. The woman trussed across the tip of the tree was suddenly quiescent, perhaps in a faint, perhaps petrified with dread. An intense pulsing silence descended over the clearing. Leddravohr knew that the partition in the tree's combustion chamber had already given way, that a measure of green and purple crystals had already been mixed, that the energy released by them could be pent up for only a few seconds...

The sound of the explosion, although directed upwards, was appalling. The brakka's trunk whipped and shuddered as the pollinated discharge ripped into the sky, a vaporous column momentarily tinged with blood, concentrically ringed with smoke.

Leddravohr felt the ground lift beneath him as a shock wave raced out through the surrounding forest, then he was on his feet and running. Deafened by the awesome blast of sound, he had to rely on the evidence of his eyes to gauge the degree of surprise in the attack. To the left and right he could see the orange helmet crests of two of his lieutenants, with dozens of soldiers emerging from the trees behind them. Directly ahead of him the Gethans were gazing spellbound at the sacrificial tree, whose leaves were already beginning to unfurl, but they were bound to discover their peril at any second. He had covered almost half the distance to the nearest guard and unless the man turned soon he was going to die-without even knowing what had hit him.

The man turned. His face contorted, the mouth curving downwards, as he shouted a warning. He stamped his right foot on something concealed in the grass. Leddravohr knew it was the Gethan version of a cannon—a brakka tube set on a shallow ramp and intended solely for anti-personnel use. The impact of the guard's foot had shattered a glass or ceramic capsule in the breech and mixed its charge of power crystals, but—and this was why Kolcorron had little regard for such weapons—there was an inevitable delay before the discharge. Brief though the period was, it enabled Leddravohr to take evasive action. Shouting a warning to the soldiers behind him, he veered to the right and came at the Gethan from the side just as the cannon exploded and sent its fan-shaped spray of pebbles and rock fragments crackling through the grass. The guard had managed to draw his sword, but his preoccupation with the sacrifice had rendered him untuned and unready for combat. Leddravohr, without even breaking his stride, cut him down with a single slash across the neck and plunged on into the confusion of human figures beyond.

Normal time ceased to exist for Leddravohr as he cut his way towards the

centre of the clearing. He was only dimly aware of the sounds of struggle being punctuated by further cannon blasts. At least two of the Gethans he killed were young women, something his men might grumble about later, but he had seen otherwise good soldiers lose their lives through trying to differentiate between the sexes during a battle. Turning a killing stroke into one which merely stunned involved making a decision and losing combat efficiency—and it took only an eyeblink for an enemy blade to find its mark.

Some of the Gethans were trying to make their escape, only to be felled or turned back by the encircling Kolcorronians. Others were making a fight of it as best they could, but their preoccupation with the ceremony had been fatal and they were paying the full price for their lack of vigilance. A group of tribesmen, plait-haired and outlandish in skin mosaics, got among the nine brakka trees and used the trunks as a natural fortification. Leddravohr saw two of his men take serious wounds, but the Gethans' stand was short-lived. They were hampered by lack of room and made easy targets for spearmen from the second cohort.

All at once the battle was over.

With the fading of the crimson joy and the return of sanity Leddravohr's cooler instincts reasserted themselves. He scanned his surroundings to make sure he was in no personal danger, that the only people still on their feet were Kolcorronian soldiers and captured Gethan women, then he turned his gaze to the sky. While in the forest he and his men had been safe from ptertha, but now they were in the open and at some slight risk.

The celestial globe which presented itself to Leddravohr's scrutiny looked strange to a native of Kolcorron. He had grown up with the huge and misty sphere of Overland hanging directly overhead, but here in the Loongl Peninsula the sister world was displaced far to the west. Leddravohr could see clear sky straight above and it gave him an uncomfortable feeling, as though he had left an important flank exposed in a battle plan. No bluish specs were to be seen drifting against the patterns of daytime stars, however, and he decided it was safe to return his attention to the work at hand.

The scene all about him was a familiar one, filled with a medley of familiar sounds. Some of the Kolcorronians were shouting coarse jokes at each other as they moved about the clearing dispatching wounded Gethans and collecting battle trophies. The tribesmen had little that could be considered valuable, but their Y-shaped ptertha sticks would make interesting curios to be shown in the taverns of Ro-Atabri. Other soldiers were laughing and whooping as they stripped the dozen or so Gethan women who had been taken alive. That was a legitimate activity at this stage—men who had fought well were entitled to the prizes of war—and Leddravohr paid only enough attention to satisfy himself that

no actual coupling had begun. In this kind of territory an enemy counterattack could be launched very quickly, and a soldier in rut was one of the most useless creatures in the universe.

Railo, Nothnalp and Chravell—the lieutenants who had led the other three cohorts—approached Leddravohr. The leather of Railo’s circular shield was badly gashed and there was a reddening bandage on his left arm, but he was fit and in good spirits. Nothnalp and Chravell were cleaning their swords with rags, removing all traces of contamination from the enamel inlays on the black blades.

“A successful operation, if I’m not mistaken,” Railo said, giving Leddravohr the informal field salute.

Leddravohr nodded. “What casualties?”

“Three dead and eleven wounded. Two of the wounded were hit by the cannon. They won’t see littlenight.”

“Will they take the Bright Road?”

Railo looked offended. “Of course.”

“I’ll speak to them before they go,” Leddravohr said. As a pragmatic man with no religious beliefs he suspected his words might not mean much to the dying soldiers, but it was the sort of gesture which would be appreciated by their comrades. Like his practice of permitting even the lowliest line soldier to speak to him without using the proper forms of address, it was one of the ways in which he retained the affection and loyalty of his troops. He kept to himself the intelligence that his motives were entirely practical.

“Do we push straight on the Gethan village?” Chravell, the tallest of the lieutenants, returned his sword to its sheath. “It’s not much more than a mile to the north-east, and they probably heard the cannon fire.”

Leddravohr considered the question. “How many adults remain in the village?”

“Practically none, according to the scouts. They all came here to see the show.” Chravell glanced briefly upwards at the dehumanised tatters of flesh and bone dangling from the tip of the sacrificial tree.

“In that case the village has ceased to be a military threat and has become an asset. Give me a map.” Leddravohr took the proffered sheet and went down on one knee to spread it on the ground. It had been drawn a short time previously by an aerial survey team and emphasised the local features of interest to the Kolcorronian commanders—the size and location of Gethan settlements, topography, rivers, and—most important from a strategic point of view—the distribution of brakka among the other types of forestation. Leddravohr studied it carefully, then outlined his plans.

Some twenty miles beyond the village was a much larger community, coded

G31, capable of fielding an estimated three-hundred fighting men. The intervening terrain was, to say the least of it, difficult. It was densely wooded and crisscrossed with steep ridges, crevasses and fast-flowing streams—all of which conspired to make it a nightmare for Kolcorronian soldiers whose natural taste was for plains warfare.

“The savages must come to us,” Leddravohr announced. “A forced march across that type of ground will tire any man, so the faster they come the better for us. I take it this is a sacred place for them?”

“A holy of holies,” Railo said. “It’s very unusual to find nine brakka so close together.”

“Good! The first thing we do is bring the trees down. Instruct the sentinels to allow some villagers to get close enough to see what is happening, and to let them get away again. And just before littlenight send a detachment to burn the village—just to drive the message home. If we are lucky the savages will be so exhausted when they get here they’ll barely have enough strength to run on to our swords.”

Leddravohr concluded his deliberately simplistic verbal sketch by laughing and tossing the map back to Chravell. His judgment was that the Gethans of G31, even if provoked into a hasty attack, would be more dangerous opponents than the lowland villagers. The forthcoming battle, as well as providing valuable experience for the three young officers, would let him demonstrate once again that in his forties he was a better soldier than men half his age. He stood up, breathing deeply and pleasurably, looking forward to the remainder of a day which had begun well.

In spite of his relaxed mood, ingrained habit prompted him to check the open sky. No ptertha were visible, but he was alerted by a suggestion of movement in one of the vertical panels of sky seen through the trees to the west. He took out his field glasses, trained them on the adjoining patch of brightness and a moment later caught a brief glimpse of a low-flying airship.

It was obviously heading for the area command centre, which was about five miles away on the western edge of the peninsula. The vessel had been too distant for Leddravohr to be certain, but he thought he had seen a plume-and-sword symbol on the side of the gondola. He frowned as he tried to imagine what circumstance was bringing one of his father’s messengers to such an outlying region.

“The men are ready for breakfast,” Nothnalp said, removing his orange-crested helmet so that he could wipe perspiration from his neck. “A couple of extra strips of salt pork wouldn’t do any harm in this heat.”

Leddravohr nodded. “I suppose they’ve earned that much.”

“They’d also like to start on the women.”

“Not until we secure the area. Make sure it is fully patrolled, and get the slimers brought forward immediately—I want those trees on the ground fast.” Leddravohr moved away from the lieutenants and began a circuit of the clearing. The predominant sound was now that of the Gethan women screaming abuse in their barbaric tongue, but cooking fires were beginning to crackle and he could hear Railo shouting orders at the platoon leaders who were going on patrol.

Near the base of one of the brakka trees was a low wooden platform heavily daubed in green and yellow with the matt pigments used by the Gethans. The naked body of a white-bearded man lay across the platform, his torso displaying several stab wounds. Leddravohr guessed the dead man was the priest who had been conducting the ceremony of sacrifice. His guess was confirmed when he noticed high-sergeant Reeff and a line soldier in conversation close to the primitive structure. The two men’s voices were inaudible, but they were speaking with the peculiar intensity which soldiers reserved for the subject of money, and Leddravohr knew a bargain was being struck. He unstrapped his cuirass and sat down on a stump, waiting to see if Reeff was capable of any degree of subtlety. A moment later Reeff put his arm around the other man’s shoulders and brought him forward.

“This is Soo Eggezo,” Reeff said. “A good soldier. He’s the one who silenced the priest.”

“Useful work, Eggezo.” Leddravohr gazed blandly at the young soldier, who was tongue-tied and obviously overawed by his presence, and made no other response. There was an awkward silence.

“Sir, you generously offered a reward of ten nobles for killing the priest.” Reeff’s voice assumed a throaty sincerity. “Eggezo supports his mother and father in Ro-Atabri. The extra money would mean a great deal to them.”

“Of course.” Leddravohr opened his pouch and took out a ten-noble note and extended it to Eggezo. He waited until the soldier’s fingers had almost closed on the blue square of woven glass, then he quickly returned it to his pouch. Eggezo glanced uneasily at the sergeant.

“On second thoughts,” Leddravohr said, “these might be more ... convenient. “He replaced the first note with two green squares of the five-noble denomination and handed them to Eggezo. He pretended to lose interest as the two men thanked him and hurried away. They went barely twenty paces before stopping for another whispered conversation, and when they parted Reeff was tucking something into a pocket. Leddravohr smiled as he committed Reeff s

name to long-term memory. The sergeant was the sort of man he occasionally had use for—greedy, stupid and highly predictable. A few seconds later his interest in Reeffer was pushed into the hinterland of his consciousness as a howl of jovial protest from many Kolcorronian throats told him the slimers had arrived to deal with the stand of brakka trees.

Leddravohr rose to his feet, as anxious as anybody to avoid getting downwind of the slimers, and watched the four semi-nude men emerge from the surrounding forest. They were carrying large gourds slung from padded yokes and they also bore spades and other kinds of digging implements. Their limbs were streaked with the living slime which was the principal tool of their trade. Every artifact they carried was made from glass, stone or ceramic because the slime would quickly have devoured all other materials, especially brakka. Even their breech clouts were woven from soft glass.

“Out of the way, dung-eaters,” their round-bellied leader shouted as they marched straight across the clearing to the brakka. His words provoked a barrage of insults from the soldiers, to which the other slimers responded with obscene gestures. Leddravohr moved to keep upwind of the four men, partly to escape the stench they were exuding, but mainly to ensure that none of the slime’s airborne spores settled on his person. The only way to rid one’s self of even the slightest contamination was by thorough and painful abrasion of the skin.

On reaching the nearest brakka the slimers set down their equipment and began work immediately. As they dug to expose the upper root system, the one which extracted pikon, they kept up their verbal abuse of all soldiers who caught their gaze. They could do so with impunity because they knew themselves to be the cornerstone of the Kolcorronian economy, an outcast elite, and were accorded unique privileges. They were also highly paid for their services. After ten years as a slimer a man could retire to a life of ease—provided he survived the lengthy process of being cleansed of the virulent mucus.

Leddravohr watched with interest as the radial upper roots were uncovered. A slimer opened one of the glass gourds and, using a spatula, proceeded to daub the main roots with the pus-like goo. Cultured from the solvent the brakka themselves had evolved to dissolve their combustion chamber diaphragms, the slime gave out a choking odour like bile-laden vomit mingled, incongruously, with the sweetness of whitefern. The roots, which would have resisted the sharpest blade, swelled visibly as their cellular structure was attacked. Two other slimers hacked through them with slate axes and, working with showy energy for the benefit of their audience, dug further down to reveal the lower root system and the bulbous swelling of the combustion chamber at the base of the trunk. Inside it was a valuable harvest of power crystals which would have to be

removed, taking the utmost care to keep the two varieties separated, before the tree could be felled.

“Stand back, dung-eaters,” the oldest slimer called out. “Stand back and let...” His voice faded as he raised his eyes and for the first time realised that Leddravohr was present. He bowed deeply, with a grace which went ill with his naked and filth-streaked belly, and said, “I cannot apologise to you, Prince, because of course my remarks were not addressed to you.”

“Well put,” Leddravohr said, appreciating nimbleness of mind from such an unlikely source. “I’m pleased to learn you don’t suffer from suicidal tendencies. What’s your name?”

“It is Owpope, Prince.”

“Proceed with your labours, Owpope—I never tire of seeing the wealth of our country being produced.”

“Gladly, Prince, but there is always a slight risk of a blowout through the side of the chamber when we broach a tree.”

“Just exercise your normal discretion,” Leddravohr said, folding his arms. His acute hearing picked up a ripple of admiring whispers going through the nearby soldiery, and he knew he had added to his reputation as the prince with the common touch. The word would spread fast—*Leddravohr loves his people so much that he will even converse with a slimer*. The little episode was a calculated exercise in image-building, but in truth he did not feel he was demeaning himself by talking to a man like Owpope, whose work was of genuine importance to Kolcorron. It was the useless parasites—like the priests and philosophers—who earned his hatred and contempt. They would be the first to be purged out of existence when he eventually became King.

He was settling down to watch Owpope apply an elliptical pattern of slime to the curving base of the brakka trunk when his attention was again caught by a movement in the sky to the west. The airship had returned and was scudding through the narrow band of blue which separated Overland from the jagged wall of trees. Its appearance after such a short time meant that it had not landed at G1, the area command centre. The captain must have communicated with the base by sunwriter and then come directly to the forward zone—which made it almost certain that he was carrying an urgent message to Leddravohr from the King.

Mystified, Leddravohr shaded his eyes from the sun’s glare as he watched the airship slow down and manoeuvre towards a landing in the forest clearing.

CHAPTER 3

Lain Maraquine's domicile—known as the Square House—was positioned on Greenmount, a rounded hill in a northern suburb of Ro-Atabri, the Kolcorronian capital.

From the window of his study he had a panoramic view of the city's various districts—residential, commercial, industrial, administrative—as they sifted down to the Borann River and on the far bank gave way to the parklands surrounding the five palaces. The families headed by the Lord Philosopher had been granted a cluster of dwellings and other buildings on this choice site many centuries earlier, during the reign of Bytran IV, when their work was held in much higher regard.

The Lord Philosopher himself lived in a sprawling structure known as Greenmount Peel, and it was a sign of his former importance that all the houses in his bailiwick had been placed in line-of-sight with the Great Palace, thus facilitating communication by sunwriter. Now, however, such prestigious features only added to the jealousy and resentment felt by the heads of other orders. Lain Maraquine knew that the industrial supremo, Prince Chakkell, particularly wanted Greenmount as an adornment to his own empire and was doing everything in his power to have the philosophers deposed and moved to humbler accommodation.

It was the beginning of aftday, the region having just emerged from the shadow of Overland, and the city was looking beautiful as it returned to life after its two-hour sleep. The yellow, orange and red coloration of trees which were shedding their leaves contrasted with the pale and darker greens of trees with different cycles which were coming into bud or were in full foliage. Here and there the brightly glowing envelopes of airships created pastel circles and ellipses, and on the river could be seen the white sails of ocean-going ships which were bringing a thousand commodities from distant parts of Land.

Seated at his desk by the window, Lain was oblivious to the spectacular view. All that day he had been aware of a curious excitement and a sense of expectancy deep within himself. There was no way in which he could be certain, but his premonition was that the mental agitation was leading to something of rare importance.

For some time he had been intrigued by an underlying similarity he had observed in problems fed into his department from a variety of sources. The problems were as routine and mundane as a vintner wanting to know the most economical shape of jar in which to market a fixed quantity of wine, or a farmer trying to decide the best mix of crops for a certain area of land at different times of the year.

It was all a far cry from the days when his forebears had been charged with tasks like estimating the size of the cosmos, and yet Lain had begun to suspect that somewhere at the heart of the commonplace commercial riddles there lurked a concept whose implications were more universal than the enigmas of astronomy. In every case there was a quantity whose value was governed by changes in another quantity, and the problem was that of finding an optimum balance. Traditional solutions involved making numerous approximations or plotting vertices on a graph, but a tiny voice had begun to whisper to Lain and its message was the icily thrilling one that there might be a way of arriving at a *precise* solution algebraically, with a few strokes of the pen. It was something to do with the mathematical notion of limits, with the idea that...

"You'll have to help with the guest list," Gesalla said as she swept into the panelled study. "I can't do any serious planning when I don't even know how many people we are going to have."

A glimmering in the depths of Lain's mind was abruptly extinguished, leaving him with a sense of loss which quickly faded as he looked up at his black-haired solewife. The illness of early pregnancy had narrowed the oval of her face and given her a dark-eyed pallor which somehow emphasised her intelligence and strength of character. She had never looked more beautiful in Lain's eyes, but he still wished she had not insisted on starting the baby. That slender, slim-hipped body did not look to him as though it had been designed for motherhood and he had private fears about the outcome.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Lain," she said, her face showing concern. "Did I interrupt something important?"

He smiled and shook his head, once again impressed by her talent for divining other people's thoughts. "Isn't it early to be planning for Yearsend?"

"Yes." She met his gaze coolly—her way of challenging him to find anything wrong with being efficient. "Now, about your guests..."

"I promise to write out a list before the day is over. I suppose it will be much the same as usual, though I'm not sure if Toller will be home this year."

"I hope he isn't," Gesalla said, wrinkling her nose. "I don't want him. It would be so pleasant to have a party without any arguments or fighting."

"He *is* my brother," Lain protested amiably.

“Half-brother would be more like it.”

Lain’s good humour was threatened. “I’m glad my mother isn’t alive to hear that comment.”

Gesalla came to him immediately, sat on his lap and kissed him on the mouth, moulding his cheeks with both her hands to coax him into an ardent response. It was a familiar trick of hers, but nonetheless effective. Still feeling privileged even after two years of marriage, he slid his hand inside her blue camisole and caressed her small breasts. After a moment she sat upright and gave him a solemn stare.

“I didn’t mean any disrespect to your mother,” she said. “It’s just that Toller *looks* more like a soldier than a member of this family.”

“Genetic flukes sometimes happen.”

“And there’s the way he can’t even read.”

“We’ve been through all this before,” Lain said patiently. “When you get to know Toller better you’ll see that he is as intelligent as any other member of the family. He *can* read, but he isn’t fluent because of some problem with the way he perceives printed words. In any case, most of the military are literate—so your observation is lacking in relevance.”

“Well...” Gesalla looked dissatisfied. “Well, why does he have to cause trouble everywhere he goes?”

“Lots of people have that habit—including one whose left nipple is tickling my palm at this moment.”

“Don’t try to turn my mind to other things—especially at this time of day.”

“All right, but why does Toller bother you so much? I mean, we are pretty well surrounded by individualists and near-eccentrics on Greenmount.”

“Would you like it better if I were one of those faceless females who have no opinions about anything?” Gesalla was galvanised into springing to her feet, her light body scarcely reacting against his thighs, and an expression of dismay appeared on her face as she looked down into the walled precinct in front of the house. “Were you expecting Lord Glo?”

“No.”

“Bad luck—you’ve got him.” Gesalla hurried to the door of the study. “I’m going to vanish before he arrives. I can’t afford to spend half the day listening to all that endless humming and hawing—not to mention the smutty innuendoes.” She gathered her ankle-length skirts and ran silently towards the rear stairs.

Lain took off his reading glasses and gazed after her, wishing she would not keep reviving the subject of his brother’s parentage. Aytha Maraquine, his mother, had died in giving birth to Toller, so if there had been an adulterous liaison she had more than paid for it. Why could Gesalla not leave the matter at

that? Lain had been attracted to her for her intellectual independence as well as her beauty and physical grace, but he had not bargained for the antagonism towards his brother. He hoped it was not going to lead to years of domestic friction.

The sound of a carriage door slamming in the precinct drew his attention to the outside world. Lord Glo had just stepped down from the aging but resplendent phaeton which he always used for short journeys in the city. Its driver, holding the two bluehorns in check, nodded and fidgeted as he received a lengthy series of instructions from Glo. Lain guessed that the Lord Philosopher was using a hundred words where ten would have sufficed and he began to pray that the visit would not be too much of an endurance test. He went to the sideboard, poured out two glasses of black wine and waited by the study door until Glo appeared.

“You’re very kind,” Glo said, taking his glass as he entered and going straight to the nearest chair. Although in his late fifties, he looked much older thanks to his rotund figure and the fact that his teeth had been reduced to a few brownish pegs splayed behind his lower lip. He was breathing noisily after climbing the stairs, his stomach ballooning and collapsing under his informal grey-and-white robe.

“It’s always a pleasure to see you, my lord,” Lain said, wondering if there was a special reason for the visit and knowing there was little point in his trying to elicit the information too soon.

Glo drank half his wine in one gulp. “Mutual, my boy. Oh! I’ve got something ... hmm ... at least, I *think* I’ve got something to show you. You’re going to like this.” He set his glass aside, groped in the folds of his clothing and eventually produced a square of paper which he handed to Lain. It was slightly sticky and mid-brown in colour except for a circular patch of mottled tan in the centre.

“Farland.” Lain identified the circle as being a light picture of the only other major planet in the local system, orbiting the sun at some twice the distance of the Land-Overland pair. “The images are getting better.”

“Yes, but we still can’t make them permanent. That one has faded ... hmm ... noticeably since last night. You can hardly see the polar caps now, but last night they were very clear. Pity. Pity.” Glo took the picture back and studied it closely, all the while shaking his head and sucking his teeth.

“The polar caps were as clear as daylight. Clear as daylight, I tell you. Young Enteth got a very good confirmation of the angle of ... ah ... inclination. Lain, have you ever tried to visualise what it would be like to live on a world whose axis was tilted? There would be a hot period of the year, with long days and

short nights, and a cold ... hmm ... period, with long days ... I mean *short* days ... and long nights ... all depending on where the planet was in its orbit. The colour changes on Farland show that *all* the vegetation is geared to a single ... hmm ... superimposed cycle.”

Lain concealed his impatience and boredom as Glo launched himself upon one of his most familiar set pieces. It was a cruel irony that the Lord Philosopher was becoming prematurely senile, and Lain—who had a genuine regard for the older man—saw it as a duty to give him maximum support, personally and professionally. He replenished his visitor’s drink and made appropriate comments as Glo meandered on from elementary astronomy to botany and the differences between the ecology of a tilted world and that of Land.

On Land, where there were no seasons, the very first fanners must have had the task of separating the natural jumble of edible grasses into synchronous batches which matured at chosen times. Six harvests a year was the norm in most parts of the world. Thereafter it had simply been a matter of planting and reaping six adjacent strips to maintain supplies of grain, with no long-term storage problems. In modern times the advanced countries had found it more efficacious to devote whole farms to single-cycle crops and to work in six-farm combines or multiples thereof, but the principle was the same.

As a boy, Lain Maraquine had enjoyed speculating about life on distant planets—assuming they existed in other parts of the universe and were peopled by intelligent beings—but he had quickly found that mathematics offered him greater scope for intellectual adventure. Now all he could wish for was that Lord Glo would either go away and let him get on with his work or proceed to explain his visit. Tuning his thoughts back into the rambling discourse he found that Glo had switched back to the experiments with photography and the difficulties of producing emulsions of light-sensitive vegetable cells which would hold an image for more than a few days.

“Why is it so important to you?” Lain put in. “Anybody in your observatory staff could draw a much better picture by hand.”

“Astronomy is only a tiny bit of it, my boy—the aim is to be able to produce totally ... hmm ... accurate pictures of buildings, landscapes, people.”

“Yes, but we already have draughtsmen and artists who can do that.”

Glo shook his head and smiled, showing the ruins of his teeth, and spoke with unusual fluency. “Artists only paint what they or their patrons believe to be important. We lose so much. The times slip through our fingers. I want every man to be his own artist—then we’ll discover our history.”

“Do you think it will be possible?”

“Undoubtedly. I foresee the day when everybody will carry light-sensitive

material and will be able to make a picture of *anything* in the blink of an eye.”

“You can still outfly any of us,” Lain said, impressed, feeling he had momentarily been in the presence of the Lord Glo who used to be. “And by flying higher you see farther.”

Glo looked gratified. “Never mind that—give me more ... hmm ... wine.” He watched his glass closely while it was being refilled, then settled back in his chair. “You will never guess what has happened.”

“You’ve impregnated some innocent young female.”

“Try again.”

“Some innocent young female had impregnated you.”

“This is a serious matter, Lain.” Glo made a damping movement with his hand to show that levity was out of place. “The King and Prince Chakkell have suddenly wakened up to the fact that we are running short of brakka.”

Lain froze in the act of raising his own glass to his lips. “I can’t believe this, as you predicted. How many reports and studies have we sent them in the last ten years?”

“I’ve lost count, but it looks as though they have finally taken some effect. The King has called a meeting of the high ... hmm ... council.”

“I never thought he’d do it,” Lain said. “Have you just come from the palace?”

“Ah ... no. I’ve known about the meeting for some days, but I couldn’t pass the news on to you because the King sent me off to Sorka—of all places!—on another ... hmm ... matter. I just got back this foreday.”

“I could use an extra holiday.”

“It was no holiday, my boy.” Glo shook his large head and looked solemn. “I was with Tunsfo—and I had to watch one of his surgeons perform an autopsy on a soldier. I don’t mind admitting I have no stomach for that kind of thing.”

“Please! Don’t even talk about it,” Lain said, feeling a gentle upward pressure on his diaphragm at the thought of knives going through pallid skin and disturbing the cold obscenities beneath. “Why did the King want you there?”

Glo tapped himself on the chest. “Lord Philosopher, that’s me. My word still carries a lot of weight with the King. Apparently our soldiers and airmen are becoming ... hmm ... demoralised over rumours that it isn’t safe to go near ptertha casualties.”

“Not safe? In what way?”

“The story is that several line soldiers contracted pterthacosis through handling victims.”

“But that’s nonsense,” Lain said, taking a first sip of his wine. “What did Tunsfo find?”

“It was pterthacosis, all right. No doubt about it. Spleen like a football. Our official conclusion was that the soldier encountered a globe at dead of night and took the dust without knowing it—or that he was telling ... hmm ... lies. That happens, you know. Some men can’t face up to it. They even manage to convince *themselves* that they’re all right.”

“I can understand that.” Lain drew in his shoulders as though feeling cold. “The temptation must be there. After all, the slightest air current can make all the difference. Between life and death.”

“I would prefer to talk about our own concerns.” Glo stood up and began to pace the room. “This meeting is very important to us, my boy. A chance for the philosophy order to win the recognition it deserves, to regain its former status. Now, I want you to prepare the graphs in person—make them big and colourful and ... hmm ... simple—showing how much pikon and halvell Kolcorron can expect to manufacture in the next fifty years. Five year increments might be appropriate—I leave that to you. We also need to show how, as the requirement for natural crystals decreases, our reserves of home-grown brakka will increase until we...”

“My lord, slow down a little,” Lain protested, dismayed to see Glo’s visionary rhetoric waft him so far from the realities of the situation. “I hate to appear pessimistic, but there is no guarantee that we will produce *any* usable crystals in the next fifty years. Our best pikon to date has a purity of only one third, and the halvell is not much better.”

Glo gave an excited laugh. “That’s only because we haven’t had the full backing of the King. With proper resources we can solve all the purification problems in a few years. I’m sure of it! Why the King even permitted me to use his messengers to recall Sisstt and Duthoon. They can give up-to-date reports on their progress at the meeting. Hard facts—that what impress the King. Practicalities. I tell you, my boy, the times are changing. I feel sick.” Glo dropped back into his chair with a thud which disturbed the decorative ceramics on the nearest wall.

Lain knew he should go forward to offer comfort, but he found himself shrinking back. Glo looked as though he could vomit at any moment, and the thought of being close to him when it happened was too distasteful. Even worse, the meandering veins on Glo’s temples seemed in danger of rupturing. What if there actually were a fountaining of red? Lain tried to visualise how he would cope if some of the other man’s blood got on to his own person and again his stomach gave a preliminary heave.

“Shall I go and fetch something?” he said anxiously. “Some water?”

“More wine,” Glo husked, holding out his glass.

“Do you think you should?”

“Don’t be such a prune, my boy—it’s the best tonic there is. If you drank a little more wine it might put some flesh on your ... hmm ... bones.” Glo studied his glass while it was being refilled, making sure he received full measure, and the colour began returning to his face. “Now, what was I talking about?”

“Wasn’t it something to do with the impending rebirth of our civilisation?”

Glo looked reproachful. “Sarcasm? Is that sarcasm?”

“I’m sorry, my lord,” Lain said. “It’s just that brakka conservation has always been a passion with me—a subject upon which I can easily become intemperate.”

“I remember.” Glo’s gaze travelled the room, noting the use of ceramics and glass for fitments which in almost any other house would have been carved from the black wood. “You don’t think you ... hmm ... overdo it?”

“It’s the way I feel.” Lain held up his left hand and indicated the black ring he wore on the sixth finger. “The only reason I have this much is that it was a wedding token from Gesalla.”

“Ah yes—Gesalla.” Glo bared his divergent teeth in a parody of lecherousness. “One of these nights,! swear, you’ll have some extra company in bed.”

“My bed is your bed,” Lain said easily, aware that Lord Glo never claimed his nobleman’s right to take any woman in the social group of which he was dynastic head. It was an ancient custom in Kolcorron, still observed in the major families, and Glo’s occasional jests on the subject were merely his way of emphasising the philosophy order’s cultural superiority in having left the practice behind.

“Bearing in mind your extreme views,” Glo went on, returning to his original subject, “couldn’t you bring yourself to adopt a more positive attitude to the meeting? Aren’t you pleased about it?”

“Yes, I’m pleased. It’s a step in the right direction, but it has come so *late*. You know it takes fifty or sixty years for a brakka to reach maturity and enter the pollinating phase. We’d still be facing that time lag even if we had the capability to grow pure crystals right now—and it’s frighteningly large.”

“All the more reason to plan ahead, my boy.”

“True—but the greater the need for a plan the less chance it has of being accepted.”

“That was very profound,” Glo said. “Now tell me what it ... hmm ... means.”

“There was a time, perhaps fifty years ago, when Kolcorron could have balanced supply and demand by implementing just a few commonsense

conservation measures, but even then the princes wouldn't listen. Now we're in a situation which calls for really drastic measures. Can you imagine how Leddravohr would react to the proposal that all armament production should be suspended for twenty or thirty years?"

"It doesn't bear thinking about," Glo said. "But aren't you exaggerating the difficulties?"

"Have a look at these graphs." Lain went to a chest of shallow drawers, took out a large sheet and spread it on his desk where it could be seen by Glo. He explained the various coloured diagrams, avoiding abstruse mathematics as much as possible, analysing how the country's growing demands for power crystals and brakka were interacting with other factors such as increasing scarcity and transport delays. Once or twice as he spoke it came to him that here, yet again, were problems in the same general class as those he had been thinking about earlier. Then he had been tantalised by the idea that he was about to conceive of an entirely new way of dealing with them, something to do with the mathematical concept of limits, but now material and human considerations were dominating his thoughts.

Among them was the fact that Lord Glo, who would be the principal philosophy spokesman, had become incapable of following complex arguments. And in addition to his natural disability, Glo was now in the habit of fuddling himself with wine every day. He was nodding a great deal and sucking his teeth, trying to exhibit concerned interest, but the fleshy wattles of his eyelids were descending with increasing frequency.

"So that's the extent of the problem, my lord," Lain said, speaking with extra fervour to get Glo's attention. "Would you like to hear my department's views on the kind of measures needed to keep the crisis within manageable proportions?"

"Stability, yes, stability—that's the thing." Glo abruptly raised his head and for a moment he seemed utterly lost, his pale blue eyes scanning Lain's face as though seeing it for the first time. "Where were we?"

Lain felt depressed and oddly afraid. "Perhaps it would be best if I sent a written summary to you at the Peel, one you could go over at your leisure. When is the council going to meet?"

"On the morning of two-hundred. Yes, the King definitely said two-hundred. What day is this?"

"One-nine-four."

"There isn't much time," Glo said sadly. "I promised the King I'd have a significant ... hmm ... contribution."

"You will."

“That’s not what I...” Glo stood up, swaying a little, and faced Lain with an odd tremulous smile. “Did you really mean what you said?”

Lain blinked at him, unable to place the question in context properly. “My lord?”

“About my ... about my flying higher ... seeing farther?”

“Of course,” Lain said, beginning to feel embarrassed. “I couldn’t have been more sincere.”

“That’s good. It means so...” Glo straightened up and expanded his plump chest, suddenly recovering his normal joviality. “We’ll show them. We’ll show *all* of them. “He went to the door, then paused with his hand on the porcelain knob. “Let me have a summary as soon as ... hmm ... possible. Oh, by the way, I have instructed Sisstt to bring your brother home with him.”

“That’s very kind of you, my lord,” Lain said, his pleasure at the prospect of seeing Toller again modified by thoughts of Gesalla’s likely reaction to the news.

“Not at all. I think we were all a trifle hard on him. I mean, a year in a miserable place like Haffanger just for giving Ongmat a tap on the chin.”

“As a result of that tap Ongmat’s jaw was broken in two places.”

“Well, it was a *firm* tap.” Glo gave a wheezing laugh. “And we all felt the benefit of Ongmat being silenced for a while.” Still chuckling, he moved out of sight along the corridor, his sandals slapping on the mosaic floor.

Lain carried his hardly-touched glass of wine to his desk and sat down, swirling the black liquid to create light patterns on its surface. Glo’s humorous endorsement of Toller’s violence was quite typical of him, one of the little ways in which he reminded members of the philosophy order that he was of royal lineage and therefore had the blood of conquerors in his veins. It showed he was feeling better and had recovered his self-esteem, but it did nothing to ease Lain’s worries about the older man’s physical and mental fitness.

In the space of only a few years Glo had turned into a bumbling and absent-minded incompetent. His unsuitability for his post was tolerated by most department heads, some of whom appreciated the extra personal freedom they derived from it, but there was a general sense of demoralisation over the order’s continuing loss of status. The aging King Prad still retained an indulgent fondness for Glo—and, so the whispers went, if philosophy had come to be regarded as a joke it was appropriate that it should be represented by a court jester.

But there was nothing funny about a meeting of the high council, Lain told himself. The person who presented the case for rigorous brakka conservation would need to do it with eloquence and force, marshalling complex arguments

and backing them up with an unassailable command of the statistics involved. His stance would be generally unpopular, and would attract special hostility from the ambitious Prince Chakkell and the savage Leddravohr.

If Glo proved unable to master the brief in time for the meeting it was possible he would call on a deputy to speak on his behalf, and the thought of having to challenge Chakkell or Leddravohr—even verbally—produced in Lain a cold panic which threatened to affect his bladder. The wine in his glass was now reflecting a pattern of trembling concentric circles.

Lain set the glass down and began breathing deeply and steadily, waiting for the shaking of his hands to cease.

CHAPTER 4

Toller Maraquine awoke with the knowledge, which was both disturbing and comforting, that he was not alone in bed.

He could feel the body heat of the woman who was lying at his left side, one of her arms resting on his stomach, one of her legs drawn up across his thighs. The sensations were all the more pleasant for being unfamiliar. He lay quite still, staring at the ceiling, as he tried to recall the exact circumstances which had brought female company to his austere apartment in the Square House.

He had celebrated his return to the capital with a round of the busy taverns in the Samlue district. The tour had begun early on the previous day and had been intended to last only until the end of littlenight, but the ale and wine had been persuasive and the acquaintances he met had eventually begun to seem like cherished friends. He had continued drinking right through aftday and well into the night, revelling in his escape from the smell of the pikon pans, and at a late stage had begun to notice the same woman close to him in the throng time after time, much more often than could be accounted for by chance.

She had been tawny-haired and tall, full-breasted, broad of shoulder and hip—the sort of woman Toller had dreamed about during his exile in Haffanger. She had also been brazenly chewing a sprig of maidenfriend. He had a clear memory of her face, which was round and open and uncomplicated, with wine-heightened colouring on the cheeks. Her smile had been very white and marred only by a tiny triangular chip missing from one front incisor. Toller had found her easy to talk to, easy to laugh with, and in the end it had seemed the most natural thing in the world for them to spend the night together...

“I’m hungry,” she said abruptly, raising herself into a sitting position beside him. “I want some breakfast.”

Toller ran an appreciative eye over her splendidly naked torso and smiled. “Supposing I want something else first?”

She looked disappointed, but only for an instant, then returned his smile as she moved to bring her breasts into contact with his chest. “If you’re not careful I’ll ride you to death.”

“Please try it,” Toller said, his smile developing into a gratified chuckle. He drew her down to him. A pleasurable warmth suffused his mind and body as

they kissed, but within a moment he became aware of something being wrong, of a niggling sense of unease. He opened his eyes and immediately identified one source of his worry—the brightness of his bedchamber indicated that it was well past dawn. This was the morning of day two-hundred, and he had promised his brother that he would be up at first light to help move some charts and a display easel to the Great Palace. It was a menial task which anybody could have done, but Lain had seemed anxious for him to undertake it, possibly so that he would not be left alone in the house with Gesalla while the lengthy council meeting was in progress.

Gesalla!

Toller almost groaned aloud as he remembered that he had not even seen Gesalla on the previous day. He had arrived from Haffanger early in the morning and after a brief interview with his brother—during which Lain had been preoccupied with his charts—had gone straight out on the drinking spree. Gesalla, as Lain's solewife, was mistress of the household and as such would have expected Toller to pay his respects at the formal evening meal. Another woman might have overlooked his behavioural lapse, but the fastidious and unbending Gesalla was bound to have been furious. On the flight back to Ro-Atabri Toller had vowed that, to avoid causing any tensions in his brother's house, he would studiously keep on the right side of Gesalla—and he had led off by affronting her on the very first day. The flickering of a moist tongue against his own suddenly reminded Toller that his transgressions against domestic protocol had been greater than Gesalla knew.

"I'm sorry about this," he said, twisting free of the embrace, "but you have to go home now."

The woman's jaw sagged. "What?"

"Come on—hurry it up." Toller stood up, swept her clothes into a wispy bundle and pushed them into her arms. He opened a wardrobe and began selecting fresh clothes for himself,

"But what about my breakfast?"

"There's no time—I have to get you out of here."

"That's just great," she said bitterly, beginning to sort through the binders and scraps of near-transparent fabric which were her sole attire.

"I told you I was sorry," Toller said as he struggled into breeches which seemed determined to resist entry.

"A lot of good that..." She paused in the act of gathering her breasts into a flimsy sling and scrutinised the room from ceiling to floor. "Are you *sure* you

live here?”

Toller was amused in spite of his agitation. “Do you think I would just pick a house at random and sneak in to use a bed?”

“I thought it was a bit strange last night ... getting a coach all the way out here ... keeping so quiet ... This is Greenmount, isn’t it?” Her frankly suspicious stare travelled his heavily muscled arms and shoulders. He guessed the direction in which her thoughts were going, but there was no hint of censure in her expression and he took no offence.

“It’s a nice morning for a walk,” he said, raising her to an upright position and hastening her—clothing still partially unfastened—towards the room’s single exit. He opened the door at the precise instant needed to bring him into confrontation with Gesalla Maraquine, who had been passing by in the corridor. Gesalla was pale and ill-looking, thinner than when he had last seen her, but her grey-eyed gaze had lost none of its force—and it was obvious she was angry.

“Good foreday,” she said, icily correct. “I was *told* you had returned.”

“I apologise for last night,” Toller said. “I ... I got detained.”

“Obviously.” Gesalla glanced at his companion with open distaste. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Aren’t you going to introduce your ... friend?”

Toller swore inwardly as it came to him that there was no longer the slightest hope of salvaging anything from the situation. Even allowing for the fact that he had been adrift on a vinous sea when he met his bed partner, how could he have overlooked such a basic propriety as asking her name? Gesalla was the last person in the world to whom he could have explained the mood of the previous evening, and that being the case there was no point in trying to placate her. *I’m sorry about this, dear brother*, he thought. *I didn’t plan it this way...*

“The frosty female is my sister-in-law, Gesalla Maraquine,” he said, putting an arm around his companion’s shoulders as he kissed her on the forehead. “She would like to know your name, and—considering the sport we had during the night—so would I.”

“Fera,” the woman said, making final adjustments to her garments. “Fera Rivoo.”

“Isn’t that nice?” Toller smiled broadly at Gesalla. “Now we can all be friends together.”

“Please see that she leaves by one of the side gates,” Gesalla said. She turned and strode away, head thrown back, each foot descending directly in front of the other.

Toller shook his head. “What do you think was the matter with her?”

“Some women are easily upset.” Fera straightened up and pushed Toller

away from her. “Show me the way out.”

“I thought you wanted breakfast.”

“I thought you wanted me to go home.”

“You must have misunderstood me,” Toller said. “I’d like you to stay, for as long as *you* want. Have you a job to worry about?”

“Oh, I have a very important position in the Samlue market—gutting fish.” Fera held up her hands, which were reddened and marked by numerous small cuts. “How do you think I got these?”

“Forget the job,” Toller urged, enclosing her hands with his own. “Go back to bed and wait for me there. I’ll have food sent to you. You can rest and eat and drink all day—and tonight we’ll go on the pleasure barges.”

Fera smiled, filling the triangular gap in her teeth with the tip of her tongue. “Your sister-in-law...”

“Is only my sister-in-law. I was born in this house and grew up in it and have the right to invite guests. You are staying, aren’t you?”

“Will there be spiced pork?”

“I assure you that entire piggeries are reduced to spiced pork on a daily basis in this house,” Toller said, leading Fera back into the room. “Now, you stay here until I get back, then we’ll take up where we left off.”

“All right.” She lay down on the bed, settled herself comfortably on the pillows and spread her legs. “Just one thing before you go.”

“Yes?”

She gave him her full white smile. “Perhaps you’d better tell me *your* name.”

Toller was still chuckling as he reached the stairs at the end of the corridor and went down towards the central section of the house, from which was emanating the sound of many voices. He found Fera’s company refreshing, but her presence in the house might be just too much of an affront to Gesalla to be tolerated for very long. Two or three days would be sufficient to make the point that Gesalla had no right to insult him or his guests, that any effort she made to dominate him—as she did his brother—would be doomed to failure.

When Toller reached the bottom flight of the main staircase he found about a dozen people gathered in the entrance hall. Some were computational assistants; others were domestics and grooms who seemed to have gathered to watch their master set off for his appointment at the Great Palace. Lain Maraquine was wearing the antique-styled formal garment of a senior philosopher—a full-length robe of dove grey trimmed at the hem and cuff with black triangles. Its silky material emphasised the slightness of his build, but his posture was upright and dignified. His face, beneath the heavy sweeps of black hair, was very pale. Toller felt a surge of affection and concern as he crossed the hall—the council

meeting was obviously an important occasion for his brother and he was already showing the strain.

“You’re late,” Lain said, eyeing him critically. “And you should be wearing your greys.”

“There was no time to get them ready. I had a rough night.”

“Gesalla has just told me what kind of night you had.” Lain’s expression showed a blend of amusement and exasperation. “Is it true you didn’t even know the woman’s name?”

Toller shrugged to disguise his embarrassment. “What do names matter?”

“If you don’t know that there isn’t much point in my trying to enlighten you.”

“I don’t need you to...” Toller took a deep breath, determined for once not to add to his brother’s problems by losing his temper. “Where is the stuff you want me to carry?”

The official residence of King Prad Neldeever was notable more for its size than architectural merit. Successive generations of rulers had added wings, towers and cupolas to suit their individual whims, usually in the style of the day, with the result that the building had some resemblance to a coral or one of the accretive structures erected by certain kinds of insects. An early landscape gardener had attempted to impose a degree of order by planting stands of synchronous parble and rafter trees, but over the centuries they had been infiltrated by other varieties. The palace, itself variegated because of different masonry, was now screened by vegetation equally uneven in colour, and from a distance it could be difficult for the eye to separate one from the other.

Toller Maraquine, however, was untroubled by such aesthetic quibbles as he rode down from Greenmount at the rear of his brother’s modest entourage. There had been rain before dawn and the morning air was clean and invigorating, charged with a sunlit spirit of new beginnings. The huge disk of Overland shone above him with a pure lustre and many stars decked the surrounding blueness of the sky. The city itself was an incredibly complex scattering of multi-hued flecks stretching down to the slate-blue ribbon of the Borann, where sails gleamed like lozenges of snow.

Toller’s pleasure at being back in Ro-Atabri, at having escaped the desolation of Haffanger, had banished his customary dissatisfaction with his life as an unimportant member of the philosophy order. After the unfortunate start to the day the pendulum of his mood was on the upswing. His mind was teeming with half-formed plans to improve his reading ability, to seek out some interesting aspect of the order’s work and devote all his energies to it, to make Lain proud of him. On reflection he could appreciate that Gesalla had had every right to be

furious over his behaviour. It would be no more than a normal courtesy were he to move Fera out of his apartment as soon as he returned home.

The sturdy bluehorn he had been allocated by the stablemaster was a placid beast which seemed to know its own way to the palace. Leaving it to its own devices as it plodded the increasingly busy streets, Toller tried to create a more definite picture of his immediate future, one which might impress Lain. He had heard of one research group which was trying to develop a combination of ceramics and glass threads which would be tough enough to stand in for brakka in the manufacture of swords and armour. It was quite certain that they would never succeed, but the subject was nearer to his taste than chores like the measuring of rainfall, and it would please Lain to know that he was supporting the conservation movement. The next step was to think of a way of winning Gesalla's approval...

By the time the philosophy delegation had passed through the heart of the city and had crossed the river at the Bytran Bridge the palace and its grounds were spanning the entire view ahead. The party negotiated the four concentric bloom-spangled moats, whose ornamentation disguised their function, and halted at the palace's main gate. Several guards, looking like huge black beetles in their heavy armour, came forward at a leisurely pace. While their commander was laboriously checking the visitors' names on his list one of his pikemen approached Toller and, without speaking, began roughly delving among the rolled-up charts in his panniers. When he had finished he paused to spit on the ground, then turned his attention to the collapsed easel which was strapped across the bluehorn's haunches. He tugged at the polished wooden struts so forcibly that the bluehorn sidestepped against him.

"What's the matter with you?" he growled, shooting Toller a venomous look. "Can't you control that fleabag?"

I'm a new person, Toller assured himself, *and I can't be goaded into brawls*. He smiled and said, "Can you blame her for wanting to get near you?"

The pikeman's lips moved silently as he came closer to Toller, but at that moment the guard commander gave the signal for the party to proceed on its way. Toller urged his mount forward and resumed his position behind Lain's carriage. The minor brush with the guard had left him slightly keyed-up but otherwise unaffected, and he felt pleased with the way he had comported himself. It had been a valuable exercise in avoiding unnecessary trouble, the art he intended to practise for the rest of his life. Sitting easily in the saddle, enjoying the rhythm of the bluehorn's stately gait, he turned his thoughts to the business ahead.

Toller had been to the Great Palace only once before, as a small child, and

had only the vaguest recollection of the domed Rainbow Hall in which the council meeting was to be held. He doubted that it could be as vast and as awe-inspiring as he remembered, but it was a major function room in the palace and its use as a venue today was significant. King Prad obviously regarded the meeting as being important, a fact which Toller found somewhat puzzling. All his life he had been listening to conservationists like his brother issuing sombre warnings about dwindling resources of brakka, but everyday life in Kolcorron had continued very much as before. It was true that in recent years there had been periods when power crystals and the black wood had been in short supply, and the cost kept rising, but new reserves had always been found. Try as he might, Toller could not imagine the natural storehouse of an entire world failing to meet his people's needs.

As the philosophy delegation reached the elevated ground on which the palace itself was situated he saw that many carriages were gathered on the principal forecourt. Among them was the flamboyant red-and-orange phaeton of Lord Glo. Three men in philosophy greys were standing beside it, and when they noticed Lain's carriage they advanced to intercept it. Toller identified the stunted figure of Vorndal Sisstt first; then Duthoon, leader of the halvell section; and the angular outline of Borreat Hargeth, chief of weapons research. All three appeared nervous and unhappy, and they closed on Lain as soon as he had stepped down from his carriage.

"We're in trouble, Lain," Hargeth said, nodding in the direction of Glo's phaeton. "You'd better take a look at our esteemed leader."

Lain frowned. "Is he ill?"

"No, he isn't ill—I'd say he never felt better in his life."

"Don't tell me he's been..." Lain went to the phaeton and wrenched open the door. Lord Glo, who had been slumped with his head on his chest, jerked upright and looked about him with a startled expression. He brought his pale blue eyes to focus on Lain, then showed the pegs of his lower teeth in a smile.

"Good to see you, my boy," he said. "I tell you this is going to be our ... hmm ... day. We're going to carry all before us."

Toller swung himself down from his mount and tethered it to the rear of the carriage, keeping his back to the others to conceal his amusement. He had seen Glo the worse for wine several times before, but never so obviously, so comically incapable. The contrast between Glo's ruddy-cheeked euphoria and the scandalised, ashen countenances of his aides made the situation even funnier. Any notions they had about making a good showing at the meeting were being swiftly and painfully revised. Toller could not help but enjoy another person attracting the kind of censure which so often was reserved for him, especially

when the offender was the Lord Philosopher himself.

“My lord, the meeting is due to begin soon,” Lain said. “But if you are indisposed perhaps we could...”

“Indisposed! What manner of talk is that?” Glo ducked his head and emerged from his vehicle to stand with unnatural steadiness. “What are we waiting for? Let’s take our places.”

“Very well, my lord.” Lain came to Toller with a hag-ridden expression. “Quate and Locranan will take the charts and easel. I want you to stay here by the carriage and keep an... What do you find so amusing?”

“Nothing,” Toller said quickly. “Nothing at all.”

“You have no idea of what’s at stake today, have you?”

“Conservation is important to me, too,” Toller replied, making his voice as sincere as possible. “I was only...”

“Toller Maraquine!” Lord Glo came towards Toller with arms outstretched, his eyes bulging with pleasurable excitement. “I didn’t know you were here! How are you, my boy?”

Toller was mildly surprised at even being recognised by Glo, let alone being greeted so effusively. “I’m in good health, my lord.”

“You look it.” Glo reached up and put an arm around Toller’s shoulders and swung to face the others. “Look at this fine figure of a man—he reminds me of myself when I was ... hmm ... young.”

“We should take our places right away,” Lain said. “I don’t want to hurry you, but...”

“You’re quite right—we shouldn’t delay our moment of ... hmm ... glory.” Glo gave Toller an affectionate squeeze, exhaling the reek of wine as he did so. “Come on, Toller—you can tell me what you’ve been doing with yourself out in Haffanger.”

Lain stepped forward, looking anxious. “My brother isn’t part of the delegation, my lord. He is supposed to wait here.”

“Nonsense! We’re all together.”

“But he has no greys.”

“That doesn’t matter if he’s in my personal retinue,” Glo said with the kind of mildness that brooked no argument. “We’ll proceed.”

Toller met Lain’s gaze and issued a silent disclaimer by momentarily raising his eyebrows as the group moved off in the direction of the palace’s main entrance. He welcomed the unexpected turn of events, which had saved him from what had promised to be a spell of utter boredom, but he was still resolved to maintain a good relationship with his brother. It was vital for him to be as unobtrusive as possible during the meeting, and in particular to keep a straight

face regardless of what kind of performance Lord Glo might put on. Ignoring the curious glances from passers-by, he walked into the palace with Glo hugging his arm and did his best to produce acceptable small-talk in response to the older man's questioning, even though all his attention was being absorbed by his surroundings.

The palace was also the seat of the Kolcorronian administration and it gave him the impression of being a city within a city. Its corridors and staterooms were populated by sombre-faced men whose manner proclaimed that their concerns were not those of ordinary citizens. Toller was unable even to guess at their functions or the subjects of their low-voiced conversations. His senses were swamped by the sheer opulence of the carpets and hangings, the paintings and sculptures, the complexity of the vaulted ceilings. Even the least important doors appeared to have been carved from single slabs of perette, elvart or glasswood, each one representing perhaps a year's work for a master craftsman.

Lord Glo seemed oblivious to the atmosphere of the palace, but Lain and the rest of his party were noticeably subdued. They were moving in a tight group, like soldiers in hostile territory. After a lengthy walk they reached an enormous double door guarded by two black-armoured ostiaries. Glo led the way into the huge elliptical room beyond. Toller hung back to give his brother precedence, and almost gasped as he got his first adult glimpse of the famed Rainbow Hall. Its domed roof was made entirely of square glass panels supported on intricate lattices of brakka. Most of the panels were pale blue or white, to represent clear sky and clouds, but seven adjacent curving bands echoed the colours of the rainbow. The light blazing down from the canopy was a mingling, merging glory which made the furnishings of the hall glow with tinted fire.

At the far locus of the ellipse was a large but unadorned throne on the uppermost level of a dais. Three lesser thrones were ranged on the second level for the use of the princes who were expected to be present. In ancient times the princes would all have been sons of the ruler, but with the country's expansion and development it had become expedient to allow some government posts to be filled by collateral descendants. These were numerous, thanks to the sexual license accorded to the nobility, and it was usually possible to allocate important responsibilities to suitable men. Of the current monarchy, only Leddravohr and the colourless Pouche, controller of public finances, were acknowledged sons of the King.

Facing the thrones were seats which had been laid out in radial sections for the orders whose concerns ranged from the arts and medicine to religion and proletarian education. The philosophy delegation occupied the middle sector in accordance with the tradition dating back to Bytran IV, who had believed that

scientific knowledge was the foundation upon which Kolcorron would build a future world empire. In subsequent centuries it had become apparent that science had already learned all that was worth learning about the workings of the universe, and the influence of Bytran's thinking had faded, but the philosophy order still retained many of the trappings of its former eminence, in spite of opposition from others of a more pragmatic turn of mind.

Toller felt an ungrudging admiration for Lord Glo as the pudgy little man, large head thrown back and stomach protruding, marched up the hall and took his position before the thrones. The remainder of the philosophy delegation quietly seated themselves behind him, exchanging tentative glances with their opposites in neighbouring sectors. There were more people than Toller had expected—perhaps a hundred in all—the other delegations being augmented by clerks and advisors. Toller, now profoundly grateful for his supernumerary status, slid into the row behind Lain's computational assistants and waited for the proceedings to begin.

There was a murmurous delay punctuated by coughs and occasional nervous laughs, then a ceremonial horn was sounded and King Prad and the three princes entered the hall by way of a private doorway beyond the dais.

At sixty-plus the ruler was tall and lean, carrying his years well in spite of one milk-white eye which he refused to cover. Although Prad was an imposing and regal figure in his blood-coloured robes as he ascended to the high throne, Toller's interest was captured by the powerful, slow-padding form of Prince Leddravohr. He was wearing a white cuirass made from multiple layers of sized linen moulded to the shape of a perfectly developed male torso, and it was evident from what could be seen of his arms and legs that the cuirass did not belie what it covered. Leddravohr's face was smooth and dark-browed, suggestive of brooding power, and it was obvious from his bearing that he had no wish to be present at the council meeting. Toller knew him to be the veteran of a hundred bloody conflicts and he felt a pang of envy as he noted the obvious disdain with which Leddravohr surveyed the assembly before lowering himself on to the central throne of the second tier. He could daydream about playing a similar role, that of the warrior prince, reluctantly recalled from dangerous frontiers to attend to trivialities of civilian existence.

An official beat on the floor three times with his staff to signal that the council meeting had begun. Prad, who was noted for the informality with which he held court, began to speak at once.

"I thank you for your attendance here today," he said, using the inflections of high Kolcorronian. "As you know, the subject for discussion is the increasing scarcity of brakka and energy crystals—but before I hear your submissions it is

my will that another matter be dealt with, if only to establish its relative unimportance to the security of the empire.

“I do not refer to the reports from various sources that ptertha have sharply increased in number during the course of this year. It is my considered opinion that the *apparent* increases can be explained by the fact that our armies are, for the first time, operating in regions of Land where—because of the natural conditions—ptertha have always been more plentiful. I am instructing Lord Glo to instigate a thorough survey which will provide more reliable statistics, but in any case there is no cause for alarm. Prince Leddravohr assures me that the existing procedures and anti-ptertha weapons are more than adequate to deal with any exigency.

“Of more pressing concern to us are rumours that soldiers have died as a result of coming into contact with ptertha casualties. The rumours appear to have originated from units of the Second Army on the Sorka front, and they have spread quickly—as such harmful fictions do—as far as Loongl in the east and the Yalrofac theatre in the west.”

Prad paused and leaned forward, his blind eye gleaming. “The demoralising effect of this kind of scaremongering is a greater threat to our national interests than a two-fold or three-fold increase in the ptertha population. All of us in this hall know that pterthacosis *cannot* be passed on by bodily contact or any other means. It is the duty of every man here to ensure that harmful stories claiming otherwise are stamped out with all possible speed and vigour. We must do everything in our power to promote a healthy scepticism in the minds of the proletariat—and I look particularly to teacher, poet and priest in this respect.”

Toller glanced to each side and saw the leaders of several delegations nodding as they made notes. It was surprising to him that the King should deal with such a minor issue in person, and for a moment he toyed with the startling idea that there might actually be some kernel of truth in the odd rumours. Common soldiers, sailors and airmen were a stolid lot as a rule—but on the other hand they tended to be ignorant and gullible. On balance, he could see no reason to believe there was anything more to fear from the ptertha than in any previous era in Kolcorron’s long history.

“...principal subject for discussion,” King Prad was saying. “The records of the Ports Authority show that in the year 2625 our imports of brakka from the six provinces amounted to only 118,426 tons. It is the twelfth year in succession that the total has fallen. The pikon and halvell yield was correspondingly down. No figures are available for the domestic harvest, but the preliminary estimates are less encouraging than usual.

“The situation is exacerbated by the fact that military and industrial

consumption, particularly of crystals, continues to rise. It is becoming obvious that we are approaching a crucial period in our country's fortunes, and that far-reaching strategies will have to be devised to deal with the problem. I will now entertain your proposals."

Prince Leddravohr, who had become restless during his father's summation, rose to his feet at once. "Majesty, I intend no disrespect to you, but I confess to growing impatient with all this talk of scarcity and dwindling resources. The truth of the matter is that there is an abundance of brakka—sufficient to meet our needs for centuries to come. There are great forests of brakka as yet untouched. The *real* shortcoming lies within ourselves. We lack the resolution to turn our eyes towards the Land of the Long Days—to go forth and claim what is rightfully ours."

In the assembly there was an immediate flurry of excitement which Prad stilled by raising one hand. Toller sat up straighter, suddenly alerted.

"I will not countenance any talk of moving against Chamteth," Prad said, his voice harsher and louder than before.

Leddravohr spun to face him. "It is destined to happen sooner or later—so why not sooner?"

"I repeat there will be no talk of a major war."

"In that case, Majesty, I beg your permission to withdraw," Leddravohr said, his manner taking him within a hair-breadth of insolence. "I can make no contribution to a discussion from which plain logic is barred."

Prad gave his head a single birdlike shake. "Resume your seat and curb your impatience—your newfound regard for logic may yet prove useful." He smiled at the rest of the gathering—his way of saying, *Even a king has problems with unruly offspring*—and invited Prince Chakkell to put forward ideas for reducing industrial consumption of power crystals.

Toller relaxed again while Chakkell was speaking, but he was unable to take his eyes off Leddravohr, who was now lounging in an exaggerated posture of boredom. He was intrigued, disturbed and strangely captivated by the discovery that the military prince regarded war with Chamteth as both desirable and inevitable. Little was known about the exotic land which, being on the far side of the world, was untouched by Overland's shadow and therefore had an uninterrupted day.

The available maps were very old and of doubtful accuracy, but they showed that Chamteth was as large as the Kolcorronian empire and equally populous. Few travellers had penetrated to its interior and returned, but their accounts had been unanimous in the descriptions of the vast brakka forests. The reserves had never been depleted because the Chamtethans regarded it as the ultimate sin to

interrupt the life cycle of the brakka tree. They drew off limited quantities of crystals by drilling small holes into the combustion chambers, and restricted their use of the black wood to what could be obtained from trees which had died naturally.

The existence of such a fabulous treasurehouse had attracted the interest of Kolcorronian rulers in the past, but no real acquisitive action had ever been taken. One factor was the sheer remoteness of the country; the other was the Chamtethans' reputation as fierce, tenacious and gifted fighters. It was thought that their army was the sole user of the country's supply of crystals, and certainly the Chamtethans were well known for their extensive use of cannon—one of the most extravagant ways ever devised for the expending of crystals. They were also totally insular in their outlook, rejecting all commercial and cultural contact with other nations.

The cost, one way or another, of trying to exploit Chamteth had always been recognised as being too great, and Toller had taken it for granted that the situation was a permanent part of the natural order of things. But he had just heard talk of change—and he had a deep personal interest in that possibility.

The social divisions in Kolcorron were such that in normal circumstances a member of one of the great vocational family of families was not permitted to cross the barriers. Toller, restless and resentful over having been born into the philosophy order, had made many futile attempts to get himself accepted for military service. His lack of success had been made all the more galling by the knowledge that there would have been no obstacle to his joining the army had he been part of the proletarian masses. He would have been prepared to serve as a line soldier in the most inhospitable outpost of the empire, but one of his social rank could be accorded nothing less than officer status—an honour which was jealously guarded by the military caste.

All that, Toller now realised, was concomitant on the affairs of the country following the familiar centuries-old course. A war with Chamteth would force profound changes on Kolcorron, however, and King Prad would not be on the throne for ever. He was likely to be succeeded by Leddravohr in the not-too-distant future—and when that happened the old order would be swept away. It looked to Toller as though his fortunes could be directly affected by those of Leddravohr, and the mere prospect was enough to produce an undertow of dark excitement in his consciousness. The council meeting, which he had expected to be routine and dull, was proving to be one of the most significant occasions of his life.

On the dais the swarthy, balding and paunchy Prince Chakkell was concluding his opening remarks with a statement that he needed twice his

present supply of pikon and halvell for quarrying purposes if essential building projects were to continue.

“You appear not to be in sympathy with the stated aims of this gathering,” Prad commented, beginning to show some exasperation. “May I remind you that I was awaiting your thoughts on how to reduce requirements?”

“My apologies, Majesty,” Chakkell said, the stubbornness of his tone contradicting the words. The son of an obscure nobleman, he had earned his rank through a combination of energy, guile and driving ambition, and it was no secret in the upper echelons of Kolcorronian society that he nursed hopes of seeing a change in the rules of succession which would allow one of his children to ascend the throne. Those aspirations, coupled with the fact that he was Leddravohr’s main competitor for brakka products, meant that there was a smouldering antagonism between them, but on this occasion both men were in accord. Chakkell sat down and folded his arms, making it clear that any thoughts he had on the subject of conservation would not be to the King’s liking.

“There appears to be a lack of understanding of an extremely serious problem,” Prad said severely. “I must emphasise that the country is facing several years of acute shortages of a vital commodity, and that I expect a more positive attitude from my administrators and advisors for the remainder of this meeting. Perhaps the gravity of the situation will be borne home to you if I call upon Lord Glo to report on the progress which has been made thus far with the attempts to produce pikon and halvell by artificial means. Although our expectations are high in this regard, there is—as you will hear—a considerable way to go, and it behoves us to plan accordingly.

“Let us hear what you have to say, Lord Glo.”

There was an extended silence during which nothing happened, then Borreat Hargeth—in the philosophy sector’s second row—was seen to lean forward and tap Glo’s shoulder. Glo jumped to his feet immediately, obviously startled, and somebody across the aisle on Toller’s right gave a low chuckle.

“Pardon me, Majesty, I was collecting my thoughts,” Glo said, his voice unnecessarily loud. “What was your ... hmm ... question?”

On the dais Prince Leddravohr covered his face with one splayed hand to mime embarrassment and the same man on Toller’s right, encouraged, chuckled louder. Toller turned in his direction, scowling, and the man—an official in Lord Tunsfo’s medical delegation—glanced at him and abruptly ceased looking amused.

The King gave a tolerant sigh. “My question, if you will honour us by bringing your mind to bear on it, was a general one concerning the experiments with pikon and halvell. Where do we stand?”

“Ah! Yes, Majesty, the situation is indeed as I ... hmm ... reported to you at our last meeting. We have made great strides ... unprecedented strides ... in the extraction and purification of both the green and the purple. We have much to be proud of. AH that remains for us to do at this ... hmm ... stage is to perfect a way of removing the contaminants which inhibit the crystals from reacting with each other. That is proving ... hmm ... difficult.”

“You’re contradicting yourself, Glo. Are you making progress with purification or are you not?”

“Our progress has been excellent, Majesty. As far as it goes, that is. It’s all a question of solvents and temperatures and ... um ... complex chemical reactions. We are handicapped by not having the proper solvent.”

“Perhaps the old fool drank it all,” Leddravohr said to Chakkell, making no attempt to modulate his voice. The laughter which followed his words was accompanied by a frisson of unease—most of those present had never seen a man of Glo’s rank so directly insulted.

“Enough!” Prad’s milk-white eye narrowed and widened several times, a warning beacon. “Lord Glo, when I spoke to you ten days ago you gave me the impression that you could begin to produce pure crystals within two or three years. Are you now saying differently?”

“He doesn’t know *what* he’s saying,” Leddravohr put in, grinning, his contemptuous stare raking the philosophy sector. Toller, unable to react in any other way, spread his shoulders to make himself as conspicuous as possible and sought to hold Leddravohr’s gaze, and all the while an inner voice was pleading with him to remember his new vows, to use his brains and stay out of trouble.

“Majesty, this is a matter of great ... hmm ... complexity,” Glo said, ignoring Leddravohr. “We cannot consider the subject of power crystals in isolation. Even if we had an unlimited supply of crystals this very day... There is the brakka tree itself, you see. Our plantations. It takes six centuries for the seedlings to mature and...”

“You mean six decades, don’t you?”

“I believe I said decades, Majesty, but I have another proposal which I beg leave to bring to your attention.” Glo’s voice had developed a quaver and he was swaying slightly. “I have the honour to present for your consideration a visionary scheme, one which will shape the ultimate future of this great nation of ours. A thousand years from now our descendants will look back on your reign with wonder and awe as they...”

“Lord Glo!” Prad was incredulous and angry. “Are you ill or drunk?”

“Neither, Majesty.”

“Then stop prating about visions and answer my question concerning the

crystals.”

Glo seemed to be labouring for breath, his plump chest swelling to take up the slack in his grey robe. “I fear I may be indisposed, after all.” He pressed a hand to his side and dropped into his chair with an audible thud. “My senior mathematician, Lain Maraquine, will present the facts on my ... hmm ... behalf.”

Toller watched with growing trepidation as his brother stood up, bowed towards the dais, and signalled for his assistants, Quate and Locranan, to bring his easel and charts forward. They did so and erected the easel with a fumbling eagerness which prolonged what should have been the work of a moment. More time was taken up as the chart they unrolled and suspended had to be coaxed to remain flat. On the dais even the insipid Prince Pouche was beginning to look restless. Toller was concerned to see that Lain was trembling with nervousness.

“What is your intention, Maraquine?” the King said, not unkindly. “Am I to revisit the classroom at my time of life?”

“The graphics are helpful, Majesty,” Lain said. “They illustrate the factors governing the...” The remainder of his reply drifted into inaudibility as he indicated key features on the vivid diagrams.

“Can’t hear you,” Chakkell snapped irritably. “Speak up!”

“Where are your manners?” Leddravohr said, turning to him. “What way is that to address such a shy young maiden?” A number of men in the audience, taking their cue, guffawed loudly.

This shouldn’t be happening, Toller thought as he rose to his feet, the blood roaring in his ears. The Kolcorronian code of conduct ruled that to step in and reply to a challenge—and an insult was always regarded as such—issued to a third party was to add to the original slur. The imputation was that the insulted man was too cowardly to defend his own honour. Lain had often claimed that it was his duty as a philosopher to soar above all such irrationalities, that the ancient code was more suited to quarrelsome animals than thinking men. Knowing that his brother would not and could not take up Leddravohr’s challenge, knowing further that he was barred from active intervention, Toller was taking the only course open to him. He stood up straight, differentiating himself from the seated nonparticipants all around, waiting for Leddravohr to notice him and interpret his physical and mental stance.

“That’s enough, Leddravohr.” The King slapped the arms of his throne. “I want to hear what the wrangler has to say. Go ahead, Maraquine.”

“Majesty, I...” Lain was now quivering so violently that his robe was fluttering.

“Try to put yourself at ease, Maraquine. I don’t want a lengthy discourse—it

will suffice for you to tell me how many years will elapse, in your expert opinion, before we can produce pure pikon and halvell.”

Lain took a deep breath, fighting to control himself. “It is impossible to make predictions in matters like this.”

“Give me your personal view. Would you say five years?”

“No, Majesty.” Lain shot a sideways glance at Lord Glo and managed to make his voice more resolute. “If we increased our research expenditure tenfold ... and were fortunate ... we might produce some usable crystals twenty years from now. But there is no guarantee that we will ever succeed. There is only one sane and logical course for the country as a whole to follow and that is to ban the felling of brakka entirely for the next twenty or thirty years. In that way...”

“I *refuse* to listen to any more of this!” Leddravohr was on his feet and stepping down from the dais. “Did I say maiden? I was wrong—this is an old woman! Raise your skirts and flee from this place, old woman, and take your sticks and scraps with you.” Leddravohr strode to the easel and thrust the palm of his hand against it, sending it clattering to the floor.

During the clamour which followed, Toller left his place and walked forwards on stiffened legs to stand close to his brother. On the dais the King was ordering Leddravohr back to his seat, but his voice was almost lost amid angry cries from Chakkell and in the general commotion in the hall. A court official was hammering on the floor with his staff, but the only effect was to increase the level of sound. Leddravohr looked straight at Toller with white-flaring eyes, but appeared not to see him as he wheeled round to face his father.

“I act on your behalf, Majesty,” he shouted in a voice which brought a ringing silence to the hall. “Your ears shall not be defiled any further with the kind of spoutings we have just heard from the so-called thinkers among us.”

“I am quite capable of making such decisions for myself,” Prad replied sternly. “I would remind you that this is a meeting of the high council—not some brawling ground for your muddled soldiery.”

Leddravohr was unrepentant as he glanced contemptuously at Lain. “I hold the lowliest soldier in the service of Kolcorron in greater esteem than this whey-faced old woman.” His continued defiance of the King intensified the silence under the glass dome, and it was into that magnifying hush that Toller heard himself drop his own challenge. It would have been a crime akin to treason, and punishable by death, for one of his station to take the initiative and challenge a member of the monarchy, but the code permitted him to move indirectly within limits and seek to provoke a response.

“‘Old woman’ appears to be a favourite epithet of Prince Leddravohr’s,” he said to Vorndal Sisstt, who was seated close to him. “Does that mean he is

always very prudent in his choice of opponents?”

Sisstt gaped up at him and shrank away, white-faced, anxiously dissociating himself as Leddravohr turned to find out who had spoken. Seeing Leddravohr at close quarters for the first time, Toller observed that his strong-jawed countenance was unlined, possessed of a curious statuesque smoothness, almost as if the muscles were nerveless and immobile. It was an inhuman face, untroubled by the ordinary range of expression, with only the eyes to signal what was going on behind the broad brow. In this case Leddravohr’s eyes showed that he was more incredulous than angry as he scrutinised the younger man, taking in every detail of his physique and dress.

“Who are you?” Leddravohr said at last. “Or should I say, what are you?”

“My name is Toller Maraquine, Prince—and I take pride in being a philosopher.”

Leddravohr glanced up at his father and smiled, as if to demonstrate that when he saw it as his filial duty he could endure extreme provocation. Toller did not like the smile, which was accomplished in an instant, effortless as the twitching back of a drape, affecting no other part of his face.

“Well, Toller Maraquine,” Leddravohr said, “it is very fortunate that personal weapons are never worn in my father’s household.”

Leave it at that, Toller urged himself. *You’ve made your point and—against all the odds—you’re getting away with it.*

“Fortunate?” he said pleasantly. “For whom?”

Leddravohr’s smile did not waver, but his eyes became opaque, like polished brown pebbles. He took one step forward and Toller readied himself for the shock of physical combat, but in that moment the glass axis of the confrontation was snapped by pressure from an unexpected direction.

“Majesty,” Lord Glo called out, lurching to his feet, looking ghastly but speaking in surprisingly fluent and resonant tones. “I beg you—for the sake of our beloved Kolcorron—to listen to the proposal of which I spoke earlier. Please do not let my brief indisposition stand in the way of your hearing of a scheme whose implications go far beyond the present and near future, and in the long run will concern the very existence of our great nation.”

“Hold still, Glo.” King Prad also rose to his feet and pointed at Leddravohr with the index fingers of both hands, triangulating on him with all the force of his authority. “Leddravohr, you will now resume your seat.”

Leddravohr eyed the King for a few seconds, his face impassive, then he turned away from Toller and walked slowly to the dais. Toller was startled as he felt his brother grip his arm.

“What are you trying to do?” Lain whispered, his frightened gaze hunting

over Toller's face. "Leddravohr has killed people for less."

Toller shrugged his arm free. "I'm still alive."

"And you had no right to step in like that."

"I apologise for the insult," Toller said. "I didn't think one more would make any difference."

"You know what I think of your childish..." Lain broke off as Lord Glo came to stand close beside him.

"The boy can't help being impetuous—I was the same at his age," Glo said. The brilliance from above showed that every pore on his forehead was separately domed with sweat. Beneath the ample folds of his robe his chest swelled and contracted with disturbing rapidity, pumping out the smell of wine.

"My lord, I think you should sit down and compose yourself," Lain said quietly. "There is no need for you to be subjected to any more of..."

"No! You're the one who must sit down." Glo indicated two nearby seats and waited until Lain and Toller had sunk into them. "You're a good man, Lain, but it was very wrong of me to burden you with a task for which you are constitutionally ... hmm ... unsuited. This is a time for boldness. Boldness of vision. That is what earned us the respect of the ancient kings."

Toller, rendered morbidly sensitive to Leddravohr's every movement, noticed that on the dais the prince was concluding a whispered conversation with his father. Both men sat down, and Leddravohr immediately turned his brooding gaze in Toller's direction. At a barely perceptible nod from the King an official pounded the floor with his staff to quell the low-key murmurings throughout the hall.

"Lord Glo!" Prad's voice was now ominously calm. "I apologise for the discourtesy shown to members of your delegation, but I also add that the council's time should not be wasted on frivolous suggestions. Now, if I grant you permission to lay before us the essentials of your grand scheme, will you undertake to do so quickly and succinctly, without adding to my tribulations on a day which has already seen too many?"

"Gladly!"

"Then proceed."

"I am about to do so, Majesty." Glo half turned to look at Lain, gave him a prolonged wink and began to whisper. "Remember what you said about my flying higher and seeing farther? You're going to have cause to reflect on those words, my boy. Your graphs were telling a story that even you didn't understand, but I..."

"Lord Glo," Prad said, "I am waiting."

Glo gave him an elaborate bow, complete with the hand flourishes

appropriate to the use of the high tongue. “Majesty, the philosopher has many duties, many responsibilities. Not only must his mind encompass the past and the present, it must illuminate the multiple pathways of the future. The darker and more ... hmm ... hazardous those pathways may be, the higher...”

“Get on with it, Glo!”

“Very well, Majesty. My analysis of the situation in which Kolcorron finds itself today shows that the difficulties of obtaining brakka and power crystals are going to increase until ... hmm ... only the most vigorous and far-sighted measures will avert national disaster.” Glo’s voice shook with fervour.

“It is my considered opinion that, as the problems which beset us grow and multiply, we must expand our capabilities accordingly. If we are to maintain our premier position on Land we must turn our eyes—not towards the petty nations on our borders, with their meagre resources—but towards the sky!

“The entire planet of Overland hangs above us, waiting, like a luscious fruit ready for the picking. It is within our powers to develop the means to go there and to...” The rest of Glo’s sentence was drowned in a swelling tide of laughter.

Toller, whose gaze had been locked with Leddravohr’s, turned his head as he heard angry shouts from his right. He saw that, beyond Tunsfo’s medical delegation, Lord Prelate Balountar had risen to his feet and was pointing at Glo in accusation, his small mouth distorted and dragged to one side with intensity of emotion.

Borreat Hargeth leaned over from the row behind Toller and gripped Lain’s shoulder. “Make the old fool sit down,” he urged in a scandalised whisper. “Did you know he was going to do this?”

“Of course not!” Lain’s narrow face was haggard. “And how can I stop him?”

“You’d better do something before we’re all made to look like idiots.”

“...long been known that Land and Overland share a common atmosphere,” Glo was declaiming, seemingly oblivious to the commotion he had caused. “The Greenmount archives contain detailed drawings for hot air balloons capable of ascending to...”

“In the name of the Church I command you to cease this blasphemy,” Lord Prelate Balountar shouted, leaving his place to advance on Glo, head thrust forward and tilting from side to side like that of a wading bird. Toller, who was irreligious by instinct, deduced from the violence of Balountar’s reaction that the churchman was a strict Alternationist. Unlike many senior clerics, who paid lip service to their creed in order to collect large stipends, Balountar really did believe that after death the spirit migrated to Overland, was reincarnated as a newborn infant and eventually returned to Land in the same way, part of a neverending cycle of existence.

Glo made a dismissive gesture in Balountar's direction. "The main difficulty lies with the region of neutral ... hmm ... gravity at the midpoint of the flight where, of course, the density differential between hot and cold air can have no effect. That problem can be solved by fitting each craft with reaction tubes which..."

Glo was abruptly silenced when Balountar closed the distance between them in a sudden rush, black vestments flapping, and clamped a hand over Glo's mouth. Toller, who had not expected the cleric to use force, sprang from his chair. He grabbed both of Balountar's bony wrists and brought his arms down to his sides. Glo clutched at his own throat, gagging. Balountar tried to break free, but Toller lifted him as easily as he would have moved a straw dummy and set him down several paces away, becoming aware as he did so that the King had again risen to his feet. The laughter in the hall died away to be replaced by a taut silence.

"*You!*" Balountar's mouth worked spasmodically as he glared up at Toller. "You touched me!"

"I was acting in defence of my master," Toller said, realising that his reflex action had been a major breach of protocol. He heard a muffled retching sound and turned to see that Glo was being sick with both hands cupped over his mouth. Black wine was gouting through his fingers, disfiguring his robe and spattering on the floor.

The King spoke loudly and clearly, each word like the snapping of a blade. "Lord Glo, I don't know which I find more offensive—the contents of your stomach or the contents of your mind. You and your party will leave my presence immediately, and I warn you here and now that—as soon as more pressing matters have been dealt with—I am going to think long and hard about your future."

Glo uncovered his mouth and tried to speak, the brown pegs of his teeth working up and down, but was able to produce nothing more than clicking sounds in his throat.

"Remove him from my sight," Prad said, turning his hard eyes on the Lord Prelate. "As for you, Balountar, you are to be rebuked for mounting a physical attack on one of my ministers, no matter how great the provocation. For that reason, you have no redress against the young man who restrained you, though he does appear somewhat lacking in discretion. You will return to your place and remain there without speaking until the Lord Philosopher and his cortege of buffoons have withdrawn."

The King sat down and stared straight ahead while Lain and Borreat Hargeth closed upon Glo and led him away towards the hall's main entrance. Toller

walked around Vorndal Sisstt, who had knelt to wipe the floor with the hem of his own robe, and helped Lain's two assistants to gather up the fallen easel and charts. As he stood up with the easel under his arm it occurred to him that Prince Leddravohr must have received an unusually powerful reprimand to induce him to remain so quiet. He glanced towards the dais and saw that Leddravohr, lounging in his throne, was staring at him with an intent unwavering gaze. Toller, oppressed by collective shame, looked elsewhere immediately, but not before he had seen Leddravohr's smile twitch into existence.

"What are you waiting for?" Sisstt mumbled. "Get that stuff out of here before the King decides to have us flayed."

The walk through the corridors and high chambers of the palace seemed twice as long as before. Even when Glo had recovered sufficiently to shake off helping hands, Toller felt that news of the philosophers' disgrace had magically flown ahead of them and was being discussed by every low-voiced group they passed. From the start he had felt that Lord Glo was going to be unable to function well at the meeting, but he had not anticipated being drawn into a debacle of such magnitude. King Prad was famed for the informality and tolerance with which he conducted royal business, but Glo had managed to transgress to such an extent that the future of the entire order had been called into question. And furthermore, Toller's embryonic plan to enter the army by someday finding favour with Leddravohr was no longer tenable—the military prince had a reputation for never forgetting, never forgiving.

On reaching the principal courtyard Glo thrust out his stomach and marched jauntily to his phaeton. He paused beside it, turned to face the rest of the group and said, "Well, that didn't go too badly, did it? I think I can truthfully say that I planted a seed in the King's ... hmm ... mind. What do you say?"

Lain, Hargeth and Duthoon exchanged stricken glances, but Sisstt spoke up at once. "You're absolutely right, my lord."

Glo nodded approval at him. "That's the only way to advance a radical new idea, you know. Plant a seed. Let it ... hmm ... germinate."

Toller turned away, suddenly in fresh danger of laughing aloud in spite of all that had happened to him, and carried the easel to his tethered bluehorn. He strapped the wooden framework across the beast's haunches, retrieved the rolled charts from Quate and Locranan, and prepared to depart. The sun was little more than halfway between the eastern rim of Overland—the ordeal by humiliation had been mercifully brief—and there was time for him to claim a late breakfast as the first step in salvaging the rest of the day. He had placed one foot in the stirrup when his brother appeared at his side.

"What is it that afflicts you?" Lain said. "Your behaviour in the palace was

appalling—even by your own standards.”

Toller was taken aback. “*My behaviour!*”

“Yes! Within the space of minutes you made enemies of two of the most dangerous men in the empire. How do you do it?”

“It’s very simple,” Toller said stonily. “I comport myself as a man.”

Lain sighed in exasperation. “I’ll speak to you further when we get back to Greenmount.”

“No doubt.” Toller mounted the bluehorn and urged it forward, not waiting for the coach. On the ride back to the Square House his annoyance with Lain gradually faded as he considered his brother’s unenviable position. Lord Philosopher Glo was bringing the order in disrepute, but as a royal he could only be deposed by the King. Attempting to undermine him would be treated as sedition, and in any case Lain had too much personal loyalty to Glo even to criticise him in private. When it became common knowledge that Glo had proposed trying to send ships to Overland all those connected with him would become objects of derision—and Lain would suffer everything in silence, retreating further into his books and graphs while the philosophers’ tenure at Greenmount grew steadily less secure.

By the time he had reached the multi-gabled house Toller’s mind was tiring of abstracts and becoming preoccupied with the fact that he was hungry. Not only had he missed breakfast, he had eaten virtually nothing on the previous day, and now there was a raging emptiness in his stomach. He tethered the bluehorn in the precinct and, without bothering to unload it, walked quickly into the house with the intention of going straight to the kitchen.

For the second time that morning he found himself unexpectedly in the presence of Gesalla, who was crossing the entrance hall towards the west salon. She turned to him, dazzled by the light from the archway, and smiled. The smile lasted only a moment, as long as it took for her to identify him against the glare, but its effect on Toller was odd. He seemed to see Gesalla for the first time, as a goddess figure with sun-bright eyes, and in the instant he felt an inexplicable and poignant sense of waste, not of material possessions but of all the potential of life itself. The sensation faded as quickly as it had come, but it left him feeling sad and strangely chastened.

“Oh, it’s you,” Gesalla said in a cold voice. “I thought you were Lain.”

Toller smiled, wondering if he could begin a new and more constructive relationship with Gesalla. “A trick of the light.”

“Why are you back so early?”

“Ah ... the meeting didn’t go as planned. There was some trouble. Lain will tell you all about it—he’s on his way home now.”

Gesalla tilted her head and moved until she had the advantage of the light. “Why can’t you tell me? Was it something to do with you?”

“With *me*?”

“Yes. I advised Lain not to let you go anywhere near the palace.”

“Well, perhaps he’s getting as sick as I am of you and your endless torrents of advice.” Toller tried to stop speaking, but the word fever was upon him. “Perhaps he has begun to regret marrying a withered twig instead of a real woman.”

“Thank you—I’ll pass your comments on to Lain in full.” Gesalla’s lips quirked, showing that—far from being wounded—she was pleased at having invoked the kind of intemperate response which could result in Toller being banished from the Square House. “Do I take it that your concept of a real woman is embodied in the whore who is waiting in your bed at this moment?”

“You can take...” Toller scowled, trying to conceal the fact that he had completely forgotten about his companion of the night. “You should guard your tongue! Felise is no whore.”

Gesalla’s eyes sparkled. “Her name is Fera.”

“Felise or Fera—she isn’t a whore.”

“I won’t bandy definitions with you,” Gesalla said, her tones now light, cool and infuriating. “The cook told me you left instructions for your ... guest to be provided with all the food she wished. And if the amounts she has already consumed this foreday are any yardstick, you should think yourself fortunate that you don’t have to support her in marriage.”

“But I do!” Toller saw his chance to deliver the verbal thrust and took it on the reflex, with heady disregard for the consequences. “I’ve been trying to tell you that I gave Fera gradewife status before I left here this morning. I’m sure you will soon learn to enjoy her company about the house, and then we can all be friends together. Now, if you will excuse me...”

He smiled, savouring the shock and incredulity on Gesalla’s face, then turned and sauntered towards the main stair, taking care to hide his own numb bemusement over what a few angry seconds could do to the course of his life. The last thing he wanted was the responsibility of a wife, even of the fourth grade, and he could only hope that Fera would refuse the offer he had committed himself to making.

CHAPTER 5

General Risdal Dalacott awoke at first light and, following the routine which had rarely varied in his sixty-eight years of life, left his bed immediately.

He walked around the room several times, his step growing firmer as the stiffness and pain gradually departed from his right leg. It was almost thirty years since the aftday, during the first Sorka campaign, when a heavy Merrillian throwing spear had smashed his thigh bone just above the knee. The injury had troubled him at intervals ever since, and the periods when he was free of discomfort were becoming shorter and quite infrequent.

As soon as he was satisfied with the leg's performance he went into the adjoining toilet chamber and threw the lever of enamelled brakka which was set in one wall. The water which sprayed down on him from the perforated ceiling was hot—a reminder that he was not in his own spartan quarters in Trompha. Putting aside irrational feelings of guilt, he took maximum enjoyment from the warmth as it penetrated and soothed his muscles.

After drying himself he paused at a wall-mounted mirror, which was made of two layers of clear glass with highly different refractive indices, and took stock of his image. Although age had had its inevitable effect on the once-powerful body, the austere discipline of his way of life had prevented fatty degeneration. His long, thoughtful face had become deeply lined, but the greyness which had entered his cropped hair scarcely showed against its fair coloration, and his overall appearance was one of durable health and fitness.

Still serviceable, he thought. But I'll do only one more year. The army has taken too much from me already.

While he was donning his informal blues he turned his thoughts to the day ahead. It was the twelfth birthday of his grandson, Hallie, and—as part of the ritual which proved he was ready to enter military academy—the boy was due to go alone against ptertha. The occasion was an important one, and Dalacott vividly remembered the pride he had felt on watching his own son, Oderan, pass the same test. Oderan's subsequent army career had been cut short by his death at the age of thirty-three—the result of an airship crash in Yalrofac—and it was Dalacott's painful duty to stand in for him during the day's celebrations. He finished dressing, left the bedroom and went downstairs to the dining room

where, in spite of the earliness of the hour, he found Conna Dalacott seated at the round table. She was a tall, open-faced woman whose form was developing the solidity of early middle age.

“Good foreday, Conna,” he said, noting that she was alone. “Is young Hallie still asleep?”

“On his twelfth?” She nodded towards the walled garden, part of which was visible through the floor-to-ceiling window. “He’s out there somewhere, practising. He wouldn’t even look at his breakfast.”

“It’s a big day for him. For us all.”

“Yes.” Something in the timbre of Conna’s voice told Dalacott that she was under a strain. “A wonderful day.”

“I know it’s distressing for you,” he said gently, “but Oderan would have wanted us to make the most of it, for Hallie’s sake.”

Conna gave him a calm smile. “Do you still take nothing but porridge for breakfast? Can’t I tempt you with some whitefish? Sausage? A forcemeat cake?”

“I’ve lived too long on line soldier’s rations,” he protested, tacitly agreeing to restrict himself to smalltalk. Conna had maintained the villa and conducted her life ably enough without his assistance in the ten years since Oderan’s death, and it would be presumptuous of him to offer her any advice at this juncture.

“Very well,” she said, beginning to serve him from one of the covered dishes on the table, “but there’ll be no soldier’s rations for you at the littlenight feast.”

“Agreed!” While Dalacott was eating the lightly salted porridge he exchanged pleasantries with his daughter-in-law, but the seething of his memories continued unabated and—as had been happening more often of late—thoughts of the son he had lost evoked others of the son he had never claimed. Looking back over his life he had, once again, to ponder the ways in which the major turning points were frequently unrecognisable as such, in which the inconsequential could lead to the momentous.

Had he not been caught off his guard during the course of a minor skirmish in Yalrofac all those years ago he would not have received the serious wound in his leg. The injury had led to a long convalescence in the quietness of Redant province; and it was there, while walking by the Bes-Undar river, he had chanced to find the strangest natural object he had ever seen, the one he still carried everywhere he went. The object had been in his possession for about a year when, on a rare visit to the capital, he had impulsively taken it to the science quarter on Greenmount to find out if its strange properties could be explained.

In the event, he had learned nothing about the object and a great deal about himself.

As a dedicated career soldier he had taken on a solewife almost as a duty to the state, to provide him with an heir and to minister to his needs between campaigns. His relationship with Toriane had been pleasant, even and warm; and he had regarded it as fulfilling—until the day he had ridden into the precinct of a square house on Greenmount and had seen Aytha Maraquine. His meeting with the slender young matron had been a blending of green and purple, producing a violent explosion of passion and ecstasy and, ultimately, an intensity of pain he had not believed possible...

"The carriage is back, Grandad," Hallie cried, tapping at the long window. "We're ready to go to the hill."

"I'm coming." Dalacott waved to the fair-haired boy who was dancing with excitement on the patio. Hallie was tall and sturdy, well able to handle the full-size ptertha sticks which were clattering on his belt.

"You haven't finished your porridge," Conna said as he stood up, her matter-of-fact tone not quite concealing the underlying emotion.

"You know, there is absolutely no need for you to worry," he said. "A ptertha drifting over open ground in clear daylight poses no threat to anybody. Dealing with it is child's play, and in any case I'll be staying close to Hallie at all times."

"Thank you." Conna remained seated, staring down at her untouched food, until Dalacott had left the room.

He went out to the garden which—as was standard in rural areas—had high walls surmounted by ptertha screens which could be closed together overhead at night and in foggy conditions. Hallie came running to him, recreating the image of his father at the same age, and took his hand. They walked out to the carriage, in which waited three men, local friends of the family, who were required as witnesses to the boy's coming-of-age. Dalacott, who had renewed their acquaintanceship on the previous evening, exchanged greetings with them as he and Hallie took their places on the padded benches inside the big coach. The driver cracked his whip over his team of four bluehorns and the vehicle moved off.

"Oho! Have we a seasoned campaigner here?" said Gehate, a retired merchant, leaning forward to tap a Y-shaped ptertha stick he had noticed among the normal Kolcorronian cruciforms in Hallie's armoury.

"It's Ballinnian," Hallie said proudly, stroking the polished and highly decorated wood of the weapon, which Dalacott had given him a year earlier. "It flies farther than the others. Effective at thirty yards. The Gethans use them as well. The Gethans and the Cissorians."

Dalacott returned the indulgent smiles the boy's show of knowledge elicited from the other men. Throwing sticks of one form or another had been in use

since ancient times by almost every nation on Land as a defence against ptertha, and had been chosen for their effectiveness. The enigmatic globes burst as easily as soap bubbles once they got to within their killing radius of a man, but before that they showed a surprising degree of resilience. A bullet, an arrow or even a spear could pass through a ptertha without causing it any harm—the globe would only quiver momentarily as it repaired the punctures in its transparent skin. It took a rotating, flailing missile to disrupt a ptertha's structure and disperse its toxic dust into the air.

The bolas made a good ptertha killer, but it was hard to master and had the disadvantage of being too heavy to be carried in quantity, whereas a multi-bladed throwing stick was flat, comparatively light and easily portable. It was a source of wonder to Dalacott that even the most primitive tribesmen had learned that giving each blade one rounded edge and one sharp edge produced a weapon which sustained itself in the air like a bird, flying much farther than an ordinary projectile. No doubt it was that seemingly magical property which induced people like the Ballinnians to lavish such care on the carving and embellishment of their ptertha sticks. By contrast, the pragmatic Kolcorronians favoured a plain expendable weapon of the four-bladed pattern which was suitable for mass production because it was made of two straight sections glued together at the centre.

The carriage gradually left the grain fields and orchards of Klinterden behind and began climbing the foothills of Mount Pharote. Eventually it reached a place where the road petered out on a grassy table, beyond which the ground ascended steeply into mists which had not yet been boiled off by the sun.

"Here we are," Gehate said jovially to Hallie as the vehicle creaked to a halt. "I can't wait to see what sport that fancy stick of yours will produce. Thirty yards, you say?"

Thessaro, a florid-faced banker, frowned and shook his head. "Don't egg the boy into showing off. It isn't good to throw too soon."

"I think you'll find he knows what to do," Dalacott said as he got out of the carriage with Hallie and looked around. The sky was a dome of pearly brilliance shading off into pale blue overhead. No stars could be seen and even the great disk of Overland, only part of which was visible, appeared pale and insubstantial. Dalacott had travelled to the south of Kail province to visit his son's family, and in these latitudes Overland was noticeably displaced to the north. The climate was more temperate than that of equatorial Kolcorron, a factor which—combined with a much shorter littlenight—made the region one of the best food producers in the empire.

"Plenty of ptertha," Gehate said, pointing upwards to where purple motes

could be seen drifting high in the air currents rolling down from the mountain.

“There’s always plenty of ptertha these days,” commented Ondobirtre, the third witness. “I’ll swear they are on the increase—no matter what anybody says to the contrary. I heard that several of them even penetrated the centre of Ro-Baccanta a few days ago.”

Gehate shook his head impatiently. “They don’t go into cities.”

“I’m only telling what I heard.”

“You’re too credulous, my friend. You listen to too many tall stories.”

“This is no time for bickering,” Thessaro put in. “This is an important occasion.” He opened the linen sack he was carrying and began counting out six ptertha sticks each to Dalacott and the other men.

“You won’t need those, Grandad,” Hallie said, looking offended. “I’m not going to miss.”

“I know that, Hallie, but it’s the custom. Besides, some of the rest of us might be in need of a little practice.” Dalacott put an arm around the boy’s shoulders and walked with him to the mouth of an alley created by two high nets. They were strung on parallel lines of poles which crossed the table and went up the slope beyond to disappear into the mist ceiling. The system was a traditional one which served to guide ptertha down from the mountain in small numbers. It would have been easy for the globes to escape by floating upwards, but a few always followed such an alley to its lower end as though they were sentient creatures motivated by curiosity. Quirks of behaviour like that were the main reason for the belief, held by many, that the globes possessed some degree of intelligence, although Dalacott had always remained unconvinced in view of their complete lack of internal structure.

“You can leave me now, Grandad,” Hallie said. “I’m ready.”

“Very well, young man.” Dalacott moved back a dozen paces to stand line abreast with the other men. It was the first time he had ever thought of his grandson as being anything more than a boy, but Hallie was entering his trial with courage and dignity, and would never again be quite the same person as the child who had played in the garden only that morning. It came to Dalacott that at breakfast he had given Conna the wrong assurances—she had known only too well that her child was never coming back to her. The insight was something Dalacott would have to note in his diary at nightfall. Soldiers’ wives were required to undergo their own trials, and the adversary was time itself.

“I knew we wouldn’t have to wait very long,” Ondobirtre whispered.

Dalacott transferred his attention from his grandson to the wall of mist at the far end of the netted enclosure. In spite of his confidence in Hallie, he felt a spasm of alarm as he saw that two ptertha had appeared simultaneously. The

livid globes, each a full two yards in diameter, came drifting low and weaving, becoming harder to see clearly as they moved down the slope to where the background was grass. Hallie, who had a four-bladed stick in his hand, altered his stance slightly and made ready to throw.

Not yet, Dalacott commanded in his thoughts, knowing that the presence of a second ptertha would increase the temptation to try destroying one at maximum range. The dust released by a bursting ptertha lost its toxicity almost as soon as it was exposed to air, so the minimum safe range for a kill could be as little as six paces, depending on wind conditions. At that distance it was virtually impossible to miss, which meant that the ptertha was no match at all for a man with a cool head, but Dalacott had seen novices suddenly lose their judgment and coordination. For some there was a strange mesmeric and unmanly quality about the trembling spheres, especially when on nearing their prey they ceased their random drifting and closed in with silent, deadly purpose.

The two floating towards Hallie were now less than thirty paces away from him, sailing just above the grass, blindly questing from one net to the other. Hallie brought his right arm back, making tentative wrist movements, but refrained from throwing. Watching the solitary, straight-backed figure holding his ground as the ptertha drew ever closer, Dalacott experienced a mixture of pride, love and pure fear. He held one of his own sticks at the ready and prepared to dart forward. Hallie moved closer to the net on his left, still withholding his first strike.

“Do you see what the little devil is up to?” Gehate breathed. “I do believe he’s...”

At that moment the aimless meanderings of the ptertha brought them together, one behind the other, and Hallie made his throw. The blades of the cruciform weapon blurred as it flew straight and true, and an instant later the purple globes no longer existed.

Hallie became a boy again, just long enough to make one exultant leap into the air, then he resumed his watchful stance as a third ptertha emerged from the mist. He unclipped another stick from his belt, and Dalacott saw that it was the Y-shaped Ballinnian weapon.

Gehate nudged Dalacott. “The first throw was for you, but I think this one is going to be for my benefit—to teach me to keep my mouth shut.”

Hallie allowed the globe to get no closer than thirty paces before he made his second throw. The weapon flitted along the alley like a brilliantly coloured bird, almost without sinking, and was just beginning to lose stability when it sliced into the ptertha and annihilated it. Hallie was grinning as he turned to the watching men and gave them an elaborate bow. He had claimed the necessary

three kills and was now officially entering the adult phase of his life.

“The boy had some luck that time, but he deserved it,” Gehate said ungrudgingly. “Oderan should have been here.”

“Yes.” Dalacott, racked by bitter-sweet emotions, contented himself with the monosyllabic response, and was relieved when the others moved away—Gehate and Thessaro to embrace Hallie, Ondobirtre to fetch the ritual flask of brandy from the carriage. The group of six, including the hired driver, came together again when Ondobirtre distributed tiny hemispherical glasses whose rims had been fashioned unevenly to represent vanquished ptertha. Dalacott kept an eye on his grandson while he had his first sip of ardent spirits, and was amused when the boy, who had just overcome a mortal enemy, pulled a grotesque face.

“I trust,” Ondobirtre said as he refilled the adults’ glasses, “that all present have noticed the unusual feature of this morning’s outing?”

Gehate snorted. “Yes—I’m glad you didn’t attack the brandy before the rest of us got near it.”

“That’s not it,” Ondobirtre said gravely, refusing to be goaded. “Everybody thinks I’m an idiot, but in all the years we’ve been watching this kind of thing has anybody seen a day when three globes showed up before the bluehorns had stopped farting after the climb? I’m telling you, my shortsighted friends, that the ptertha are on the increase. In fact, unless I’m getting winedreams, we have a couple more visitors.”

The company turned to look at the space between the nets and saw that two more ptertha had drifted down from the obscurity of the cloud ceiling and were nuzzling their way along the corded barriers.

“They’re mine,” Gehate called as he ran forward. He halted, steadied himself and threw two sticks in quick succession, destroying both the globes with ease. Their dust briefly smudged the air.

“There you are!” Gehate cried. “You don’t need to be built like a soldier to be able to defend yourself. I can still teach you a thing or two, young Hallie.”

Hallie handed his glass back to Ondobirtre and ran to join Gehate, eager to compete with him. After the second brandy Dalacott and Thessaro also went forward and they made a sporting contest of the destruction of every globe which appeared, only giving up when the mist rose clear of the top end of the alley and the ptertha retreated with it to higher altitudes. Dalacott was impressed by the fact that almost forty had come down the alley in the space of an hour, considerably more than he normally would have expected. While the others were retrieving their sticks in preparation for leaving, he commented on the matter to Ondobirtre.

“It’s what I’ve been saying all along,” said Ondobirtre, who had been steadily

drinking brandy all the while and was growing pale and morose. “But everybody thinks I’m an idiot.”

By the time the carriage had completed the journey back to Klinterden the sun was nearing the eastern rim of Overland, and the littlenight celebration in honour of Hallie was about to begin.

The vehicles and animals belonging to the guests were gathered in the villa’s forecourt, and a number of children were at play in the walled garden. Hallie, first to jump down from the carriage, sprinted into the house to find his mother. Dalacott followed him at a more sedate pace, the pain in his leg having returned during the long spell in the carriage. He had little enthusiasm for large parties and was not looking forward to the remainder of the day, but it would have been discourteous of him not to stay the night. It was arranged that a military airship would pick him up on the following day for the flight back to the Fifth Army’s headquarters in Trompha.

Conna greeted him with a warm embrace as he entered the villa. “Thank you for taking care of Hallie,” she said. “Was he as superb as he claims?”

“Absolutely! He made a splendid showing.” Dalacott was pleased to see that Conna was now looking cheerful and self-possessed. “He made Gehate sit up and take notice, I can tell you.”

“I’m glad. Now, remember what you promised me at breakfast. I want to see you *eating*—not just picking at your food.”

“The fresh air and exercise have made me ravenous,” Dalacott lied. He left Conna as she was welcoming the three witnesses and went into the central part of the house, which was thronged with men and women who were conversing animatedly in small groups. Grateful that nobody appeared to have noticed his arrival, he quietly took a glass of fruit juice from the table set out for the children and went to stand by a window. From the vantage point he could see quite a long way to the west, over vistas of agricultural land which at the limits of vision shaded off into a low range of blue-green hills. The strip fields clearly showed progressions of six colours, from the pale green of the freshly planted to the deep yellow of mature crops ready for harvesting.

As he was watching, the hills and most distant fields blinked with prismatic colour and abruptly dimmed. The penumbral band of Overland’s shadow was racing across the landscape at orbital speed, closely followed by the blackness of the umbra itself. It took only a fraction of a minute for the rushing wall of darkness to reach and envelop the house—then littlenight had begun. It was a phenomenon Dalacott had never tired of watching. As his eyes adjusted to the new conditions the sky seemed to blossom with stars, hazy spirals and comets,

and he found himself wondering if there could be—as some claimed—other inhabited worlds circling far-off suns. In the old days the army had absorbed too much of his mental energy for him to think deeply on such matters, but of late he had found a spare comfort in the notion that there might be an infinity of worlds, and that on one of them there might be another Kolcorron identical to the one he knew in every respect save one. Was it possible that there was another Land on which his lost loved ones were still alive?

The evocative smell of freshly-lit oil lanterns and candles took his thoughts back to the few treasured nights he had spent with Aytha Maraquine. During the heady hours of passion Dalacott had known with total certainty that they would overcome all difficulties, surmount all the obstacles that lay in the way of their eventual marriage. Aytha, who had solewife status, would have had to endure the twin disgraces of divorcing a sickly husband and of marrying across the greatest of all social divisions, the one which separated the military from all other classes. He had been faced with similar impediments, with an added problem in that by divorcing Toriane—daughter of a military governor—he would have been placing his own career in jeopardy.

None of that had mattered to Dalacott in his fevered monomania. Then had come the Padalian campaign, which should have been brief but which in the event had entailed his being separated from Aytha for almost a year. Next had come the news that she had died in giving birth to a male child. Dalacott's first tortured impulse had been to claim the boy as his own, and in that way keep faith with Aytha, but the cool voices of logic and self-interest had intervened. What was the point in posthumously smirching Aytha's good name and at the same time prejudicing his career and bringing unhappiness to his family? It would not even benefit the boy, Toller, who would be best left to grow up in the comfortable circumstances of his maternal kith and kin.

In the end Dalacott had committed himself to the course of rationality, not even trying to see his son, and the years had slipped by and his abilities had brought him the deserved rank of general. Now, at this late stage of his life, the entire episode had many of the qualities of a dream and might have lost its power to engender pain—except that other questions and doubts had begun to trouble his hours of solitude. All his protestations notwithstanding, had he really intended to marry Aytha? Had he not, in some buried level of his consciousness, been relieved when her death had made it unnecessary for him to make a decision one way or the other? In short, was he—General Risdal Dalacott—the man he had always believed himself to be? Or was he a...?

"There you are!" Conna said, approaching him with a glass of wheat wine which she placed firmly in his free hand while depriving him of the fruit juice.

“You’ll simply have to mingle with the guests, you know. Otherwise it will look as though you consider yourself too famous and important to acknowledge my friends.”

“I’m sorry.” He gave her a wry smile. “The older I get the more I look into the past.”

“Were you thinking about Oderan?”

“I was thinking about many things.” Dalacott sipped his wine and went with his daughter-in-law to make smalltalk with a succession of men and women. He noticed that very few of them had army backgrounds, possibly an indication of Conna’s true feelings about the organisation which had taken her husband and was now turning its attention to her only child. The strain of manufacturing conversation with virtual strangers was considerable, and it was almost with relief that he heard the summons to go to the table. It was his duty now to make a short formal speech about his grandson’s coming-of-age; then he would be free to fade into the background to the best of his ability. He walked around the table to the single high-backed chair which had been decked with blue spearflowers in Hallie’s honour and realised he had not seen the boy for some time.

“Where’s our hero?” a man called out. “Bring on the hero!”

“He must have gone to his room,” Conna said. “I’ll fetch him.”

She smiled apologetically and slipped away from the company. There was delay of perhaps a minute before she reappeared in the doorway, and when she did so her face was strangely passive, frozen. She pointed at Dalacott and turned away again without speaking. He went after her, telling himself that the icy sensation in his stomach meant nothing, and walked along the corridor to Hallie’s bedroom. The boy was lying on his back on his narrow couch. His face was flushed and gleaming with sweat, and his limbs were making small uncoordinated movements.

It can’t be, Dalacott thought, appalled, as he went to the couch. He looked down at Hallie, saw the terror in his eyes, and knew at once that the twitching of his arms and legs represented strenuous attempts to move normally. Paralysis and fever! *I won’t allow this*, Dalacott shouted inwardly as he dropped to his knees. *It isn’t permitted!*

He placed his hand on Hallie’s slim body, just below the ribcage, immediately found the telltale swelling of the spleen, and a moan of pure grief escaped his lips.

“You promised to look after him,” Conna said in a lifeless voice. “He’s only a baby!”

Dalacott stood up and gripped her shoulders. “Is there a doctor here?”

“What’s the use?”

“I know what this looks like, Conna, but at no time was Hallie within twenty paces of a globe and there was no wind to speak of.” Listening to his own voice, a stranger’s voice, Dalacott tried to be persuaded by the stated facts. “Besides, it takes two days for pterthacosis to develop. It simply can’t happen like this. Now, is there a doctor?”

“Visigann,” she whispered, brimming eyes scanning his face in search of hope. “I’ll get him.” She turned and ran from the bedroom.

“You’re going to be all right, Hallie,” Dalacott said as he knelt again by the couch. He used the edge of a coverlet to dab perspiration from the boy’s face and was dismayed to find that he could actually feel heat radiating from the beaded skin. Hallie gazed up at him mutely, and his lips quivered as he tried to smile. Dalacott noticed that the Ballinnian ptertha stick was lying on the couch. He picked it up and pressed it into Hallie’s hand, closing the boy’s nerveless fingers around the polished wood, then kissed him on the forehead. He prolonged the kiss, as though trying to siphon the consuming pyrexia into his own body, and only slowly became aware of two odd facts—that Conna was taking too long to return with the doctor, and that a woman was screaming in another part of the house.

“I’ll come back to you in just a moment, soldier,” he said. He stood up, tranced, made his way back to the dining room and saw that the guests were gathered around a man who was lying on the floor.

The man was Gehate:—and from his fevered complexion and the feeble pawing of his hands it was evident that he was in an advanced stage of pterthacosis.

While he was waiting for the airship to be untethered, Dalacott slipped his hand into a pocket and located the curious nameless object he had found decades earlier on the banks of the Bes-Undar. His thumb worked in a circular pattern over the nugget’s reflective surface, polished smooth by many years of similar frictions, as he tried to come to terms with the enormity of what had happened in the past nine days. The bare statistics conveyed little of the anguish which was withering his spirit.

Hallie had died before the end of the littlenight of his coming of age. Gehate and Ondobirtre had succumbed to the terrifying new form of pterthacosis by the end of that day, and on the following morning he had found Hallie’s mother dead of the same cause in her room. That had been his first indication that the disease was contagious, and the implications had still been reverberating in his head when news had come of the fate of those who had been present at the celebration.

Of some forty men, women and children who had been in the villa, no fewer than thirty-two—including all the children—had been swept away during the same night. And still the tide of death had not expended its fell energies. The population of the hamlet of Klinterden and surrounding district had been reduced from approximately three-hundred to a mere sixty within three days. At that point the invisible killer had appeared to lose its virulence, and the burials had begun.

The airship's gondola lurched and swayed a little as it was freed from its constraints. Dalacott moved closer to a port hole and, for what he knew would be the last time, looked down on the familiar pattern of red-roofed dwellings, orchards and striated fields of grain. Its placid appearance masked the profound changes which had taken place, just as his own unaltered physical aspect disguised the fact that in nine days he had grown old.

The feeling—the drear apathy, the failure of optimism—was new to him, but he had no difficulty in identifying it because, for the first time ever, he could see cause to envy the dead.

PART II
The Proving Flight

CHAPTER 6

The Weapons Research Station was in the south-western outskirts of Ro-Atabri, in the old manufacturing district of Mardavan Quays. The area was lowlying, drained by a hesitant and polluted watercourse which discharged into the Borann below the city. Centuries of industrial usage had rendered the soil of Mardavan Quays sterile in some places, while in others there were great stands of wrongly-coloured vegetation nourished by unknown seepings and secretions, products of ancient cesspools and spoilheaps. Factories and storage buildings were copiously scattered on the landscape, linked by deep-rutted tracks, and half-hidden among them were groups of shabby dwellings from whose windows light rarely shone.

The Research Station did not look out of place in its surroundings, being a collection of nondescript workshops, sheds and shabby single-storey offices. Even the station chiefs office was so grimy that the typical Kolcorronian diamond patterns of its brickwork were almost totally obscured.

Toller Maraquine found the station a deeply depressing place in which to work. Looking back to the time of his appointment, he could see that he had been childishly naïve in his visualisation of a weapons research establishment. He had anticipated perhaps a breezy sward with swordsmen busy testing new types of blades, or archers meticulously assessing the performance of laminated bows and novel patterns of arrowheads.

On arrival at the Quays it had taken him only a few hours to learn that there was very little genuine research on weapons being carried out under Borreat Hargeth. The name of the section disguised the fact that most of its funds were spent on trying to develop materials which could be substituted for brakka in the manufacture of gears and other machine components. Toller's work mainly consisted of mixing various fibres and powders with various types of resin and using the composite to cast various shapes of test specimens. He disliked the choking smell of the resins and the repetitious nature of the task, especially as his instincts told him the project was a waste of time. None of the composite materials the station produced compared well with brakka, the hardest and most durable substance on the planet—and if nature had been obliging enough to supply an ideal material what was the point in searching for another?

Apart from the occasional grumble to Hargeth, however, Toller worked

steadily and conscientiously, determined to prove to his brother that he was a responsible member of the family. His marriage to Fera also had something to do with his newfound steadiness, which was an unexpected benefit from an arrangement he had plunged into for the sole purpose of confounding his brother's wife. He had offered Fera the fourth grade—temporary, non-exclusive, terminable by the man at any time—but she had had the nerve to hold out for third grade status, which was binding on him for six years.

That had been more than fifty days ago, and Toller had hoped that by this time Gesalla would have softened in her attitude to both him and Fera, but if anything the triangular relationship had deteriorated. Irritant factors were Fera's monumental appetite and her capacity for indolence, both of which were an affront to the primly sedulous Gesalla, but Toller was unable to chastise his wife for refusing to amend her ways. She was claiming her right to be the person she had always been, regardless of whom she displeased, just as he was claiming the right to reside in the Maraquine family home. Gesalla was ever on the look-out for a pretext on which to have him dismissed from the Square House, and it was sheer stubbornness on his part which kept him from finding accommodation elsewhere.

Toller was pondering on his domestic situation one foreday, wondering how long the uneasy balance could be maintained, when he saw Hargeth coming into the shed where he was weighing out chopped glass fibres. Hargeth was a lean fidgety man in his early fifties and everything about him—nose, chin, ears, elbows, shoulders—seemed to be sharp-cornered. Today he appeared more restless than usual.

"Come with me, Toller," he said. "We have need of those muscles of yours."

Toller put his scoop aside. "What do you want me to do?"

"You're always complaining about not being able to work on engines of war—and now is your opportunity." Hargeth led the way to a small portable crane which had been erected on a patch of ground between two workshops. It was of conventional rafter wood construction except that the gear wheels, which would have been brakka in an ordinary crane, had been cast in a greyish composite produced by the research station.

"Lord Glo is arriving soon," Hargeth said. "He wants to demonstrate these gears to one of Prince Pouche's financial inspectors, and today we are going to have a preliminary test. I want you to check the cables, grease the gears carefully and fill the load basket with rocks."

"You spoke of a war engine," Toller said. "This is just a crane."

"Army engineers have to build fortifications and raise heavy equipment—so this is a war engine. The Prince's accountants must be kept happy, otherwise we

lose funding. Now go to work—Glo will be here within the hour.”

Toller nodded and began preparing the crane. The sun was only halfway to its daily occlusion by Overland, but there was no wind to scoop the heat out of the lowlying river basin and the temperature was climbing steadily. A nearby tannery was adding its stench to the already fume-laden air of the station. Toller found himself longing for a pot of cool ale, but the Quays district boasted of only one tavern and it had such a verminous aspect that he would not consider sending an apprentice for a sample of its wares.

This is a miserly reward for a life of virtue, he thought disconsolately. *At least at Haffanger the air was fit to breathe.*

He had barely finished putting rocks into the crane’s load basket when there came the sounds of harness and hoofbeats. Lord Glo’s jaunty red-and-orange phaeton rolled through the station’s gates and came to a halt outside Hargeth’s office, looking incongruous amid the begrimed surroundings. Glo stepped down from the vehicle and had a long discussion with his driver before turning to greet Hargeth, who had ventured out to meet him. The two men conversed quietly for a minute, then came towards the crane.

Glo was holding a kerchief close to his nose, and it was obvious from his heightened colouring and a certain stateliness of his gait that he had already partaken generously of wine. Toller shook his head in a kind of amused respect for the single-mindedness with which the Lord Philosopher continued to render himself unfit for office. He stopped smiling when he noticed that several passing workers were whispering behind their hands. Why could Glo not place a higher value on his own dignity?

“There you are, my boy!” Glo called out on seeing Toller. “Do you know that, more than ever, you remind me of myself as a ... hmm ... young man?” He nudged Hargeth. “How is that for a splendid figure of a man, Borreat? That’s how I used to look.”

“Very good, my lord,” Hargeth replied, noticeably unimpressed. “These wheels are the old Compound 18, but we have tried low-temperature curing on them and the results are quite encouraging, even though this crane is more-or-less a scale model. I’m sure it’s a step in the right direction.”

“I’m sure you’re right, but let me see the thing at ... hmm ... work.”

“Of course.” Hargeth nodded to Toller, who began putting the crane through its paces. It was designed for operation by two men, but he was able to hoist the load on his own without undue effort, and directed by Hargeth he spent a few minutes rotating the jib and demonstrating the machine’s load-placing accuracy. He was careful to make the operation as smooth as possible, to avoid feeding shocks into the gear teeth, and the display ended with the crane’s moving parts

in apparently excellent condition. The group of computational assistants and labourers who had gathered to watch the proceedings began to drift away.

Toller was lowering the load to its original resting when, without warning, the pawl with which he was controlling the descent sheared through several teeth on the main ratchet in a burst of staccato sound. The laden basket dropped a short distance before the cable drum locked, and the crane—with Toller still at the controls—tilted dangerously on its base. It was saved from toppling when some of the watching labourers threw their weight on to the rising leg and brought it to the ground.

“My congratulations,” Hargeth said scathingly as Toller stepped clear of the creaking structure. “How did you manage to do that?”

“If only you could invent a material stronger than stale porridge there’d be no...” Toller broke off as he looked beyond Hargeth and saw that Lord Glo had fallen to the ground. He was lying with his face pressed against a ridge of dried clay, seemingly unable to move. Fearful that Glo might have been struck by a flying gear tooth, Toller ran and knelt beside him. Glo’s pale blue eye turned in his direction, but still the rotund body remained inert.

“I’m not drunk,” Glo mumbled, speaking from one side of his mouth. “Get me away from here, my boy—I think I’m halfway to being dead.”

Fera Rivoo had adapted well to her new style of life in Greenmount Peel, but no amount of coaxing on Toller’s part had ever persuaded her to sit astride a bluehorn or even one of the smaller whitehorns which were often favoured by women. Consequently, when Toller wanted to get away from the Peel with his wife for fresh air or simply a change of surroundings he was forced to go on foot. Walking was a form of exercise and travel for which he cared little because it was too tame and dictated too leisurely a pace of events, but Fera regarded it as the only way of getting about the city districts when no carriage was available to her.

“I’m hungry,” she announced as they reached the Plaza of the Navigators, close to the centre of Ro-Atabri.

“Of course you are,” Toller said. “Why, it must be almost an hour since your second breakfast.”

She dug an elbow into his ribs and gave him a meaningful smile. “You want me to keep my strength up, don’t you?”

“Has it occurred to you that there might be more to life than sex and food?”

“Yes—wine.” She shaded her eyes from the early foreday sun and surveyed the nearest of the pastry vendors’ stalls which were dotted along the square’s perimeter. “I think I’ll have some honeycake and perhaps some Kailian white to

wash it down with.”

Still uttering token protests, Toller made the necessary purchases and they sat on one of the benches which faced the statues of illustrious seafarers of the empire’s past. The plaza was bounded by a mix of public and commercial buildings, most of which exhibited—in various shades of masonry and brick—the traditional Kolcorronian pattern of interlocked diamonds. Trees in contrasting stages of their maturation cycle and the colourful dress of passers-by added to the sunlit chiaroscuro. A westerly breeze was keeping the air pleasant and lively.

“I have to admit,” Toller said, sipping some cool light wine, “that this is much better than working for Hargeth. I’ve never understood why scientific research work always seems to involve evil smells.”

“You poor delicate creature!” Fera brushed a crumb from her chin. “If you want to know what a *real* stink is like you should try working in the fish market.”

“No, thanks—I prefer to stay where I am,” Toller replied. It was about twenty days since the sudden onset of Lord Glo’s illness, but Toller was still appreciative of the resultant change in his own circumstances and employment. Glo had been stricken with a paralysis which affected the left side of his body and had found himself in need of a personal attendant, preferably one with an abundance of physical strength. When Toller had been offered the position he had accepted at once, and had moved with Fera to Glo’s spacious residence on the western slope of Greenmount. The new arrangement, as well as providing a welcome relief from Mardavan Quays, had resolved the difficult situation in the Maraquine household, and Toller was making a conscientious effort to be content. A restless gloominess sometimes came upon him when he compared his menial existence to the kind of life he would have preferred, but it was something he always kept to himself. On the positive side, Glo had proved a considerate employer and as soon as he had regained a measure of his strength and mobility had made as few demands as possible on Toller’s time.

“Lord Glo seemed busy this morning,” Fera said. “I could hear that sunwriter of his clicking and clacking no matter where I went.”

Toller nodded. “He’s been talking a great deal with Tunsfo lately. I think he’s worried about the reports from the provinces.”

“There isn’t really going to be a plague, is there, Toller?” Fera drew her shoulders forward in distaste, deepening the cleft in her bosom. “I can’t bear having sick people around me.”

“Don’t worry! From what I hear they wouldn’t be around you very long—about two hours seems to be the average.”

“*Toller!*” Fera gazed at him in open-mouthed reproach, her tongue coated with a fine slurry of honeycake.

“There’s nothing for you to fret about,” Toller said reassuringly, even though—as he had gathered from Glo—something akin to a plague had begun simultaneously in eight widely separated places. Outbreaks had first been reported from the palatine provinces of Kail and Middac; then from the less important and more remote regions of Sorka, Merrill, Padale, Ballin, Yalrofac and Loongl. Since then there had been a lull of a few days, and Toller knew the authorities were hoping against hope that the calamity had been of a transient nature, that the disease had burned itself out, that the mother country of Kolcorron and the capital city would remain unaffected. Toller could understand their feelings, but he saw little grounds for optimism. If the ptertha had increased their killing range and potency to the awesome extent suggested by the dispatches, they were in his opinion bound to make maximum use of their new powers. The respite that mankind was enjoying could mean that the ptertha were behaving like an intelligent and ruthless enemy who, having successfully tested a new weapon, had retired only to regroup and prepare for a major onslaught.

“We should think about returning to the Peel soon.” Toller drained his porcelain cup of wine and placed it under the bench for retrieval by the vendor. “Glo wants to bathe before littenight.”

“I’m glad I won’t have to help.”

“He has his own kind of courage, you know. I don’t think I could endure the life of a cripple, but I have yet to hear him utter a single word of complaint.”

“Why do you keep talking about sickness when you know I don’t like it?” Fera stood up and smoothed the wispy plumage of her clothing. “We have time to walk by the White Fountains, haven’t we?”

“Only for a few minutes.” Toller linked arms with his wife and they crossed the Plaza of the Navigators and walked along the busy avenue which led to the municipal gardens. The fountains sculpted in snowy Padalian marble were seeding the air with a refreshing coolness. Groups of people, some of them accompanied by children, were strolling amid the islands of bright foliage and their occasional laughter added to the idyllic tranquillity of the scene.

“I suppose this could be regarded as the epitome of civilised life,” Toller said. “The only thing wrong with it—and this is strictly my own point of view—is that it is much too...” He stopped speaking as the braying note of a heavy horn sounded from a nearby rooftop and was quickly echoed by others in more distant parts of the city.

“Ptertha!” Toller swung his gaze upwards to the sky.

Fera moved closer to him. “It’s a mistake, isn’t it, Toller? They don’t come

into the city.”

“We’d better get out of the open just the same,” Toller said, urging her towards the buildings on the north side of the gardens. People all about him were scanning the heavens, but—such was the power of conviction and habit—only a few were hurrying to take cover. The ptertha were an implacable natural enemy, but a balance had been struck long ago and the very existence of civilisation was predicated on the ptertha’s behaviour patterns remaining constant and foreseeable. It was quite unthinkable that the blindly malevolent globes could make a sudden radical change in their habits—in that respect Toller was at one with the people around him—but the news from the provinces had implanted the seeds of unease deep in his consciousness. If the ptertha could change in one way—why not in another?

A woman screamed some distance to Toller’s left, and the single inarticulate pulse of sound framed the real world’s answer to his abstract musings. He looked in the direction of the scream and saw a single ptertha descend from the sun’s cone of brilliance. The blue-and-purple globe sank into a crowded area at the centre of the gardens, and now men were screaming too, counterpointing the continuing blare of the alarm horns. Fera’s body went rigid with shock as she glimpsed the ptertha in the last second of its existence.

“Come on!” Toller gripped her hand and sprinted towards the peristyled guildhalls to the north. In his pounding progress across the open ground he had scant time in which to look out for other ptertha, but it was no longer necessary to search for the globes. They could be readily seen now, drifting among the rooftops and domes and chimneys in placid sunlight.

There could only have been a few citizens of the Kolcorronian empire who had never had a nightmare about being caught on exposed ground amid a swarm of ptertha, and in the next hour Toller not only experienced the nightmare to the full but went beyond it into new realms of dread. Displaying their terrifying new boldness, the ptertha were descending to street level all over the city—silent and shimmering—invading gardens and precincts, bounding slowly across public squares, lurking in archways and colonnades. They were being annihilated by the panic-stricken populace, and it was here that the terms of the ancient nightmare became inadequate for the actuality—because Toller knew, with a bleak and wordless certainty, that the invaders represented the new breed of ptertha.

They were the plague-carriers.

In the long-running debate about the nature of the ptertha, those who spoke in support of the idea that the globes possessed some qualities of mind had always pointed to the fact that they judiciously avoided cities and large towns. Even in

sizable swarms the ptertha would have been swiftly destroyed on venturing into an urban environment, especially in conditions of good visibility. The argument had been that they were less concerned with self-preservation than with avoiding wasting their numbers in futile attacks—clear evidence of mentation—and the theory had had some validity when the ptertha's killing range was limited to a few paces.

But, as Toller had intuited at once, the livid globes drifting down in Ro-Atabri were plague-carriers.

For every one of them destroyed, many citizens would be lost to the new kind of poisonous dust which killed at great range, and the horror did not stop there—because the grim new rules of conflict decreed that each direct victim of a ptertha encounter would, in the brief time remaining to them, contaminate and carry off to the grave perhaps dozens of others.

An hour elapsed before the wind conditions changed and brought the first attack on Ro-Atabri to an end, but—in a city where every man, woman and child was suddenly a potential mortal enemy and had to be treated as such—Toller's nightmare was able to continue for much, much longer...

A rare band of rain had swept over the region during the night and now, in the first quiet minutes after sunrise, Toller Maraquine found himself looking down from Greenmount on an unfamiliar world. Patches and streamers of ground-hugging mist garlanded the vistas below, in places obscuring Ro-Atabri more effectively than the blanket of ptertha screens which had been thrown over the city since the first attack, almost two years earlier. The triangular outline of Mount Opelmer rose out of an aureate haze to the east, its upper slopes tinted by the reddish sun which had just climbed into view.

Toller had awakened early and, driven by the restlessness which recently had been troubling him more and more, had decided to get up and walk alone in the grounds of the Peel.

He began by pacing along the inner defensive screen and checking that the nets were securely in place. Until the onslaught of the plague only rural habitations had needed ptertha barriers, and in those days simple nets and trellises had been adequate—but all at once, in town and country alike, it had become necessary to erect more elaborate screens which created a thirty-yard buffer zone around protected areas. A single layer of netting still sufficed for the roofs of most enclosures, because the ptertha toxins were borne away horizontally in the wind, but it was vital that the perimeters should be double screens, widely separated and supported by strong scaffolding.

Lord Glo had gratified Toller by giving him, in addition to his normal duties,

the responsible and sometimes dangerous task of overseeing the construction of the screens for the Peel and some other philosophy buildings. The feeling that he was at last doing something important and useful had made him less unruly, and the risks of working in the open had provided satisfactions of a different kind. Borreat Hargeth's only significant contribution to the anti-ptertha armoury had been the development of an odd-looking L-shaped throwing stick which flew faster and farther than the standard Kolcorronian cruciform, and in which in the hands of a good man could destroy globes at more than forty yards. While supervising screen construction Toller had perfected his skill with the new weapon, and prided himself on having lost no workers directly to the ptertha.

That phase of his life had drawn to its ordained close, however, and now—in spite of all his efforts—he was burdened with a sense of having been caught like a fish in the very nets he had helped to construct. Considering that more than two thirds of the empire's population had been swept away by the virulent new form of pterthacosis, he should have been counting himself fortunate to be alive and healthy, with food, shelter and a lusty woman to share his bed—but none of those considerations could offset the gnawing conviction that his life was going to waste. He instinctively rejected the Church's teaching that he had an endless succession of incarnations ahead of him, alternating between Land and Overland; he had been granted only one life, one precious span of existence, and the prospect of squandering what remained of it was intolerable.

Despite the buoyant freshness of the morning air, Toller felt his chest begin to heave and his lungs to labour as though with suffocation. Close to sudden irrational panic, desperate for a physical outlet for his emotions, he reacted as he had not done since his time of exile on the Loongl peninsula. He opened a gate in the Peel's inner screen, crossed the buffer zone and went through the outer screen to stand on the unprotected slope of Greenmount. A strip of pasture—deeded to the philosophy order long ago—stretched before him for several furlongs, its lower end slanting down into trees and mist. The air was almost completely still, so there was little chance of encountering a stray globe, but the symbolic act of defiance had an easing effect on the psychological pressure which had been building within him.

He unhooked a ptertha stick from his belt and was preparing to walk farther down the hill when his attention was caught by a movement at the bottom edge of the pasture. A lone rider was emerging from the swath of woodland which separated the philosophers' demesne from the adjacent city district of Silarbri. Toller brought out his telescope, treasured possession, and with its aid determined that the rider was in the King's service and that he bore on his chest the blue-and-white plume-and-sword symbol of a courier.

His interest aroused, Toller sat down on a natural bench of rock to observe the newcomer's progress. He was reminded of a previous time when the arrival of a royal messenger had heralded his escape from the miseries of the Loongl research station, but on this occasion the circumstances were vastly different. Lord Glo had been virtually ignored by the Great Palace since the debacle in the Rainbow Hall. In the old days the delivery of a message by hand could have implied that it was privy, not to be entrusted to a sunwriter, but now it was difficult to imagine King Prad wanting to communicate with the Lord Philosopher about anything at all.

The rider was approaching slowly and nonchalantly. By taking a slightly more circuitous route he could have made the entire journey to Glo's residence under the smothering nets of the city's ptertha screens, but it looked as though he was enjoying the short stretch of open sky in spite of the slight risk of having a ptertha descend on him. Toller wondered if the messenger had a spirit similar to his own, one which chafed under the stringent anti-ptertha precautions which enabled what was left of the population to continue with their beleaguered existences.

The great census of 2622, taken only four years earlier, had established that the empire's population consisted of almost two million with full Kolcorronian citizenship and some four million with tributary status. By the end of the first two plague years the total remaining was estimated at rather less than two million. A minute proportion of those who survived did so because, inexplicably, they had some degree of immunity to the secondary infection, but the vast majority went in continual fear for their lives, emulating the lowliest vermin in their burrows. Unscreened dwellings had been fitted with airtight seals which were clamped over doors, windows and chimney openings during ptertha alerts, and outside the cities and townships the ordinary people had deserted their farms and taken to living in woodlands and forests, the natural fortresses which the globes were unable to penetrate.

As a result agricultural output had fallen to a level which was insufficient even for the greatly reduced needs of a depleted population, but Toller—with the unconscious egocentricity of the young—had little thought to spare for the statistics which told of calamities on a national scale. To him they amounted to little more than a shadow play, a vaguely shifting background to the central drama of his own affairs, and it was in the hope of learning something to his personal advantage that he stood up to greet the arriving king's messenger.

"Good foreday," he said, smiling. "What brings you to Greenmount Peel?"

The courier was a gaunt man with a world-weary look to him, but he nodded pleasantly enough as he reined his bluehorn to a halt. "The message I bear is for

Lord Glo's eyes only."

"Lord Glo is still asleep. I am Toller Maraquine, Lord Glo's personal attendant and a hereditary member of the philosophy order. I have no wish to pry, but my lord is not a well man and he would be displeased were I to awaken him at this hour except for a matter of considerable urgency. Let me have the gist of your message so that I may decide what should be done."

"The message tube is sealed." The courier produced a mock-rueful smile. "And I'm not supposed to be aware of its contents."

Toller shrugged, playing a familiar game. "That's a pity—I was hoping that you and I could have made our lives a little easier."

"Fine grazing land," the courier said, turning in the saddle to appraise the pasture he had just ridden through. "I imagine his lordship's household has not been greatly affected by the food shortages..."

"You must be hungry after riding all the way out here," Toller said. "I would be happy to set you down to a hero's breakfast, but perhaps there is no time. Perhaps I have to go immediately and rouse Lord Glo."

"Perhaps it would be more considerate to allow his lordship to enjoy his rest." The courier swung himself down to stand beside Toller. "The King is summoning him to a special meeting in the Great Palace, but the appointment is four days hence. It scarcely seems to be a matter of great urgency."

"Perhaps," Toller said, frowning as he tried to evaluate the surprising new information. "Perhaps not."

CHAPTER 7

“I’m not at all sure that I’m doing the right thing,” Lord Glo said as Toller Maraquine finished strapping him into his walking frame. “I think it would be much more prudent—not to mention being more fair to you—if I were to take one of the servants to the Great Palace with me and ... hmm ... leave you here. There is enough work to be done around the place, work which would keep you out of trouble.”

“It has been two years,” Toller replied, determined not to be excluded. “And Leddravohr has had so much on his mind that he has probably forgotten all about me.”

“I wouldn’t count on it, my boy—the prince has a certain reputation in these matters. Besides, if I know you, you’re quite likely to give him a reminder.”

“Why would I do something so unwise?”

“I’ve been watching you lately. You’re like a brakka tree which is overdue for a blow-out.”

“I don’t do that sort of thing any more.” Toller made the protest automatically, as he had often done in the past, but it came to him that he had in fact changed considerably since his first encounter with the military prince. His occasional periods of restlessness and dissatisfaction were proof of the change, because of the way in which he dealt with them. Instead of working himself up to a state in which the slightest annoyance was liable to trigger an outburst, he had learned—like other men—to divert or sublimate his emotional energies. He had schooled himself to accept an accretion of minor joys and satisfactions in place of that single great fulfilment which was yearned for by so many and destined for so few.

“Very well, young man,” Glo said as he adjusted a buckle. “I’m going to trust you, but please remember that this is a uniquely important occasion and conduct yourself accordingly. I will hold you to your word on this point. You realise, of course, why the King has seen fit to ... hmm ... summon me?”

“Is it a return to the days when we were consulted on the great imponderables of life? Does the King want to know why men have nipples but can’t suckle?”

Glo sniffed. “Your brother has the same unfortunate tendency towards coarse sarcasm.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re not, but I’ll enlighten you just the same. The idea I planted in the King’s mind two years ago has finally borne fruit. Remember what you said about my flying higher and seeing...? No, that was Lain. But here’s something for you to ... hmm ... think about, young Toller. I’m getting on in years and haven’t much longer to go—but I’ll wager you a thousand nobles that I will set foot on Overland before I die.”

“I would never challenge your word on any subject,” Toller said diplomatically, marvelling at the older man’s talent for self-deception. Anybody else, with the possible exception of Vorndal Sisstt, would have remembered the council meeting with shame. So great was the philosophers’ disgrace that they would surely have been deposed from Greenmount had the monarchy not been preoccupied with the plague and its consequences—yet Glo still nurtured his belief that he was highly regarded by the King and that his fantasising about the colonisation of Overland could be taken seriously. Since the onset of his illness Glo had shunned alcohol, and was able to comport himself better as a result, but his senility remained to distort his view of reality. Toller’s private guess was that Glo had been summoned to the palace to account for the continuing failure to produce the efficacious long-range anti-ptertha weapon which was vital if normal agriculture were to resume.

“We’ve got to make haste,” Glo said. “Can’t risk being late on our day of triumph.” With Toller’s help he donned his formal grey robe, working it down over the cane framework which enabled him to stand on his own. His formerly rotund body had shrunk to a loose-skinned slightness, but he had left his clothing unaltered to accommodate and hide the frame, hoping to disguise the extent of his disability. It was one of the human foibles which had earned him Toller’s sympathy.

“We’ll get you there in good time,” Toller said reassuringly, wondering if he should be trying to prepare Glo for the possible ordeal that lay ahead.

The drive to the Great Palace took place in silence, with Glo nodding ruminatively to himself now and then as he rehearsed his intended address.

It was a moist grey morning, the gloom of which was deepened by the anti-ptertha screens overhead. The level of illumination had not been reduced a great deal in those streets where it had been sufficient to put up a roof of netting or lattices supported on canes which ran horizontally from eave to eave. But where there were roofs and parapets of different heights in proximity to each other it had been necessary to erect heavy and complicated structures, many of which were clad with varnished textiles to prevent air currents and downdraughts from

carrying ptertha dust through countless apertures in buildings which were designed for an equatorial climate. Many of the once-glittering avenues in the heart of Ro-Atabri now had a cavernous dimness to them, the city's architecture having been clogged and obscured and rendered claustrophobic by the defensive shroud.

The Bytran Bridge, the main river crossing on the way south, had been completely sheathed with timber, giving it something of the appearance of a giant warehouse, and from there a tunnel-like covered way crossed the moats and led to the Great Palace, which was now draped and tented. Toller's first intimation that the meeting was going to be different from that of two years earlier came when he noticed the lack of carriages in the principal courtyard. Apart from a handful of official equippages, only his brother's lightweight brougham—acquired after the banning of team-drawn vehicles—waited near the entrance. Lain was standing alone by the brougham with a slim roll of paper under his arm. His narrow face looked pale and tired under the sweeps of black hair. Toller jumped down and assisted Glo to leave his carriage, discreetly taking his full weight until he had steadied himself.

"You didn't tell me this was going to be a private audience," Toller said.

Glo gave him a look of humorous disdain, momentarily appearing his old self. "I can't be expected to tell you everything, young man—it's important for the Lord Philosopher to be aloof and ... hmm ... enigmatic now and again." Leaning heavily on Toller's arm, he limped towards the carved arch of the entrance, where they were joined by Lain.

During the exchange of greetings Toller, who had not seen his brother for some forty days, was concerned at Lain's obvious debility. He said, "Lain, I hope you're not working too hard."

Lain made a wry grimace. "Working too hard and sleeping too little. Gesalla is pregnant again and it's affecting her more than the last time."

"I'm sorry." Toller was surprised to hear that, after her miscarriage of almost two years ago, Gesalla was still determined on motherhood. It indicated a maternal instinct which he had trouble in reconciling with the rest of her character. Apart from the single curious shift in his perception of Gesalla on his return from the disastrous council meeting, he had always seen her as being too dry, too well-ordered and too fond of her personal autonomy to enjoy rearing children.

"By the way, she sends her regards," Lain added.

Toller smiled broadly to signal his disbelief as the three men proceeded into the palace. Glo directed them through the muted activity of the corridors to a glasswood door which was well away from the administrative areas. The black-

armoured ostiaries on duty were a sign that the King was within. Toller felt Glo's body stiffen with exertion as he strove to present a good appearance, and he in turn tried to look as though he was giving Glo only minimal assistance as they entered the audience chamber.

The apartment was hexagonal and quite small, lighted by a single window, and the only furnishings were a single hexagonal table and six chairs. King Prad was already seated opposite the window and by his side were the princes Leddravohr and Chakkell, all of them informally attired in loose silks. Prad's sole mark of distinction was a large blue jewel which was suspended from his neck by a glass chain. Toller, who had a strong desire for the occasion to pass off smoothly for the sake of his brother and Lord Glo, avoided looking in Leddravohr's direction. He kept his eyes down until the King signalled for Glo and Lain to be seated, then he gave all his attention to getting Glo into a chair with a minimum of creaking from his frame.

"I apologise for this delay, Majesty," Glo said when finally at ease, speaking in high Kolcorronian. "Do you wish my attendant to retire?"

Prad shook his head. "He may remain for your comfort, Lord Glo—I had not appreciated the extent of your incapacity."

"A certain recalcitrance of the ... hmm ... limbs, that is all," Glo replied stoically.

"Nevertheless, I am grateful for the effort you made to be here. As you can see, I am dispensing with all formality so that we may have an unimpeded exchange of ideas. The circumstances of our last meeting were hardly conducive to free discussion, were they?"

Toller, who had positioned himself behind Glo's chair, was surprised by the King's amiable and reasonable tones. It seemed as though his own pessimism had been ill-founded and that Glo was to be spared fresh humiliation. He looked directly across the table for the first time and saw that Prad's expression was indeed as reassuring as it could be on features that were dominated by one inhuman, marble-white eye. Toller's gaze, without his conscious bidding, swung towards Leddravohr and he experienced a keen psychic shock as he realised that the prince's eyes had been drilling into him all the while, projecting unmistakable malice and contempt.

I'm a different person, Toller told himself, checking the reflexive defiant spreading of his shoulders. *Glo and Lain are not going to be harmed in any way by association with me.*

He lowered his head, but not before he had glimpsed Leddravohr's smile flick into being, the effortless snake-fast twitch of his upper lip. Toller was unable to decide on a course of action or inaction. It appeared that all the things they

whispered about Leddravohr were true, that he had an excellent memory for faces and an even better one for insults. The immediate difficulty for Toller lay in that, determined though he was not to cross Leddravohr, it was out of the question for him to stand with his head lowered for perhaps the whole foreday. Could he find a pretext to leave the room, perhaps something to do with...?

"I want to talk about flying to Overland," the King said, his words a conceptual bomb-blast which blew everything else out of Toller's consciousness. "Are you, in your official capacity as Lord Philosopher, stating that it can be done?"

"I am, Majesty." Glo glanced at Leddravohr and the dark-jowled Chakkell as though daring them to object. "We can fly to Overland."

"How?"

"By means of very large hot air balloons, Majesty."

"Go on."

"Their lifting power would have to be augmented by gas jets—but it is providential that in the region where the balloons would practically cease to function the jets would be their most effective." Glo was speaking strongly and without hesitations, as he could sometimes do when inspired. "The jets would also serve to turn the balloons over at the midpoint of the flight, thus enabling them to descend in the normal manner."

"I repeat, Majesty—we can fly to Overland."

Glo's words were followed by an air-whispering silence during which Toller, bemused with wonder, looked down at his brother to see if—as before—the talk of flying to Overland had come as a shock to him. Lain appeared nervous and ill at ease, but not at all surprised. He and Glo must have been in collaboration, and if Lain believed that the flight could be made—then it could be made! Toller felt a stealthy coolness spread down his spine to the accompaniment of what for him was a totally new intellectual and emotional experience. *I have a future*, he thought. *I have discovered why I am here...*

"Tell us more, Lord Glo," the King said. "This hot air balloon you speak of—has it been designed?"

"Not only has it been designed, Majesty—the archives show that an example was actually fabricated in the year 2187. It was successfully flown several times that year by a philosopher called Usader, and it is believed—although the records are ... hmm ... vague on this point—that in 2188 he actually attempted the Overland flight."

"What happened to him?"

"He was never heard of again."

"That hardly inspires confidence," Chakkell put in, speaking for the first

time. "It's hardly a record of achievement."

"That depends on one's viewpoint." Glo refused to be discouraged. "Had Usader returned a few days later one might be entitled to describe his flight as a failure. The fact that he did *not* return could indicate that he had succeeded."

Chakkell snorted. "More likely that he died!"

"I'm not claiming that such an ascent would be easy or without its share of ... hmm ... risks. My contention is that our increased scientific knowledge could reduce the risks to an acceptable level. Given sufficient determination—and the proper financial and material resources—we can produce ships capable of flying to Overland."

Prince Leddravohr sighed audibly and shifted in his chair, but refrained from speaking. Toller guessed that the King had placed powerful restraints on him before the meeting began.

"You make it all sound rather like an aftday jaunt," King Prad said. "But isn't it a fact that Land and Overland are almost five-thousand miles apart?"

"The best triangulations give a figure of 4,650 miles, Majesty. Surface to surface, that is."

"How long would it take to fly that distance?"

"I regret I cannot give a definite answer to that question at this stage."

"It's an important question, isn't it?"

"Undoubtedly! The speed of ascent of the balloon is of fundamental importance, Majesty, but there are many variables to be ... hmm ... considered." Glo signalled for Lain to open his roll of paper. "My chief scientist, who is a better mathematician than I, has been working on the preliminary calculations. With your consent, he will explain the problem."

Lain spread out a chart with trembling hands, and Toller was relieved to see that he had had the foresight to draw it on a limp cloth-based paper which quickly lay flat. Part of it was taken up by a scale diagram which illustrated the sister worlds and their spatial relationships; the remainder was given over to detailed sketches of pear-shaped balloons and complicated gondolas. Lain swallowed with difficulty a couple of times and Toller grew tense, fearing that his brother was unable to speak.

"This circle represents our own world ... with its diameter of 4,100 miles," Lain finally articulated. "The other, smaller circle represents Overland, whose diameter is generally accepted as being 3,220 miles, at its fixed point above our equator on the zero meridian, which passed through Ro-Atabri."

"I think we all learned that much basic astronomy in our infancy," Prad said. "Why can't you say how long the journey from the one to the other will take?"

Lain swallowed again. "Majesty, the size of the balloon and the weight of the

load we attach to it will influence the free ascent speed. The difference in temperature between the gases inside the balloon and the surrounding atmosphere is another factor, but the most important governing factor is the amount of crystals available to power the jets.

“Greater fuel economy would be achieved by allowing the balloon to rise to its maximum height—slowing down all the while—and not using the jets until the gravitational pull of Land had grown weak. That, of course, would entail lengthening the transit time and therefore increasing the weight of food and water to be carried, which in turn would...”

“Enough, enough! My head swims!” The King held out both his hand, fingers slightly crooked as though cradling an invisible balloon. “Settle your mind on a ship which will carry, say, twenty people. Imagine that crystals are reasonably plentiful. Now, how long will it take that ship to reach Overland? I don’t expect you to be precise—simply give me a figure which I can lodge in my cranium.”

Lain, paler than ever, but with growing assurance, ran a fingertip down some columns of figures at the side of his chart. “Twelve days, Majesty.”

“At last!” Prad glanced significantly at Leddravohr and Chakkell. “Now—for the same ship—how much of the green and purple will be required?”

Lain raised his head and stared at the King with troubled eyes. The King gazed back at him, calmly and intently, as he waited for his answer. Toller sensed that wordless communication was taking place, that something beyond his understanding was happening. His brother seemed to have transcended all his nervousness and irresolution, to have acquired a strange authority which—for the moment, at least—placed him on a level with the ruler. Toller felt a surge of family pride as he saw that the King appeared to acknowledge Lain’s new stature and was prepared to give him all the time he needed to formulate his reply.

“May I take it, Majesty,” Lain said at length, “that we are talking about a one-way flight?”

The King’s white eye narrowed. “You may.”

“In that case, Majesty, the ship would require approximately thirty pounds each of pikon and halvell.”

“Thank you. You’re not going to quibble over the fact that a higher proportion of halvell gives the best result in sustained burning?”

Lain shook his head. “Under the circumstances—no.”

“You are a valuable man, Lain Maraquine.”

“Majesty, I don’t understand this,” Glo protested, echoing Toller’s own puzzlement. “There is no conceivable reason for providing a ship with only enough fuel for one transit.”

“A single ship, no,” the King said. “A small fleet, no. But when we are talking about...” He turned his attention back to Lain. “How many ships would you say?”

Lain produced a bleak smile. “A thousand seems a good round figure, Majesty.”

“A *thousand!*” There was a creaking sound from Glo’s cane frame as he made an abortive attempt to stand up, and when he spoke again an aggrieved note had crept into his voice. “Am I the only person here who is to be kept in ignorance of the subject under discussion?”

The King made a placating gesture. “There is no conspiracy, Lord Glo—it’s merely that your chief scientist appears to have the ability to read minds. It would please me to learn how he divined what was in my thoughts.”

Lain stared down at his hands and spoke almost abstractedly, almost as though musing aloud. “For more than two-hundred days I have been unable to obtain any statistics on agricultural output or ptertha casualties. The official explanation was that the provincial administrators were too severely overworked to prepare their returns—and I have been trying to persuade myself that such was the case—but the indicators were already there, Majesty. In a way it is a relief to have my worst fears confirmed. The only way to deal with a crisis is to face up to it.”

“I agree with you,” Prad said, “but I was concerned with avoiding a general panic, hence the secrecy. I had to be certain.”

“Certain?” Glo’s large head turned from side to side. “Certain? Certain?”

“Yes, Lord Glo,” the King said gravely. “I had to be certain that our world was coming to an end.”

On hearing the bland statement Toller felt a unique emotional pang. Any fear which might have been part of it fled at once before curiosity and an overwhelming, selfish and gloating sense of privilege. The most momentous events in history were being staged for his personal benefit. For the first time in his life, he was in love with the future.

“...as though the ptertha were encouraged by the events of the past two years, in the manner of a warrior who sees that his foe is weakening,” the King was saying. “Their numbers are increasing—and who is to say that their foul emissions will not become even more deadly? It has happened once, and it can happen again.

“We in Ro-Atabri have been comparatively fortunate thus far, but throughout the empire the people are dying from the insidious new form of pterthacosis in spite of all our efforts to fend the globes off. And the newborn, upon whom our

future depends, are the most vulnerable. We might be facing the prospect of slowly dwindling into a pitiful, doomed handful of sterile old men and women—were it not for the looming spectre of famine. The agricultural regions are becoming incapable of producing food in the quantities which are necessary for the upkeep of our cities, even allowing for our vastly reduced urban populations.”

The King paused to give his audience a thin sad smile. “There are some among us who maintain that there is still room for hope, that fate may yet relent and wheel against the ptertha—but Kolcorron did not become great by supinely trusting to chance. That attitude is foreign to our national character. When forced to yield ground in a battle, we withdraw to a secure redoubt where we can gather our strength and determination to surge forth again and overwhelm our enemies.

“In the present case, as befits the ultimate conflict, there is the ultimate redoubt—and its name is Overland.

“It is my royal decree that we shall prepare to withdraw to Overland—not in order to cower away from our enemy, but to grow numerous and powerful again, to gain time in which to devise means of destroying the ptertha in their loathsome entirety, and finally—regardless of how long it may take—to return to our home world of Land as a glorious and invincible army which will triumphantly lay claim to all that is naturally and rightfully ours.”

The King’s oratory, enhanced by the formalism of the high tongue, had carried Toller along with it, opening up new perspectives in his mind, and it was with some surprise that he realised no response was forthcoming from either his brother or Glo. The latter was so immobile that he might have been dead, and Lain continued to stare down at his hands as he twisted the brakka ring on his sixth finger. Toller wondered, with a twinge of guilt, if Lain was thinking of Gesalla and the baby which would be born into turbulent times.

Prad ended the silence by choosing, oddly in Toller’s view, to address himself to Lain. “Well, wrangler? Have you another demonstration of mind reading for us?”

Lain raised his head and eyed the King steadily. “Majesty, even when our armies were at their most powerful, we avoided going against Chamteth.”

“I resent the implications of that remark,” Prince Leddravohr snapped. “I demand that...”

“Your *promise*, Leddravohr!” The King rounded angrily on his son. “I would remind you of your promise to me. Be patient! Your time is at hand.”

Leddravohr raised both hands in a gesture of resignation as he settled back in his chair, and now his brooding gaze was fixed on Lain. The spasm of alarm Toller felt over his brother’s welfare was almost lost in the silent clamour of his

reaction to the mention of Chamteth. Why had he been so slow to appreciate that an interplanetary migration fleet, if it were ever constructed, would require power crystals on such a vast scale that its needs could be met from only one source? If the King's awesome plans also included going to war against the enigmatic and insular Chamtethans, then the near future was going to be even more turbulent than Toller could readily visualise.

Chamteth was a country so huge that it could be reached just as readily by travelling east or west into the Land of the Long Days, that hemisphere of the world which was not swept by Overland's shadow and where there was no littlenight to punctuate the sun's progress across the sky. In the distant past several ambitious rulers had tried probing into Chamteth and the outcome had been so convincing, so disastrous that Chamteth had virtually been erased from the national consciousness. It existed, but—as with Overland—its existence had no relevance to the quotidian affairs of the empire.

Until now, Toller thought, striving to rebuild his picture of the universe. Chamteth and Overland are linked ... bonded ... to take one is to take the other...

“War against Chamteth has become inevitable,” the King said. “Some are of the opinion that it always has been inevitable. What do you say, Lord Glo?”

“Majesty,!...” Glo cleared his throat and sat up straighter. “Majesty, I have always regarded myself as a creative thinker, but I freely admit that the grandeur and scope of your vision have taken my ... hmm ... breath away. When I originally proposed flying to Overland I envisaged despatching a small number of pathfinders, followed by the gradual establishment of a small colony. I had not dreamed of migration on the scale you are contemplating, but I can assure you that I am equal to the responsibilities involved. The designing of a suitable ship and the planning of all the necessary...” Glo stopped speaking as he saw that Prad was shaking his head.

“My dear Lord Glo, you are not a well man,” the King said, “and I would be less than fair to you if I permitted you to expend what remains of your strength on a task of such magnitude.”

“But, Majesty...”

The King's face hardened. “Do not interrupt! The extremity of our situation demands equally extreme measures. The entire resources of Kolcorron must be reorganised and mobilised, and therefore I am dissolving all the old dynastic family structures. In their place—as of this moment—is a single pyramid of authority. Its executive head is my son, Prince Leddravohr, who will control and coordinate every aspect—military and civil—of our national affairs. He is seconded by Prince Chakkell, who will be responsible to him for the

construction of the migration fleet.”

The King paused, and when he spoke again his voice had none of the attributes of humanity. “Be it understood that Prince Leddravohr’s authority is absolute, that his power is unlimited, and that to go counter to his wishes in any respect is a crime equivalent to high treason.”

Toller closed his eyes, knowing that when he opened them again the world of his childhood and youth would have passed into history, and that in its place would be a dangerous new cosmos in which his tenure might be all too brief.

CHAPTER 8

Leddravohr was mentally tired after the meeting and had been hoping to relax during dinner, but his father—with the abundant cerebral energy which characterises some elderly men—talked all the way through the meal. He switched rapidly and effortlessly from military strategy to food rationing schemes to the technicalities of interworld flight, displaying his fascination with detail, trying to explore mutually incompatible probabilities. Leddravohr, who had no taste for juggling with abstracts, was relieved when the meal was finished and his father moved out to the balcony for a final cup of wine before retiring to his private quarters.

“Damn this glass,” Prad said, tapping the transparent cupola which enclosed the balcony. “I used to enjoy taking the air here at night. Now I can scarcely breathe.”

“Without the glass you wouldn’t be breathing at all.” Leddravohr flicked his thumb, indicating a group of three ptertha drifting overhead across the glowing face of Overland. The sun had gone down and now the sister world was entering the gibbous phases of its illumination, casting its mellow light over the southern reaches of the city, Arle Bay and the deep indigo expanses of the Gulf of Tronom. The light was good enough to read by and would steadily increase in strength as Overland, keeping pace with the rotation of Land, swung towards its point of opposition with the sun. Although the sky had darkened only to a rich mid-blue the stars, some of which were bright enough to be visible in full daylight, formed blazing patterns from Overland’s rim down to the horizon.

“Damn the ptertha, too,” Prad said. “You know, son, one of the greatest tragedies of our past is that we never learned where the globes come from. Even if they are spawned somewhere in the upper atmosphere, it might have been possible at one time to track them down and destroy them at source. It’s too late now, though.”

“What about your triumphant return from Overland? Attacking the ptertha from above?”

“Too late for me, I mean. History will remember me for the outward flight only.”

“Ah, yes—history,” Leddravohr said, once again wondering at his father’s

preoccupation with the pale and spurious immortality offered by books and graven monuments. Life was a transient thing, impossible to extend beyond its natural term, and time spent in trying to do so was a squandering of the very commodity one was seeking to preserve. Leddravohr's own belief was that the only way to cheat death, or at least reconcile oneself to it, was to achieve every ambition and sate every appetite, so that when the time came the relinquishing of life was little more than discarding an empty gourd.

His single overriding ambition had been to extend his future kingship to every quarter of Land—including Chamteth—but that was now denied him by a connivance of fate. In its place was the prospect of a hazardous and *unnatural* flight into the sky, followed by little more than a tribal existence on an unknown world. He was angry about that, filled with a gnawing canker of rage unlike anything he had ever known, and somebody would have to pay...

Prad sipped pensively at his wine. "Have you prepared all your dispatches?"

"Yes—the messengers leave at first light." Leddravohr had spent all his free time after the meeting personally writing orders to the five generals he wanted for his staff. "I instructed them to use continuous thrust, so we should have distinguished company quite soon."

"I take it you have chosen Dalacott."

"He's still the best tactician we have."

"Aren't you afraid that his edge might be blunted?" Prad said. "He must be seventy now, and being down in Kail when the plague broke out there can't have done him much good. Didn't he lose a daughter and a grandchild on the very first day?"

"Something like that," Leddravohr replied carelessly. "*He* is still healthy, though. Still of value."

"He must have the immunity." Prad's face became more animated as he fastened on to yet another of his talking points. "You know, Glo sent me some very interesting statistics at the beginning of the year. They were collated by Maraquine. They showed that the incidence of plague deaths among military personnel—which you would expect to be high because of their exposure—is actually somewhat lower than for the population in general. And, significantly, long-serving soldiers and airmen are the least likely to succumb. Maraquine suggested that years of being near ptertha kills and absorbing minute traces of the dust might train the body to resist pterthacosis. It's an intriguing thought."

"Father, it's a totally useless thought."

"I wouldn't say that. If the offspring of immune men and women were also immune, from birth, then you could breed a new race for whom the globes were no threat."

“And what good would that be to you and me?” Leddravohr said, disposing of the argument to his own satisfaction. “No, as far as I’m concerned Glo and Maraquine and their ilk are ornaments we can well do without. I look forward to the day when...”

“*Enough!*” His father was suddenly King Prad Neldeever, ruler of the empire of Kolcorron, tall and rigid, with one terrible blind eye and one equally fearsome all-seeing eye which knew everything Leddravohr would have wished to keep secret. “Ours will not be the house which is remembered for turning its back on learning. You will give me your word that you will not harm Glo or Maraquine.”

Leddravohr shrugged. “You have my word.”

“That came easily.” His father stared at him for a moment, dissatisfied, then said, “Neither will you touch Maraquine’s brother, the one who now attends to Glo.”

“That oaf! I have more important things with which to occupy my mind.”

“I know. I have given you unprecedented powers because you have the qualities necessary to bring a great endeavour to a successful conclusion, and that power is not to be abused.”

“Spare me all this, father,” Leddravohr protested, laughing to conceal his resentment at being admonished like a wilful child. “I intend to treat our philosophers with all the consideration they deserve. Tomorrow I’m going to Greenmount for two or three days—to learn all I need to know about their skyships—and if you care to make enquiries you’ll hear that I am emanating nothing but courtesy and love.”

“Don’t overdo it.” Prad drained his cup with a flourish, set it down on the wide stone balustrade and prepared to leave. “Good night, son. And remember—the future watches.”

As soon as the King had departed Leddravohr exchanged his wine for a glass of fiery Padalian brandy and returned to the balcony. He sat down on a leather couch and gazed moodily at the southern sky where three great comets plumed the star fields. *The future watches!* His father was still cherishing the notion of going down in history as another King Bytran, blinding himself to the probability that there would be no historians to record his achievements. The story of Kolcorron was drawing to a bizarre and ignominious end just when it should have been entering the most glorious era of all.

And I’m the one who is losing most, Leddravohr thought. *I’m never going to be a real King.*

As he continued drinking brandy, and the night grew steadily brighter, it came to Leddravohr that there was an anomaly in the contrast between his attitude and that of his father. Optimism was the prerogative of the young, and

yet the King was looking to the future with confidence; pessimism was a trait of the old, and yet it was Leddravohr who was gloomy and prey to grim forebodings. Why?

Was it that his father was too wrapped up in his enthusiasm for all things scientific to concede that the migration was impossible? Leddravohr took stock of his thoughts and was forced to discard the theory. At some stage in the day-long meeting he had been persuaded by the drawings, the graphs and the chains of figures, and now he believed that a skyship could reach the sister world. What, then, was the underlying cause of the malaise which had entered his soul? The future was not completely black, after all—there was the final war with Chamteth to anticipate.

As Leddravohr tilted his head back to finish a glass of brandy his gaze drifted towards the zenith—and suddenly he had his answer. The great disk of Overland was now almost fully illuminated and its face was just starting to show the prismatic changes which heralded its nightly plunge into the shadow of Land. Deepnight—that period when the world experienced real darkness—was beginning, and it had its counterpart in Leddravohr's mind.

He was a soldier, professionally immune to fear, and that was why he had been so slow to acknowledge or even identify the emotion which had lurked in his consciousness for most of the day.

He was afraid of the Overland flight!

What he felt was not straightforward apprehension over the undeniable risks involved—it was pure, primitive and unmanly terror at the very idea of ascending thousands of miles into the unforgiving blueness of the sky. The force of his dread was such that when the awful moment for embarkation arrived he might be unable to control himself. He, Prince Leddravohr Neldeever, might break down and cower away like a frightened child, possibly having to be carried bodily on to the skyship in full view of thousands...

Leddravohr jumped to his feet and hurled his glass away, smashing it on the balcony's stone floor. There was a hideous irony in the fact that his introduction to fear should have taken place not on the field of battle, but in the quietness of a small room, at the hands of stammering nonentities, with their scribbles and scratchings and their casual visions of the unthinkable.

Breathing deeply and steadily as an aid to regaining mastery of his emotions, Leddravohr watched the blackness of deepnight envelope the world, and when he finally retired to bed his face had regained its sculpted composure.

CHAPTER 9

“It’s getting late,” Toller said. “Perhaps Leddravohr isn’t coming.”

“We’ll just have to wait and see.” Lain smiled briefly and returned his attention to the papers and mathematical instruments on his desk.

“Yes.” Toller studied the ceiling for a moment. “This isn’t a sparkling conversation, is it?”

“It isn’t any kind of conversation,” Lain said. “What’s happening is that I’m trying to work and you keep interrupting.”

“Sorry.” Toller knew he should leave the room, but he was reluctant to do so. It was a long time since he had been in the family home, and some of his clearest boyhood memories were of coming into this familiar room—with its perette wood panels and glowing ceramics—and of seeing Lain at the same desk, going about the incomprehensible business of being a mathematician. Toller’s instincts told him that he and his brother were reaching a watershed in their lives, and he had a longing for them to share an hour of companionship while it was still possible. He had been vaguely embarrassed about his feelings and had not tried putting them into words, with the negative result that Lain was ill at ease and puzzled by his continuing presence.

Resolving to be quiet, Toller went to one of the stacks of ancient manuscripts which had been brought from the Greenmount archives. He picked up a leatherbound folio and glanced at its title. As usual the words appeared as linear trains of letters with elusive content until he used a trick which Lain had once devised for him. He covered the title with his palm and slowly slid his hand to the right so that the letters were revealed to him in sequence. This time the printed symbols yielded up their meaning: *Aerostatic Flights to the Far North*, by Muel Webrey, 2136.

That was as far as Toller’s interest in a book normally went, but balloon ascents had not been far from his mind since the momentous meeting of the previous day, and his curiosity was further stirred by the realisation that the book was five centuries old. What had it been like to fly across the world in the days before Kolcorron had arisen to unify a dozen warring nations? He sat down and opened the book near the middle, hoping Lain would be impressed, and began to read. Some unfamiliar spellings and grammatical constructions made the text

more oblique than he would have liked, but he persevered, sliding his hand across paragraph after paragraph which, disappointingly, had more to do with ancient politics than aviation. He was beginning to lose momentum when his attention was caught by a reference to ptertha: “...and far to our left the pink globes of the ptertha were rising”.

Toller frowned and ran his finger across the adjective several times before raising his head. “Lain, it says here that ptertha are pink.”

Lain did not look up. “You must have misread it. The word is ‘purple’.”

Toller studied the adjective again. “No, it says pink.”

“You have to allow a certain amount of leeway in subjective descriptions. Besides, the meanings of words can shift over a long period of time.”

“Yes, but...” Toller felt dissatisfied. “So you don’t think the ptertha used to be a diff—”

“Toller!” Lain threw down his pen. “Toller, don’t think I’m not glad to see you—but why have you taken up residence in my office?”

“We never talk,” Toller said uncomfortably.

“All right, what do you want to talk about?”

“Anything. There may not be much ... time.” Toller sought inspiration. “You could tell me what you’re working on.”

“There wouldn’t be much point. You wouldn’t understand it.”

“Still we’d have been talking,” Toller said, rising to his feet and returning the old book to the stacks. He was walking to the door when his brother spoke.

“I’m sorry, Toller—you’re quite right.” Lain smiled an apology. “You see, I started this essay more than a year ago, and I want to finish it before I get diverted to other matters. But perhaps it isn’t all that important.”

“It must be important if you’ve been working on it all that time. I’ll leave you in peace.”

“Please don’t go,” Lain said quickly. “Would you like to see something truly wonderful? Watch this!” He picked up a small wooden disk, laid it flat on a sheet of paper and traced a circle around it. He slid the disk sideways, drew another circle which kissed the first and then repeated the process, ending with three circles in a line. Placing a finger at each end of the row, he said, “From here to here is exactly three diameters, right?”

“That’s right,” Toller said uneasily, wondering if he had missed something.

“Now we come to the amazing part.” Lain made an ink mark on the edge of the disk and placed it vertically on the paper, carefully ensuring that the mark was at an outermost edge of the three circles. After glancing up at Toller to make sure he was paying proper attention, Lain slowly rolled the disk straight across the row. The mark on its rim described a lazy curve and came down precisely on

the outermost edge of the last circle.

“Demonstration ended,” Lain announced. “And that’s part of what I’m writing about.”

Toller blinked at him. “The circumference of a wheel being equal to three diameters?”

“The fact that it is *exactly* equal to three diameters. That demonstration was quite crude, but even when we go to the limits of measurement the ratio is exactly three. Does that not strike you as being rather astonishing?”

“Why should it?” Toller said, his puzzlement growing. “If that’s the way it is, that’s the way it is.”

“Yes, but why should it be *exactly* three? That and things like the fact that we have twelve fingers make whole areas of calculation absurdly easy. It’s almost like an unwarranted gift from nature.”

“But... But that’s the way it *is*. What else could it be?”

“Now you’re approaching the theme of the essay. There may be some other ... *place* ... where the ratio is three-and-a-quarter, or perhaps only two-and-a-half. In fact, there’s no reason why it shouldn’t be some completely irrational number which would give mathematicians headaches.”

“Some other place,” Toller said. “You mean another world? Like Farland?”

“No.” Lain gave him a look which was both frank and enigmatic. “I mean another totality—where physical laws and constants differ from those we know.”

Toller stared back at his brother as he strove to penetrate the barrier which had slid into place between them. “It is all very interesting,” he said. “I can see why the essay has taken you so long.”

Lain laughed aloud and came round the desk to embrace Toller. “I love you, little brother.”

“I love you.”

“Good! I want you to keep that in mind when Leddravohr arrives. I’m a committed pacifist, Toller, and I eschew all violence. The fact that I am no match for Leddravohr is an irrelevance—I would behave towards him in exactly the same way were our social status and physiques transposed. Leddravohr and his kind are part of the past, whereas we represent the future. So I want you to swear that no matter what insult Leddravohr offers me, you will stay apart and leave the conduct of my affairs strictly to me.”

“I’m a different person now,” Toller said, stepping back. “Besides, Leddravohr might be in a good mood.”

“I want your word, Toller.”

“You have it. Besides, it’s in my own interests to keep on the right side of Leddravohr if I want to be a skyship pilot.” Toller was belatedly shocked by the

content of his own words. "Lain, why are we taking all this so calmly? We have just been told that the world as we know it is coming to an end ... and that some of us have to try reaching another planet ... yet we're all going about our ordinary business as though everything was normal. It doesn't make sense."

"It's a more natural reaction than you might think. And don't forget the migration flight is only a contingency at this stage—it might never happen."

"The war with Chamteth is going to happen."

"That is the King's responsibility," Lain said, his voice suddenly brusque. "It can't be laid at my door. I have to get on with my work now."

"I should see how my lord is faring." As Toller walked along the corridor to the main stair he again wondered why Leddravohr had chosen to come to the Square House instead of visiting Glo at the much larger Greenmount Peel. The sunwriter message from the palace had baldly stated that the Princes Leddravohr and Chakkell would arrive at the house before littlenight for initial technical briefings, and the infirm Glo had been obliged to journey out to meet them. It was now well into aftday and Glo would be growing tired, his strength further sapped by the effort of trying to hide his disability.

Toller descended to the entrance hall and turned left into the dayroom where he had left Glo in the temporary care of Fera. The two had a very comfortable relationship because of—Toller suspected—rather than in spite of her lowly origin and unpolished manner. It was another of Glo's little affectations, a way of reminding those around him that there was more to him than the cloistered philosopher. He was seated at a table reading a small book, and Fera was standing by a window gazing out at the mesh-mosaic of the sky. She was wearing a simple one piece garment of pale green cambric which showed off her statuesque form.

She turned on hearing Toller enter the room and said, "This is boring. I want to go home."

"I thought you wanted to see a real live prince at close quarters."

"I've changed my mind."

"They're bound to be here soon," Toller said. "Why don't you be like my lord and pass the time by reading?"

Fera mouthed silently, carefully forming the swear words so that there would be no doubt about what she thought of the idea. "It wouldn't be so bad if there was even some food."

"But you ate less than an hour ago!" Toller ran a humorously critical eye over his gradewife's figure. "No wonder you're getting fat."

"I'm not!" Fera slapped her belly inwards and contracted her stomach, an action which caused a voluptuous ballooning of her breasts. Toller viewed the

display with affectionate appreciation. It was a frequent source of wonder to him that Fera, in spite of her appetite and habit of spending entire days lolling in bed, looked almost exactly as she had done two years earlier. The only noticeable change was that her chipped tooth had begun to turn grey. She devoted much time to rubbing it with white powders, supposed to contain crushed pearls, which she obtained from the Samlue market.

Lord Glo looked up from his book, his clapped-in face momentarily enlivened. "Take the woman upstairs," he said to Toller. "That's what I'd do were I five years younger."

Fera correctly assessed his mood and produced the expected ribaldry, "*I wish you were five years younger, my lord—merely mounting the stairs would be enough to finish my husband.*"

Glo gave a gratified whinny.

"In that case, we'll do it right here," Toller said. He darted forward, put his arms around Fera and drew her close to him, half-seriously simulating passion. There was an undeniable element of providing sexual titillation for Glo in what he and Fera were doing, but such was the relationship the three had built up that the overriding motif was one of companionship and friendly clowning. After a few seconds of intimate contact, however, Toller felt Fera move against him with a hint of genuine purpose.

"Do you still have the use of your old bedroom?" she whispered, pressing her lips to his ear. "I'm beginning to feel like..." She stopped speaking and although she remained in his arms he knew that somebody had entered the room.

He turned and saw Gesalla Maraquine regarding him with cool disdain, the familiar expression she seemed to reserve just for him. Her dark filmy clothing emphasised her slimness. It was the first time they had met in almost two years and he was struck by the fact that, as with Fera, her appearance had not altered in any significant way. The sickness associated with her second pregnancy—which had caused her to miss the littlenight meal—had invested her pale features with a near-numinous dignity which somehow made him feel that he was a stranger to all that was important in life.

"Good aftday, Gesalla," he said. "I see you haven't lost your knack of materialising at precisely the wrong moment." Fera slipped away from him. He smiled and looked down at Glo, expecting his moral support, but Glo indulged in playful treachery by gazing fixedly at his book, pretending to be so lost in it that he had been unaware of what Toller and Fera were doing.

Gesalla's grey eyes considered Toller briefly while she decided if he merited a reply, then she turned her attention to Glo. "My lord, Prince Chakkell's equerry is in the precinct. He reports that the Princes Chakkell and Leddravohr

are on their way up the hill.”

“Thank you, my dear.” Glo closed his book and waited until Gesalla had left the room before baring the ruins of his lower teeth at Toller. “I thought you weren’t ... hmm ... afraid of that one.”

Toller was indignant. “Afraid? Why should I be afraid?”

“Huh!” Fera had returned to her position by the window. “What was wrong with it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You said she came in at the wrong moment. What was wrong with it?”

Toller was staring at her, exasperated and speechless, when Glo tugged his sleeve to signal that he wanted to get to his feet. In the entrance hall there were footfalls and the sound of a man’s voice. Toller helped Glo to stand up and lock the verticals of his cane frame. They walked together into the hall, with Toller inconspicuously taking much of Glo’s weight. Lain and Gesalla were being addressed by the equerry, who was aged about forty and had tallowy skin and out-turned liver-coloured lips. His dark green tunic and breeches were foppishly decorated with lines of tiny crystal beads and he wore the narrow sword of a duellist.

“I am Canrell Zotiern, representing Prince Chakkell,” he announced with an imperiousness which would have been better suited to his master. “Lord Glo and members of the Maraquine family—no others—will stand here in line facing the door and will await the arrival of the prince.”

Toller, who was shocked by Zotiern’s arrogance, assisted Glo to the indicated place beside Lain and Gesalla. He glanced at Glo, expecting him to issue the proper reprimand, but the older man seemed too preoccupied with the laboured mechanics of walking to have noticed anything amiss. Several of the household servants watched silently from the door leading to the kitchens. Beyond the archway of the main entrance the mounted soldiers of Chakkell’s personal guard disturbed the flow of light into the hall. Toller became aware that the equerry was looking at him.

“You! The body servant!” Zotiern called out. “Are you deaf? Get back to your quarters.”

“My personal attendant is a Maraquine, and he remains with me,” Glo said steadily.

Toller heard the exchange as across a tumultuous distance. The crimson drumming was something he had not experienced in a long time, and he was dismayed to find that his cultivated immunity to it was proved illusory. *I’m a different person*, he told himself, while a prickly chill moved across his brow. *I AM a different person.*

“And I have a warning for you,” Glo went on, speaking in high Kolcorronian and dredging up something of his old authority as he confronted Zotiern. “The unprecedented powers the King has accorded Leddravohr and Chakkell do not, as you appear to think, extend to their lackeys. I will tolerate no further violations of protocol from you.”

“A thousand apologies, my lord,” Zotiern said, insincere and unperturbed, consulting a list he had taken from his pocket. “Ah, yes—Toller Maraquine ... and a spouse named Fera.” He swaggered closer to Toller. “While the subject of protocol is in the air, Toller Maraquine, where is this spouse of yours? Don’t you know that all female members of the household should be presented?”

“My wife is at hand,” Toller said coldly. “I will...” He broke off as Fera, who must have been listening, appeared at the door of the dayroom. Moving with uncharacteristic demureness and timidity, she came towards Toller.

“Yes, I can see why you wanted to keep this one hidden,” Zotiern said. “I must make a closer inspection on behalf of the prince.”

As Fera was passing him he halted her by the expedient of grasping a handful of her hair. The drumming in Toller’s brain crashed into silence. He thrust out his left hand and hit Zotiern on the shoulder, knocking him off-balance. Zotiern went down sideways, landing on his hands and knees, and immediately sprang up again. His right hand was going for his sword and Toller knew that by the time he fully regained his feet the blade would be unsheathed. Propelled by instinct, rage and alarm, Toller went in on his opponent and struck him on the side of the neck with all the power of his right arm. Zotiern spun away, limbs flailing the air like the blades of a ptertha stick, crashed to the floor and slid several yards on the polished surface. He ended up lying on his back, unmoving, his head angled close to one shoulder. Gesalla gave a clear, high scream.

“What happens here?” The angry shout came from Prince Chakkell, who had just come through the entrance closely followed by four of his guard. He strode to Zotiern, bent over him briefly—his sparsely covered scalp glistening—and raised his eyes towards Toller, who was frozen in the attitude of combat.

“You! *Again!*” Chakkell’s swarthy countenance grew even darker. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“He insulted Lord Glo,” Toller said, meeting the prince’s gaze directly. “He also insulted me and molested my wife.”

“That is correct,” Glo put in. “Your man’s behaviour was quite inexcusable—”

“Silence! I’ve had my fill of this doltish upstart!” Chakkell swung his arm, signalling his guards to move in on Toller. “Kill him!”

The soldiers came forward, drawing their black swords. Toller backed away, thinking of his own blade which he had left at home, until his heel touched the

wall. The soldiers formed a semicircle and closed in on him, eyes slitted and intent beneath the rims of their brakka helmets. Beyond them Toller could see Gesalla hiding in Lain's embrace; the grey-robed Glo rooted to the spot, his hand raised in ineffectual protest; and Fera watching him through latticed fingers. Until that moment the guards had remained equally distant from him, but now the one on the right was taking the initiative and the point of his sword was describing eager little circles as he prepared for the first thrust.

Toller braced himself against the wall and made ready to launch himself forward beneath the thrust when it came, determined to inflict some degree of injury on his executioners rather than simply be cut down by them. The hovering sword tip steadied, purposefully, and its message for Toller was that time was at an end. Heightened perception of everything in his surroundings brought him the awareness that another man was entering the hall, and even in the desperate extremity he was able to feel a pang of regret that the newcomer was Prince Leddravohr, arriving just in time to savour his death...

"Stand away from that man!" Leddravohr commanded. His voice was not unduly loud, but the four guards responded at once by stepping back from Toller.

"What the...!" Chakkell wheeled on Leddravohr. "Those men are in my personal guard and they take orders only from me."

"Is that so?" Leddravohr said calmly. He aimed a finger at the soldiers and slowly swung it to indicate the opposite side of the hall. The soldiers went with the line of it, as though controlled by invisible rods, and took up new positions.

"But you don't understand," Chakkell protested. "The Maraquine lout has killed Zotiern."

"It shouldn't have been possible—Zotiern was armed and the Maraquine lout wasn't. This is part of the price you pay, my dear Chakkell, for surrounding yourself with strutting incompetents." Leddravohr went closer to Zotiern, looked down at him and gave a low chuckle. "Besides, he isn't dead. He is damaged beyond repair, mind you, but he isn't quite dead. Isn't that so, Zotiern?" Leddravohr augmented the question by nudging the fallen man with his toe.

Zotiern's mouth emitted a faint bubbling sound and Toller saw that his eyes were still open, frantic and staring, although his body remained inert.

Leddravohr flicked his smile into existence for Chakkell's benefit. "As you think so highly of Zotiern, we'll do him the honour of sending him off along the Bright Road. Perhaps he would even have chosen it himself were he still able to speak." Leddravohr glanced at the four watchful soldiers. "Take him outside and see to it."

The soldiers, obviously relieved at being able to escape Leddravohr's

presence, saluted hastily before swooping on Zotiern and carrying him outside to the precinct. Chakkell made as if to follow, then turned back. Leddravohr gave him a mock-affectionate slap on the shoulder, dropped a hand to his sword and padded across the hall to stand before Toller.

“You seem obsessed with placing your life in danger,” he said. “Why did you do it?”

“Prince, he insulted Lord Glo. He insulted me. And he molested my wife.”

“Your wife?” Leddravohr turned and looked at Fera. “Ah, yes. And *how* did you overcome Zotiern?”

Toller was puzzled by Leddravohr’s tone. “I punched him.”

“Once?”

“There was no need to do it again.”

“I see.” Leddravohr’s inhumanly smooth face was enigmatic. “Is it true that you have made several attempts to enter military service?”

“It is true, Prince.”

“In that case I have good news for you, Maraquine,” Leddravohr said. “You are now *in* the army. I promise you that you will have many opportunities to satisfy your troublesome warlike urges in Chamteth. Report to the Mithold Barracks at dawn.”

Leddravohr turned away without waiting for a reply and began a murmured conversation with Chakkell. Toller remained as he was, his back still pressed to the wall, as he tried to control the seething of his thoughts. Despite his ungovernable temper he had taken human life only once before, when he had been set upon by thieves in a dark street in the Flylien district of Ro-Atabri and had left two of them dead. He had not even seen their faces and the incident had left him unaffected, but in the case of Zotiern he could still feel the appalling crunch of vertebrae and still could see the terrified eyes. The fact that he had not killed the man outright only made the event more traumatic—Zotiern had had a subjective eternity, helpless as a broken insect, in which to anticipate the final sword thrust. Toller had been floundering, trying to come to terms with his emotions, when Leddravohr had delivered his verbal bombshell, and now the universe was a chaos of tumbling fragments.

“Prince Chakkell and I will retire to a separate room with Lain Maraquine,” Leddravohr announced. “We are not to be disturbed.”

Glo signalled for Toller to come to his side. “We have everything ready for you, Prince. May I suggest that...?”

“Suggest nothing, Lord Cripple—your presence is not required at this stage.” Leddravohr’s face was expressionless as he looked at Glo, as though he were not even worthy of contempt. “You will remain here in case I have reason to

summon you later—though I confess I find it difficult to imagine your ever being of any value to anybody.” Leddravohr directed his cold gaze at Lain. “Where?”

“This way, Prince.” Lain spoke in a low voice and he was visibly quaking as he moved towards the stair. He was followed by Leddravohr and Chakkell. As soon as they had passed out of sight on the upper floor Gesalla fled from the hall, leaving Toller alone with Glo and Fera. Only a few minutes had passed since they had been together in the dayroom, and yet they now breathed different air, inhabited a different world. Toller sensed he would not feel the full impact of the change until later.

“Help me back to my ... hmm ... seat, my boy,” Glo said. He remained silent until installed in the same chair in the dayroom, then looked up at Toller with a shamefaced smile. “Life never ceases to be interesting, does it?”

“I’m sorry, my lord.” Toller tried to find appropriate words. “There was nothing I could do.”

“Don’t fret. You came out of it well—though I fear it wasn’t in Leddravohr’s mind to do you a favour when he inducted you into his service.”

“I don’t understand it. When he was walking towards me I thought he was going to kill me himself.”

“I’ll be sorry to lose you.”

“What about me?” Fera said. “Has anybody thought about what’s going to happen to me?”

Toller recalled his earlier exasperation with her. “You may not have noticed, but we have all been given other things to think about.”

“There is no need for you to worry,” Glo said to her. “You may remain at the Peel for as long as you ... hmm ... wish.”

“Thank you, my lord. I wish I could go there now.”

“So do I, my dear, but I’m afraid it’s out of the question. None of us is free to leave until dismissed by the prince. That is the custom.”

“Custom!” Fera’s dissatisfied gaze travelled the room before settling on Toller. “Wrong moment!”

He turned his back on her, unwilling to confront the enigma of the feminine mind, and went to stand at a window. *The man I killed needed to be killed*, he told himself, *so I’m not going to brood about it*. He turned his thoughts to the mystery of Leddravohr’s behaviour. Glo was quite right—the prince had not acted out of benignancy when summarily making him a soldier. There was little doubt that he hoped for Toller to be killed in battle, but why had he not seized the opportunity to take revenge in person? He could easily have sided with Chakkell over the death of the equerry and that would have been the end of the

matter. Leddravohr was capable of spinning out the destruction of someone who had crossed him so that he could derive maximum satisfaction from it, but surely that would be placing too much importance on an obscure member of a philosophy family.

The thought of his own background reminded Toller of the astonishing fact that he was now in the army, and the realisation struck him with as much or more force than Leddravohr's original pronouncement. It was ironic that the ambition he had cherished for much of his life should have been achieved in such a bizarre fashion and just at a time when he was beginning to put such ideas behind him. What was going to happen to him after he reported to the Mithold Barracks in the morning? It was disconcerting to find that he had no coherent vision of his future, that beyond the coming night the pattern broke up into shards ... bitty reflections ... Leddravohr ... the army ... Chamteth ... the migration flight ... Overland ... the unknown swirling into the unknown...

A gentle snore from behind him told Toller that Glo had gone to sleep. He left it to Fera to ensure that Glo was comfortable and continued staring through the window. The enveloping ptertha screens interfered with the view of Overland, but he could see the progression of the terminator across the great disk. When it reached the halfway mark, dividing the sister world into hemispheres of equal size but unequal brightness, the sun would be on the horizon.

A short time before that point was reached Prince Chakkell emerged from the lengthy conference and departed for his residence in the Tannoffern Palace, which lay to the east of the Great Palace. Now that the main streets of Ro-Atabri were virtually tunnels it would have been possible for him to stay longer in the Square House, but Chakkell was known for his devotion to his wife and children. After he and his retinue had left there was complete silence in the precinct, a reminder that Leddravohr had come to the meeting unaccompanied. The military prince was noted for travelling everywhere alone—partly, it was said, because of his impatience with attendants, but mainly because he scorned the use of guards. He was confident in his belief that his reputation and his own battle sword were all the protection he needed in any city of the empire.

Toller had hoped that Leddravohr would leave soon after Chakkell, but hour after hour went by with no sign of the discussion coming to an end. It appeared that Leddravohr was determined to absorb as much aeronautical knowledge as was possible in a very short time.

The weight-driven glasswood clock on the wall was showing the hour of ten when a servant arrived with platters of simple food, mainly fishcakes and bread. There was also a note of apology from Gesalla, who was too ill to perform the

normal duties of hostess. Fera had been waiting for a substantial spread and was theatrically shocked when Glo explained that no formal meal could be served unless Leddravohr chose to go to table. She ate most of what was available single-handed, then dropped into a chair in a corner and pretended to sleep. Glo alternated between trying to read in the unsatisfactory light from the sconces and staring grimly into the distance. Toller received the impression that his self-esteem had been irreparably damaged by Leddravohr's casual cruelty.

It was almost the eleventh hour when Lain walked into the room. He said, "Please return to the hall, my lord."

Glo raised his head with a start. "So the prince has finally decided to leave."

"No." Lain seemed slightly bewildered. "I think the prince is going to do me the honour of staying the night in my home. We must present ourselves now. You and your wife as well, Toller."

Toller was at a loss to explain Leddravohr's unusual decision as he raised Glo to his feet and helped him to leave the room. In normal times and circumstances it would indeed have been a great honour for a royal to sleep in the Square House, especially as the palaces were within easy reach, but Leddravohr hardly wanted to be gracious. Gesalla was already waiting near the foot of the stair, holding herself tall and straight in spite of her obvious weakness. The others formed a line with her—Glo at the centre, flanked by Lain and Toller—and waited for Leddravohr to appear.

There was a delay of several minutes before the military prince came to the head of the stair. He was eating the leg of a roast quickfowl, and added to the discourtesy by continuing to gnaw at the bone in silence until it was stripped of all flesh. Toller began to get sombre premonitions. Leddravohr threw the bone to the floor, wiped his lips with the back of a hand and slowly came down the stairs. He was still wearing his sword—another incivility—and his smooth face showed no sign of tiredness.

"Well, Lord Glo, it appears I have needlessly kept you here all day." Leddravohr's tone made it clear that he was not apologising. "I have learned most of what I need to know and will be able to finish here in the morning. Many other matters demand my attention, so to avoid wasting time in travelling back and forth to the palace I will sleep here tonight. You will be in attendance at the sixth hour. I take it you *can* bestir yourself by that time?"

"I shall be here at the sixth hour, Prince," Glo said.

"That is good to know," Leddravohr replied, jovially sarcastic. He strolled along the line, paused when he reached Toller and Fera, and produced the instantaneous smile which had nothing to do with humour. Toller faced him as woodenly as possible, his foreboding turning into a certainty that a day which

had begun badly was going to end badly. Leddravohr turned off his smile, walked back to the stair and began to ascend. Toller was beginning to wonder if his premonitions could have been groundless when Leddravohr halted on the third step.

“What is this?” he mused, keeping his back to the attentive group. “My brain is weary, and yet my body craves activity. There is a decision to be made here—shall I have a woman, or shall I not?”

Toller, already knowing the answer to Leddravohr’s rhetorical question, brought his mouth close to Fera’s ear. “This is my fault,” he whispered. “Leddravohr hates better than I knew. He wants to use you as a weapon against me, and there is nothing we can do about it. You’ll just have to go with him.”

“We’ll see,” Fera said, her composure unaffected.

Leddravohr drummed his fingers on the balustrade, prolonging the moment, then turned to face the hall. “You,” he said, pointing at Gesalla. “Come with me.”

“But...!” Toller took one step forward, breaking the line, his body a pounding column of blood. He gazed in helpless outrage at Gesalla as she touched Lain’s hand and walked towards the stair with a strange floating movement as though tranced and not really aware of what was happening. Her beautiful face was almost luminescent in its pallor. Leddravohr went ahead of her and the two were lost in the flickering dimness of the upper floor.

Toller wheeled on his brother. “That’s your wife—and she’s pregnant!”

“Thank you for that information,” Lain said in a dead voice, regarding Lain with dead eyes.

“But this is all *wrong*!”

“It’s the Kolcorronian way.” Incredibly, Lain was able to fashion his lips into a smile. “It is part of the reason we are despised by every other nation in the world.”

“Who cares about the other...?” Toller became aware that Fera, hands on hips, was staring at him with undisguised fury. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Perhaps if you had stripped me naked and thrown me at the prince things would have worked out more to your liking,” Fera said in a low hard voice.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you couldn’t wait to see me go with him.”

“You don’t understand,” Toller protested. “I thought Leddravohr wanted to punish *me*.”

“That’s exactly what he...” Fera broke off to glance at Lain, then returned her attention to Toller. “You’re a fool, Toller Maraquine. I wish I had never met you.” She spun on her heel, suddenly haughty in a way he had never seen before,

walked quickly back into the day room and slammed the door.

Toller gaped after her for a moment, baffled, then paced an urgent circle around the hall and came back to Lain and Glo. The latter, looking more exhausted and frail than ever, had clasped Lain's hand.

"What would you like me to do, my boy?" he said gently. "I could return to the Peel if you want the privacy."

Lain shook his head. "No, my lord. It is very late. If you will do me the honour of staying here I will have a suite prepared for you."

"Very well." As Lain left to instruct the servants Glo turned his large head in Toller's direction. "You're not helping your brother with all your running about like a caged animal."

"I don't understand him," Toller muttered. "Somebody should *do* something."

"What would you ... hmm ... suggest?"

"I don't know. *Something.*"

"Would it improve Gesalla's lot if Lain were to get himself killed?"

"Perhaps," Toller said, refusing to entertain logic. "She could at least be proud of him."

Glo sighed. "Help me to a chair, and then fetch me a glass of something with heat in it. Kailian black."

"Wine?" Toller was surprised despite his mental turmoil. "You want wine?"

"You said somebody should do something, and that's what I'm going to do," Glo said evenly. "You will have to dance to your own music."

Toller help Glo to a high-backed chair at the side of the hall and went to obtain a beaker of wine, his mind oppressed with the problem of how to reconcile himself to the intolerable. The mode of thought was unnatural for him and it seemed a long time before inspiration came. *Leddravohr is only playing with us*, he decided, seizing the thread of hope. *Gesalla can't be to the taste of one who is accustomed to trained courtesans. Leddravohr is only detaining her in his room, laughing at us. In fact, he can express his contempt all the better by scorning to touch any of our women...*

In the hour that followed Glo drank four large bumpers of wine, rendering himself crimson of face and almost totally helpless. Lain had retired to the solitude of his study, still betraying no trace of emotion, and Toller was dejected when Glo announced his desire to go to bed. He knew he would not sleep and had no desire to be alone with his thoughts. He half carried Glo to the assigned suite and helped him through all the tedious procedures of toilet and getting to bed, then came into the long transverse corridor which linked the principal sleeping quarters. There was a whisper of sound to his left.

He turned and saw Gesalla walking towards him on the way to her own rooms. Her black garments, long and drifting, and blanched face gave her a spectral appearance, but her bearing was erect and dignified. She was the same Gesalla Maraquine he had always known—cool, private and indomitable—and at the sight of her he experienced a pang of mingled concern and relief.

“Gesalla,” he said, moving towards her, “are you...?”

“Don’t come near me,” she snapped with a look of slit-eyed venom and walked past him without altering her step. Dismayed by the sheer loathing in her voice, he watched until she had passed out of view, then his gaze was drawn to the pale mosaic floor. The trail of bloody footprints told a story more dreadful than any he had tried to banish from his mind.

Leddravohr, oh Leddravohr, oh Leddravohr, he chanted inwardly. *We are wedded now, you and I. You have given yourself to me ... and only a death will set us apart.*

CHAPTER 10

The decision to attack Chamteth from the west was taken for geographical reasons.

At the western limits of the Kolcorronian empire, somewhat north of the equator, was a chain of volcanic islets which ended in a low-lying triangle of land about eight miles on a side. Known as Oldock, the uninhabited island had several features which were of strategic importance to Kolcorron. One was that it was close enough to Chamteth to form an excellent jumping-off point for a sea-borne invasion force; another was that it was thickly covered with rafter and tallon trees, two species which grew to a great height and offered good protection against ptertha.

The fact that Oldock and the whole Fairondes chain lay in a prevailing westerly air stream was also advantageous to Kolcorron's five armies. Although the troop ships were slowed down and airships forced to make extensive use of their jets, the steady wind blowing across open seas had a greater effect on the ptertha, making it almost impossible for them to get within range of their prey. Telescopes showed the livid globes swarming in high-altitude contraflows but they were for the most part swept away to the east when they tried to penetrate lower levels of the atmosphere. When planning the invasion the Kolcorronian high command had allowed for up to one sixth of their personnel being lost to ptertha, whereas the actual casualties were negligible.

As the armies progressed westward there was a gradual but perceptible change in the patterns of night and day. Foreday grew shorter and aftday longer as Overland drifted away from the zenith and approached the eastern horizon. Eventually foreday was reduced to a brief dazzle of prismaticics as the sun crossed the narrow gap between the horizon and Overland's disk, and soon after that the sister world was nesting on Land's eastern rim. Littlenight became a short extension of night, and there was a heightened sense of expectancy among the invaders as the celestial evidence told them they were entering the Land of the Long Days.

The establishment of a beachhead on Chamteth itself was another phase of the operation in which considerable losses had been expected, and the Kolcorronian commanders could scarcely believe their good fortune when they

found the tree-covered strands unwatched and undefended.

The three widely separated invasion prongs met no resistance whatsoever, converging and consolidating without a single casualty apart from the accidental fatalities and injuries which are inevitable when large masses of men and materiel enter an alien territory. Almost at once brakka groves were found among the other types of forestation, and within a day bands of naked slimers were at work behind the advancing military. The sacks of green and purple crystals gutted from the brakka were loaded on to separate cargo ships—large quantities of pikon and halvell were never transported together—and in an incredibly short time the first steps had been taken to initiate a supply chain reaching all the way back to Ro-Atabri.

Aerial reconnaissance was ruled out for the time being, because airships were too conspicuous, but with ancient maps to guide them the invaders were able to push westwards at a steady pace. The terrain was swampy in places, infested with poisonous snakes, but presented no serious obstacles to well trained soldiers whose morale and physical condition were at a high level.

It was on the twelfth day that a scout patrol noticed an airship of unfamiliar design scudding silently across the sky ahead of them.

By that time the vanguard of the Third Army was emerging from the waterlogged littoral and was reaching higher ground characterised by a series of drumlins running from north to south. Trees and other kinds of vegetation were more sparse here. It was the type of ground on which an unopposed army could have made excellent progress—but the first of the Chamtethan defenders were lying in wait.

They were swarthy men, long-muscled and black-bearded, wearing flexible armour made from small flakes of brakka sewn together like fish scales, and they fell on the invaders with a ferocity which even the most seasoned Kolcorronians had never encountered before. Some of them appeared to be suicide groups, sent in to cause maximum damage and disarray, creating diversions which enabled others to set up attacks using a variety of long-range weapons—cannon, mortars and mechanical catapults which hurled pikon-halvell bombs.

The Kolcorronian crack troops, veterans of many frontier engagements, destroyed the Chamtethans in the course of a diffuse, multi-centred battle which lasted almost the entire day. It was found that fewer than a hundred men had died, compared with more than twice that number of the enemy, and when the following day had passed without further incident the spirits of the invaders were again at a peak.

From that stage onwards, with secrecy no longer possible, the line soldiers were preceded by an air cover of bombers and surveillance ships, and the men

on the ground were reassured by the sight of the elliptical craft patterning the sky ahead.

Their commanders were less complacent, however, knowing they had encountered only a local defence force, that intelligence concerning the invasion had been flashed to the heart of Chamteth, and that the might of a huge continent was being drawn up against them.

CHAPTER 11

General Risdal Dalacott uncorked the tiny poison bottle and smelled its contents.

The clear fluid had a curious aroma, honeyed and peppery at the same time. It was a distillation of extracts of maidenfriend, the herb which when chewed regularly by women prevented them from conceiving children. In its concentrated form it was even more inimical to life, providing a gentle, painless and absolutely certain escape from all the troubles of the flesh. It was greatly treasured among those of the Kolcorronian aristocracy who had no taste for the more honourable but very bloody traditional methods of committing suicide.

Dalacott emptied the bottle into his cup of wine and, after only the slightest hesitation, took a tentative sip. The poison was scarcely detectable and might even have been said to have improved the rough wine, adding a hint of spicy sweetness to it. He took another sip and set the cup aside, not wishing to slip away too quickly. There was a final self-imposed duty he had yet to perform.

He looked around his tent, which was furnished with only a narrow bed, a trunk, his portable desk and some folding chairs on straw matting. Other officers of staff rank liked to surround themselves with luxury to ease the rigours of campaign, but that had never been Dalacott's way. He had always been a soldier and had lived as a soldier should, and the reason he was choosing to die by poison instead of the blade was that he no longer regarded himself as worthy of a soldier's death.

It was dim inside the tent, the only light coming from a single military field lantern of the type which fuelled itself by attracting oilbugs. He lit a second lantern and placed it on his desk, still finding it a little strange that such measures should be necessary for reading at night. This far west in Chamteth, across the Orange River, Overland was out of sight beneath the horizon and the diurnal cycle consisted of twelve hours of uninterrupted daylight followed by twelve hours of unrelieved darkness. Had Kolcorron been in this hemisphere its scientists would probably have devised an efficient lighting system long ago.

Dalacott raised the lid of his desk and took out the last volume of his diary, the one for the year 2629. It was bound in limp green leather and had a separate sheet for each day of the year. He opened the book and slowly turned its pages, compacting the entire Chamteth campaign into a matter of minutes, picking out

the key events which—insensibly at first—had led to his personal disintegration as a soldier and as a man...

DAY 84. Prince Leddravohr was in a strange mood at the staff conference today. I sensed that he was keyed-up and elated, in spite of the news of heavy losses on the southern front. Time and time again he made reference to the fact that ptertha appear to be so few in this part of Land. He is not given to confiding his innermost thoughts, but by piecing together fragmentary and oblique remarks I received the impression that he entertained visions of persuading the King to abandon the whole idea of migrating to Overland.

His rationale seemed to be that such desperate measures would be unnecessary if it were established that, for some unguessable reason, conditions in the Land of the Long Days were unfavourable to ptertha. That being the case, it would only be necessary for Kolcorron to subjugate Chamteth and transfer the seat of power and the remaining population to this continent—a much more logical and natural process than trying to reach another planet...

DAY 93. The war is going badly. These people are determined, brave and gifted fighters. I cannot bring myself to contemplate the possibility of our eventual defeat, but the truth is that we would have been severely tested in going against Chamteth even in the days when we could have fielded close on a million fully trained men. Today we have only a third of that number, an uncomfortably high proportion of them raw conscripts, and we are going to need luck in addition to all our skill and courage if the war is to be successfully prosecuted.

An important factor in our favour is that this country is so rich in resources, particularly in brakka and edible crops. The sound of brakka pollination discharges is constantly being mistaken by my men for enemy cannon fire or bombs, and we have an abundance of power crystals for our heavy weaponry. There is no difficulty in keeping the armies well fed, in spite of the Chamtethans' efforts to burn the crops they are forced to abandon.

The Chamtethan women, and even quite small children, will indulge in that form of destruction if left to their own devices. With our manpower stretched to the limit, we are unable to divert combat troops into guard duties and for that reason Leddravohr has decreed that we take no prisoners, regardless of age or sex.

It is sound military thinking, but I have been sickened by the amount of butchery I have witnessed of late. Even the most hardened of the soldiery go about their business with set grey faces, and in the encampments at night there is a contrived and unnatural quality to the little merriment that one overhears.

This is a seditious thought, one I would not express anywhere except in the privacy of these pages, but it is one thing to spread the benefits of the empire to unenlightened and squabbling tribes—and quite another to undertake the annihilation of a great nation whose sole offence was to husband its resources of brakka.

I have never had time for religion, but now—for the first time—I am beginning to comprehend the meaning of the word “sin”...

Dalacott paused in his reading and picked up the enamelled cup of wine. He stared into its beaded depths for a moment, resisting the urge to drink deeply, then took a controlled sip. So many people seemed to be calling to him from the far side of that barrier which separated the living from the dead—his wife Toriane, Aytha Maraquine, his son Oderan, Conna Dalacott and little Hallie...

Why had he been chosen to go on and on for more than seventy years, with the false blessing of the immunity, when others could have made much better use of the gift of life? Without any conscious thought on his part, Dalacott's right hand slipped into a pocket and located the curious object he had found on the banks of the Bes-Undar all those years ago. He stroked his thumb in a circular motion over its mirrorlike surface as he again began to turn the pages of his diary.

DAY 102. *How does one account for the machinations of fate?*

This morning, after having put off doing so for many days, I began signing the sheaf of award citations on my desk and discovered that my own son—Toller Maraquine—is serving as an ordinary soldier in one of the regiments directly under my control!

It appears that he has been recommended for valour disks no less than three times in spite of the brevity of his service and lack of formal training. In theory a conscript, as he must be, should not be spending so much time in the front line, but perhaps the Maraquine family has used its intimate connections with the court to enable Toller to advance his belated military career. This is something I must enquire into if I ever have some freedom from the pressures of my command.

Truly these are changed times, when the military caste not only calls upon outsiders to swell its ranks, but catapults them into the utmost danger and what passes for glory.

I will do my best to see my son, if it can be arranged without exciting suspicion in him and comment from others. A meeting with Toller would be the one gleam of brightness in the deepnight of this criminal war.

DAY 103. A company of the 8th Battalion was completely overrun in a surprise attack today in sector C11. Only a handful of men escaped the slaughter and many of those were so severely wounded that there was no option for them but the Bright Road. Disasters like that are becoming almost commonplace, so much so that I find myself more preoccupied with the reports which arrived this morning suggesting that our respite from the ptertha will soon come to an end.

Telescopic observations from airships as far east from here as the Loongl Peninsula revealed some days ago that large numbers of ptertha were drifting south across the equator. The sightings have been patchy, because we have few ships in the Fyallon Ocean at present, but the opinion of scientists seems to be that the ptertha were moving south to take advantage of a “wind cell” which would carry them west for a great distance and then north again into Chamteth.

I have never subscribed to the theory that the globes possess a rudimentary intelligence, but if they really are capable of such behaviour—i.e. making use of global weather patterns—the conclusion that they have a malign purpose is almost inescapable. Perhaps, like ants and some similar creatures, their kind as a whole has some form of composite mind, although individuals are quite incapable of mentation.

DAY 106. Leddravohr’s dream of a Kolcorron free from the scourge of the ptertha has come to an abrupt end. The globes have been sighted by fleet auxiliaries of the First Army. They are approaching the south coast in the Adrian region.

There has also been a curious report, as yet unconfirmed, from my own theatre.

Two line soldiers in a forward area claim that they saw a ptertha which was pale pink. According to their story the globe came to within forty or so paces of their position, but showed no inclination to draw nearer and eventually rose and drifted away to the west. What is one to make of such strange accounts? Could it be that two battle-weary soldiers are conniving to obtain a few days of interrogation in the safety of the base camp?

DAY 107. Today—although I take little pride or pleasure in the accomplishment—I justified Prince Leddravohr’s confidence in my abilities as a tactician.

The splendid achievement, perhaps the culmination of my military career, began with my making the kind of mistake which would have been avoided by a green lieutenant straight out of academy.

It all began in the eighth hour when I became impatient with Captain Kadal over his tardiness in taking a stretch of open ground in sector D14. His reason

for hanging back in the security of the forest was that his hastily prepared aerial map showed the territory to be traversed by several streams, and he believed them to be deep gullies capable of concealing sizable numbers of the enemy. Kadal is a competent officer, and I should have left him to scout the ground in his own way, but I feared that numerous setbacks were making him timorous, and I was overcome by a foolhardy desire to set an example to him and the men.

Accordingly, I took a sergeant and a dozen mounted soldiers and rode forward with them in person. The terrain was well suited to the bluehorns and we covered the ground quickly. Too quickly!

At a distance of perhaps a mile from our lines the sergeant became visibly uneasy, but I was too puffed up with success to pay him any heed. We had crossed two streams which were, as indicated on the map, too shallow to provide any kind of cover, and I became inflamed with a vision of myself casually presenting the whole area to Kadal as a prize I had won on his behalf with my boldness.

Before I knew it we had advanced close on two miles and even in my fit of megalomania I was beginning to hear the nagging voice of common sense warning me that enough was enough, especially as we had crossed a vestigial ridge and were no longer in sight of our own lines.

That was when the Chamtethans made their appearance.

They sprang up from the ground on both sides as if by magic, though of course there was no sorcery involved—they had been hiding in the very gullies whose existence I had blithely set out to disprove. There were at least two-hundred, looking like black reptiles in their brakka armour. Had their force been composed solely of infantry we could have outrun them, but a good quarter of their number were mounted and were already racing to block off our retreat.

I became aware of my men staring at me expectantly, and the fact that there was no sign of reproach in their eyes made my personal position all the worse. I had thrown away their lives with my overweening pride and stupidity, and all they asked of me in that terrible moment was a decision as to where and how they should die!

I looked all about and saw a tree-covered mound several furlongs ahead of us. It would afford some protection and there was a possibility that from high up in one of the trees we would be able to get a sunwriter message back to Kadal and call for help.

I gave the necessary order and we rode with all speed to the mound, fortuitously surprising the Chamtethans, who had expected us to flee in the opposite direction. We reached the trees well ahead of our pursuers, who in any case were in no particular hurry. Time was on their side, and it was all too clear

to me that even if we did succeed in communicating with Kadal it would be to no avail.

While one of the men was beginning to climb a tree with the sunwriter slung on his belt I used my field glasses in an attempt to locate the Chamtethan commander, to see if I could divine his intention. If he was cognisant of my rank he might try to take me alive—and that was something I could not have permitted. It was while sweeping the line of Chamtethan soldiers with the powerful glasses that I saw something which, even at that time of high peril, produced in me a spasm of dread.

Ptertha!

Four of the purple-tinted globes were approaching from the south, borne on the light breeze, skimming over the grass. They were plainly visible to the enemy—I saw several men point at them—but to my surprise no defensive action was taken. I saw the globes come closer and closer to the Chamtethans and—such is the power of reflex—I had to stifle the urge to shout a warning. The foremost of the globes reached the line of soldiers and abruptly ceased to exist, having burst among them.

Still no defensive or evasive action was taken. I even saw one soldier casually slash at a ptertha with his sword. In a matter of seconds the four globes had disintegrated, shedding their charges of deadly dust among the enemy, who appeared to be quite uncaring.

If what had happened up to that point was surprising, the aftermath was even more so.

The Chamtethans were in the process of spreading out to form a circle around our inadequate little fortress when I saw the beginnings of a commotion among their ranks. My glasses showed that some of the black-armoured soldiers had fallen. Already! Their comrades were kneeling beside them to render aid and—within the space of several breaths—they too were sprawling and writhing on the ground!

The sergeant came to my side and said, “Sir, the corporal says he can see our lines. What message do you want to send?”

“Wait!” I elevated my glasses slightly to take in the middle distance and after a moment picked out other ptertha weaving and wavering above the grasslands. “Instruct him to inform Captain Kadal that we have encountered a large detachment of the enemy, but that he is to remain where he is. He is not to advance until I send a further command.”

The sergeant was too well disciplined to venture a protest, but his perplexity was evident as he hurried away to transmit my orders. I resumed my surveillance of the Chamtethans. By that time there was a general awareness

that something was terribly amiss, evidenced by the manner in which the soldiers were running here and there in panic and confusion. Men who had begun to advance on our position turned and—not understanding that their sole hope of survival lay in fleeing the scene—rejoined the main body of their force. I watched with a clammy coldness in my gut as they too began to stagger and fall.

There were gasps of wonderment from behind me as my own men, even with unaided vision, took in the fact that the Chamtethans were swiftly being destroyed by some awesome and invisible agency. In a frighteningly short space of time every last one of the enemy had gone down, and nothing was moving on the plain save groups of bluehorns which had begun to graze unconcernedly among the bodies of their masters. (Why is it that all members of the animal kingdom, apart from types of simian, are immune to ptertha poison?)

When I had taken my fill of the dread scene I turned and almost laughed aloud as I saw that my men were gazing at me with a mixture of relief, respect and adoration. They had believed themselves doomed, and now—such are the workings of the common soldier's mind—their gratitude for being spared was being focussed on me, as though their deliverance had been won through some masterly strategy on my part. They seemed to have no thought at all for the wider implications of what had occurred.

Three years earlier Kolcorron had been brought to its knees by a sudden malevolent change in the nature of our age-old foe, the ptertha, and now it appeared that there had been another and greater escalation of the globes' evil powers. The new form of pterthacosis—for nothing else could have struck down the Chamtethans—which killed a man in seconds instead of hours was a grim portent of dark days ahead of us.

I relayed a message to Kadal, warning him to keep within the forest and to be on the alert for ptertha, then returned to my vigil. The glasses showed some ptertha in groups of two or three drifting on the southerly breeze. We were reasonably safe from them, thanks to the protection of the trees, but I waited for some time and made sure the sky was absolutely clear before giving the order to retrieve our bluehorns and to return to our own lines at maximum speed.

DAY 109. It transpires that I was quite wrong about a new and intensified threat from the ptertha.

Leddravohr has arrived at the truth by a characteristically direct method. He had a group of Chamtethan men and women tied to stakes on a patch of open ground, and beside them he placed a group of our own wounded, men who had little hope of recovery. Eventually they were found by drifting ptertha, and the outcome was witnessed through telescopes. The Kolcorronians, in spite of their

weakened condition, took two hours to succumb to pterthacosis—but the hapless Chamtethans died almost immediately.

Why does this strange anomaly exist?

One theory I have heard is that the Chamtethans as a race have a certain inherited weakness which renders them highly vulnerable to pterthacosis, but I believe that the real explanation is the much more complicated one advanced by our medical advisors. It depends on there being two distinct varieties of ptertha—the blackish-purple type known of old to Kolcorron, which is highly venomous; and a pink type indigenous to Chamteth, which is harmless or relatively so. (The sighting of a pink globe in this area turns out to have been duplicated many times elsewhere.)

The theory further states that in centuries of warfare against the ptertha, in which millions of the globes have been destroyed, the entire population of Kolcorron has been exposed to microscopic quantities of the toxic dust. This has given us some slight degree of tolerance for the poison, increased our resistance to it, by a mechanism similar to the one which ensures that some diseases can be contracted only once. The Chamtethans, on the other hand, have no resistance whatsoever, and an encounter with a poisonous ptertha is even more catastrophic for them than it is for us.

One experiment which would go a long way towards proving the second theory would be to expose groups of Kolcorronians and Chamtethans to pink ptertha. No doubt Leddravohr will duly arrange for the experiment to be carried out if we enter a region where the pink globes are plentiful.

Dalacott broke off from his reading and glanced at the timepiece strapped to his wrist. It was of the type based on a toughened glass tube, preferred by the military in the absence of a compact and reliable chronometer. The pace beetle inside it was nearing the eighth division of the graduated cane shoot. The time of his final appointment was almost at hand.

He took a further measured sip of his wine and turned to the last entry in the diary. It had been made many days earlier, and after its completion he had abandoned the habit of a lifetime by ceasing to record each day's activities and thoughts.

In a way that had been a symbolic suicide, preparing him for tonight's actuality...

DAY 114. *The war is over.*

The ptertha plague has done our work for us.

In the space of only six days since the purple ptertha made their appearance

in Chamteth the plague has raged the length and breadth of the continent, sweeping away its inhabitants in their millions. A swift and casual genocide!

We no longer have to progress on foot, fighting our way yard by yard against a dedicated enemy. Instead, we advance by airship, with our jets on continuous thrust. Travelling in that manner uses up large quantities of power crystals—both in the propulsion tubes and the anti-ptertha cannon—but such considerations are no longer important.

We are the proud possessors of an entire continent of mature brakka and veritable mountains of the green and purple. We share our riches with none. Leddravohr has not rescinded his order to take no prisoners, and the isolated handfuls of bewildered and demoralised Chamtethans we encounter are put to the sword.

I have flown over cities, towns and villages and farmlands where nothing lives except for wandering domestic animals. The architecture is impressive—clean, well-proportioned, dignified—but one has to admire it from afar. The stench of rotting corpses reaches high into the sky.

We are soldiers no longer.

We are the carriers of pestilence.

We ARE pestilence.

I have nothing more to say.

CHAPTER 12

The night sky, although it had much less overall brightness than in Kolcorron, was spanned by a huge spiral of misty light, the arms of which sparkled with brilliant stars of white, blue and yellow. That wheel was flanked by two large elliptical spirals, and the rest of the celestial canopy was generously dappled with small whirlpools, wisps and patches of radiance, plus the glowing plumes of a number of comets. Although the Tree was not visible, the sky was overlaid with a field of major stars whose intensity made them seem closer than all the other heavenly objects, imparting a sense of depth to the display.

Toller was only accustomed to seeing those configurations when Land was at the opposite side of its path around the sun, at which time they were dominated and dimmed by the great disk of Overland. He stood unmoving in the dusk, watching starry reflections tremble on the broad quiet waters of the Orange River. All about him the myriad subdued lights of the Third Army's headquarters glowed through the tree lanes of the forest, the days of open encampments having passed with the advent of the ptertha plague.

One question had been on his mind all day: *Why should General Dalacott want a private interview with me?*

He had spent several days of idleness at a transit camp twenty miles to the west—part of an army which, suddenly, had no work to do—and had been trying to adapt to the new pace of life when the battalion commander had ordered him to report to headquarters. On arrival he had been examined briefly by several officers, one of whom he thought might be Vorict, the adjutant-general. He had been told that General Dalacott wished to present him with valour disks in person. The various officers had plainly been puzzled by the unusual arrangement, and had discreetly pumped Toller for information before accepting that he was as unenlightened about the matter as they.

A young captain emerged from the nearby administrative enclosure, approached Toller through the spangled dimness and said, "Lieutenant Maraquine, the general will see you now."

Toller saluted and went with the officer to a tent which, unexpectedly, was quite small and unadorned. The captain ushered him in and quickly departed. Toller stood at attention before a lean, austere-looking man who was seated at a

portable desk. In the weak light from two field lanterns the general's cropped hair could either have been white or blond, and he looked surprisingly young for a man with fifty years of distinguished service. Only his eyes seemed old, eyes which had seen more than was compatible with the ability to dream.

"Sit down, son," he said. "This is a purely informal meeting."

"Thank you, sir." Toller took the indicated chair, his mystification growing.

"I see from your records that you entered the army less than a year ago as an ordinary line soldier. I know these are changed times, but wasn't that unusual for a man of your social status?"

"It was specially arranged by Prince Leddravohr."

"Is Leddravohr a friend of yours?"

Encouraged by the general's forthright but amiable manner, Toller ventured a wry smile. "I cannot claim that honour, sir."

"Good!" Dalacott smiled in return. "So you achieved the rank of lieutenant in less than a year through your own efforts."

"It was a field commission, sir. It may not be given full endorsement."

"It will." Dalacott paused to sip from an enamelled cup. "Forgive me for not offering you refreshment—this is an exotic brew and I doubt if it would be to your taste."

"I'm not thirsty, sir."

"Perhaps you would like these instead." Dalacott opened a compartment in his desk and took out three valour disks. They were circular flakes of brakka inlaid with white and red glass. He handed them to Toller and sat back to view his reactions.

"Thank you." Toller fingered the disks and put them away in a pocket. "I'm honoured."

"You disguise the fact quite well."

Toller was embarrassed and disconcerted. "Sir, I didn't intend any..."

"It's all right, son," Dalacott said. "Tell me, is army life not what you expected?"

"Since I was a child I have dreamed of being a warrior, but..."

"You were prepared to wipe an opponent's blood from your sword, but you didn't realise there would be smears of his dinner as well."

Toller met the general's gaze squarely. "Sir, I don't understand why you brought me here."

"I think it was to give you this." Dalacott opened his right hand to reveal a small object which he dropped on to Toller's palm.

Toller was surprised by its weight, by the massy impact of it on his hand. He held the object closer to the light and was intrigued by the colour and lustre of its

polished surface. The colour was unlike any he had seen before, white but somehow more than white, resembling the sea when the sun's rays were obliquely reflected from it at dawn. The object was rounded like a pebble, but might almost have been a miniature carving of a skull whose details had been worn away by time.

"What is it?" Toller said.

Dalacott shook his head. "I don't know. Nobody knows. I found it in Redant province many years ago, on the banks of the Bes-Undar, and nobody has ever been able to tell me what it is."

Toller closed his fingers around the warm object and found his thumb beginning to move in circles on the slick surface. "One question leads to another, sir. Why do you want *me* to have this?"

"Because—" Dalacott gave him a strange smile—"you might say it brought your mother and I together."

"I see," Toller said, speaking mechanically but not untruthfully as the general's words washed through his mind and, like a strong clear wave altering the aspect of a beach, rearranged memory fragments into new designs. The patterns were unfamiliar and yet not totally strange, because they had been inherent in the old order, needing only a single rippling disturbance to make them apparent. There was a long silence broken only by a faint popping sound as an oilbug blundered against a lamp's flame tube and slid down into the reservoir. Toller gazed solemnly at his father, trying to conjure up some appropriate emotion, but inside him there was only numbness.

"I don't know what to say to you," he admitted finally. "This has come so ... late."

"Later than you think." Again, Dalacott's expression was unreadable as he raised the cup of wine to his lips. "I had many reasons—some of them not altogether selfish—for not acknowledging you, Toller. Do you bear me any ill will?"

"None, sir."

"I'm glad." Dalacott rose to his feet. "We will not meet again, Toller. Will you embrace me ... once ... as a man embraces his father?"

"Father." Toller stood up and clasped his arms around the sword-straight, elderly figure. During the brief period of contact he detected a curious hint of spices on his father's breath. He glanced down at the cup waiting on the desk, made a half-intuitive mental leap, and when they parted to resume their seats there was a prickling in his eyes.

Dalacott seemed calm, fully composed. "Now, son, what comes next for you? Kolcorron and its new ally—the ptertha—have achieved their glorious victory.

The soldiers' work is all but done, so what have you planned for your future?"

"I think I wasn't intended to have a future," Toller said. "There was a time when Leddravohr would have slain me in person, but something happened, something I don't understand. He placed me in the army and I believe it was his intention that the Chamtethans would do his work at a remove."

"He has a great deal to occupy his thoughts and absorb his energies, you know," the general said. "An entire continent now has to be looted, merely as a preliminary to the building of Prad's migration fleet. Perhaps Leddravohr has forgotten you."

"I haven't forgotten him."

"Is it to the death?"

"I used to think so." Toller thought of bloody footprints on pale mosaic, but the vision had become obscured, overlaid by hundreds of images of carnage. "Now I doubt if the sword is the answer to anything."

"I'm relieved to hear you say that. Even though Leddravohr's heart is not really in the migration plan, he is probably the best man to see it through to a successful conclusion. It is possible that the future of our race rests on his shoulders."

"I'm aware of that possibility, father."

"And you also feel you can solve your own problems perfectly well without my advice." There was a wry twist to the general's lips. "I think I would have enjoyed having you by me. Now, what about my original question? Have you no thought at all for your future?"

"I would like to pilot a ship to Overland," Toller said. "But I think it is a vain ambition."

"Why? Your family must have influence."

"My brother is the chief advisor on the design of the skyships, but he is almost as unpopular with Prince Leddravohr as I am."

"Is it something you genuinely desire to do, this piloting of a skyship? Do you actually *want* to ascend thousands of miles into the heavens? With only a balloon and a few cords and scraps of wood to support you?"

Toller was surprised by the questions. "Why not?"

"Truly, a new age brings forth new men," Dalacott said softly, apparently speaking to himself, then his manner became brisk. "You must go now—I have letters to write. I have some influence with Leddravohr, and a great deal of influence with Carranald, the head of Army Air Services. If you have the necessary aptitudes you will pilot a skyship."

"Again, father, I don't know what to say." Toller stood up, but was reluctant to leave. So much had happened in the space of only a few minutes and his

inability to respond was filling him with a guilty sense of failure. How could he meet and say goodbye to his father in almost the same breath?

“You are not required to say anything, son. Only accept that I loved your mother, and...” Dalacott broke off, looking surprised, and scanned the interior of the tent as though suspecting the presence of an intruder.

Toller was alarmed. “Are you ill?”

“It’s nothing. The night is too long and dark in this part of the world.”

“Perhaps if you lay down,” Toller said, starting forward.

General Risdell Dalacott halted him with a look. “Leave me now, lieutenant.”

Toller saluted correctly and left the tent. As he was closing the entrance flap he saw that his father had picked up his pen and had already begun to write. Toller allowed the flap to fall and the triangle of wan illumination—an image seeping through the gauzy folds of probability, of lives unlived and of stories never to be told—swiftly vanished. He began to weep as he moved away through the star-canopied dimness. Deep wells of emotion were at last being tapped, and his tears were all the more copious for having come too late.

CHAPTER 13

Night, as always, was the time of the ptertha.

Marnn Ibbler had been in the army since he was fifteen years old, and—like many long-serving soldiers—had developed a superb personal alarm system which told him when one of the globes was near. He was rarely conscious of maintaining vigilance, but at all times he had a full-circle awareness of his surroundings, and even when exhausted or drunk he knew as if by instinct when ptertha were drifting in his vicinity.

Thus it was that he became the first man to receive any inkling of yet another change in the nature and ways of his people's ancient enemy.

He was on night guard at the Third Army's great permanent base camp at Trompha in southern Middac. The duty was undemanding. Only a few ancillary units had been left behind when Kolcorron had invaded Chamteth; the base was close to the secure heartland of the empire, and nobody but a fool ventured abroad at night in open countryside.

Ibbler was standing with two young sentries who were complaining bitterly and at great length about food and pay. He secretly agreed with them about the former—never in his experience had army rations been so meagre and hard to stomach—but, as old soldiers do, he persistently capped every grievance of theirs with hardship stories from early campaigns. They were close to the inner screen, beyond which was a thirty-yard buffer zone and an outer screen. The fertile plains of Middac were visible through the open meshworks, stretching away to the western horizon, illuminated by a gibbous Overland.

There was supposed to be no movement in the outer gloaming—discounting the near-continuous flickering of shooting stars—so when Ibbler's finely attuned senses detected a subtle shifting of shade upon shade he knew at once that it was a ptertha. He did not even mention the sighting to his companions—they were safe behind the double barrier—and he continued the conversation as before, but a part of his consciousness was now engaged elsewhere.

A moment later he noticed a second ptertha, then a third, and within a minute he had picked out eight of the globes, all forming a single cluster. They were riding out on a gentle north-west breeze, and they faded from his vision some distance to his right where parallax merged the vertical strands of the mesh into a

seemingly close-woven fabric.

Ibbler, watchful but still unconcerned, waited for the ptertha, to reappear in his field of view. On encountering the outer screen the globes, obeying the dictates of the air current, would nuzzle their way southwards along the camp's perimeter and eventually, having found no prey, would break free and float off towards the south-west coast and the Otollan Sea.

On this occasion, however, they seemed to be behaving unpredictably.

When minutes had passed without the globes becoming visible, Ibbler's young companions noticed that he had dropped out of the conversation. They were amused when he explained what was in his thoughts, deciding that the ptertha—assuming they had existed outside Ibbler's imagination—must have entered a rising air stream and gone over the camp's netted roofs. Anxious to avoid being classed as a nervous old woman, Ibbler allowed the matter to rest, even though it was rare for the ptertha to fly high when they were near humans.

On the following morning five diggers were found dead of pterthacosis in their hut. The soldier who blundered in on them also died, as did two others he ran to in his panic before the isolation drills were brought into force and all those thought to be contaminated were despatched along the Bright Road by archers.

It was Ibbler who noticed that the diggers' hut was close to and downwind of the point where the group of ptertha would have reached the perimeter on the night before. He secured an interview with his commanding officer and put forward the theory that the ptertha had destroyed themselves against the outer screen as a group, producing a cloud of toxic dust so concentrated that it was effective beyond the standard thirty-yard safety margin. His words were noted with considerable scepticism, but within days the phenomenon they described had actually been witnessed at several locations.

None of the subsequent outbreaks of the ptertha plague was as well-contained as at Trompha, and many hundreds had died before the authorities realised that the war between the people of Kolcorron and the ptertha had entered a new phase.

The general population of the empire felt the effect in two ways. Buffer zones were doubled in size, but there was no longer any guarantee of their efficacy. A light, steady breeze was the weather condition most feared, because it could carry invisible wisps of the ptertha toxin a long way into a community before the concentration fell below lethal levels. But even in gusty and variable wind a large enough cluster of ptertha could lay the stealthy hand of death on a sleeping child, and by morning an entire family or group household would be affected.

The second factor which accelerated the shrinkage of population was the further drop in agricultural output. Regions which had known food shortages

began to experience outright famine. The traditional system of continuous harvesting now worked against the Kolcorronians because they had never developed any great expertise in the long-term storage of grain and other edible crops. Meagre reserves of food rotted or became pest-ridden in hastily improvised granaries, and diseases unconnected with the ptertha took their toll of human life.

The work of transferring huge quantities of power crystals from Chamteth to Ro-Atabri continued throughout the worsening crisis, but the military organisations did not go unscathed. Not only were the five armies stood down in Chamteth—they were denied transportation to Kolcorron and the home provinces, and were ordered to take up permanent residence in the Land of the Long Days, where the ptertha—as though sensing their vulnerability—swarmed in ever-increasing numbers. Only those units concerned with gutting the brakka forests and shipping out the cargoes of green and purple crystals remained under the protective umbrella of Leddravohr's high command.

And Prince Leddravohr himself changed.

In the beginning he had accepted the responsibility for the Overland migration almost solely because of loyalty to his father, offsetting his private reservations against the opportunity to conduct an all-out war against Chamteth. Throughout all his preparation for the building of the fleet of skyships he had nourished deep within him the belief that the unappealing venture would never come to fruition, that some less radical solution to Kolcorron's problems would be found, one which was more in keeping with the established patterns of human history.

But above all else he was a realist, a man who understood the vital importance of balancing ambition and ability, and when he foresaw the inevitable outcome of the war against the ptertha he shifted his ground.

The migration to Overland was now part of his personal future and those about him, sensing his new attitude, understood that nothing would be allowed to stand in its way.

CHAPTER 14

“But today of all days!” Colonel Kartkang said forcibly. “I suppose you realise your take-off is scheduled for the tenth hour?”

He was lightly-built for a member of the military caste, with a round face and a mouth so wide that there was a visible gap between each of his smallish teeth. A talent for administration and an unfailing eye for detail had brought him his appointment as head of Skyship Experimental Squadron, and he clearly disliked the idea of permitting a test pilot to leave the base shortly before the most important proving flight in his programme.

“I’ll be back long before that time, sir,” Toller said. “You know I wouldn’t take the slightest risk in this matter.”

“Yes, but... Do you know that Prince Leddravohr plans to watch the ascent in person?”

“All the more reason for me to be back in good time, sir. I don’t want to risk high treason.”

Kartkang, still not easy in his mind, squared a sheaf of papers on his desk. “Was Lord Glo important to you?”

“I was prepared to risk my life in his service.”

“In that case I suppose you had better pay your last respects,” Kartkang said. “But keep it in mind about the prince.”

“Thank you, sir.” Toller saluted and left the office, his mind a battleground for incompatible emotions. It seemed cruelly ironic, almost proof of the existence of a malign deity, that Glo was to be buried on the very day that a skyship was setting out to prove the feasibility of flying to Overland. The project had been conceived in Glo’s brain and had brought him ridicule and disgrace at first, followed by ignominious retirement, and just as he was about to receive personal vindication his beleaguered body had failed him. There would be no plump-bellied statue in the grounds of the Great Palace, and it was doubtful if Glo’s name would even be remembered by the nation he had helped to establish on another world. Everything should have been very different.

Visions of the migration fleet touching down on Overland brought a resurgence of the icy excitement which Toller had been living with for days. He had been in the grip of his monomania for so long, working with total

commitment towards selection for the first interplanetary mission, that he had somehow lost sight of its astonishing realities. His impatience had slowed the passage of time so much that he had unconsciously begun to believe his goal would forever remain ahead of him, flickering beyond reach like a mirage, and now—with shocking suddenness—the present had collided with the future.

The time of the great voyage was at hand, and during it many things would be learned, not all of them to do with the technicalities of interplanetary flight.

Toller left the S.E.S. administration complex and climbed a wooden stair to the surface of the plain which extended north of Ro-Atabri as far as the foothills of the Slaskitan Mountains. He requisitioned a bluehorn from the stablemaster and set off on the two-mile ride to Greenmount. The varnished linen of the tunnel-like covered way glowed in the foreday sunlight, surrounding him with a yellowish directionless light, and the trapped air was muggy, heavy with the smell of animal droppings. Most of the traffic was heading out from the city, flatbed carts laden with gondola sections and jet cylinders of brakka.

Toller made good time to the eastern junction, entered the tube leading towards Greenmount and soon reached an area protected by the older open-mesh screens of the Ro-Atabri suburbs. He rode through a moraine of abandoned dwellings on the exposed flank of the hill, eventually reaching the small private cemetery adjoining the colonnaded west wing of Greenmount Peel.

Several groups of mourners were already in attendance, and among them he saw his brother and the slender grey-clad figure of Gesalla Maraquine. It was the first time he had seen her since the night she had been abused by Leddravohr, more than a year earlier, and his heart jolted uncomfortably as he realised he was at a loss as to how to conduct himself with her.

He dismounted, straightened the embroidered blue jupon of his skycaptain's uniform and walked towards his brother and his wife, still feeling oddly nervous and self-conscious. On seeing him approach Lain gave him the calm half-smile, indicative of family pride tinged with incredulity, which he had used of late when they met at technical briefings. Toller took pleasure in having surprised and impressed his older brother with his single-minded assault on every obstacle, including reading difficulties, on his way to becoming a skyship pilot.

"This is a sad day," he said to Lain.

Gesalla, who had not been aware of his approach, spun round, one hand flying to her throat. He nodded courteously to her and withheld a verbal greeting, leaving it to her to accept or decline the conversational initiative. She returned his nod, silently but with no visible evidence of her old antipathy and he felt slightly reassured. In his memory her face had been paled by pregnancy sickness, but now her cheeks were more fully curved and touched with pink. She

actually looked younger than before and the sight of her filled his eyes.

He became aware of the pressure of Lain's gaze and said, "Why couldn't Glo have had more time?"

Lain shrugged, an unexpectedly casual gesture for one who had been so close to the Lord Philosopher. "Have you had confirmation about the ascent?"

"Yes. It's at the tenth hour."

"I know that. I mean, are you definitely going?"

"Of course!" Toller glanced up at the netted sky and the nacreous morning crescent of Overland. "I'm all set to tackle Glo's invisible mountains."

Gesalla looked amused and interested. "What does that mean?"

"We know the atmosphere thins out between the two worlds," Toller said. "The rate of attenuation has been roughly measured by sending up gas balloons and observing their expansion through calibrated telescopes. It is something which has to be verified by the proving flight, of course, but we believe the air is plenteous enough to sustain life, even at the midpoint."

"Listen to the newly-fledged expert," Lain said.

"I've had the best teachers," Toller replied, unoffended, turning his attention back to Gesalla. "Lord Glo said the flight was comparable to climbing to the peak of one invisible mountain and descending from another."

"I never gave him credit for being a poet," Gesalla said.

"There are many things for which he will never receive credit."

"Yes—like taking in that gradewife of yours when you went off to play soldiers," Lain put in. "Whatever became of her, anyway?"

Toller gazed at his brother for a moment, puzzled and saddened by the hint of malice in his tone. Lain had asked him the same question some time ago, and now it seemed he was bringing up the subject of Fera for no other reason than that it had always been a sore point with Gesalla. Was it possible that Lain was jealous of his "little brother" having earned a place on the proving flight, the greatest scientific experiment of the age?

"Fera soon got bored with life in the Peel and went back into the city to live," Toller said. "I presume she is in good circumstances—I *hope* she is—but I haven't tried to find out. Why do you ask?"

"Ummm... Idle curiosity."

"Well, if your curiosity extends as far as my term in the army I can assure you that the word 'play' is highly inappropriate. I..."

"Be quiet, you two," Gesalla said, placing a hand on each man's arm. "The ceremony begins."

Toller fell silent in a fresh confusion of emotions as the burial party arrived from the direction of the house. In his will Glo had stated his preference for the

shortest and simplest ceremony that could be accorded a Kolcorronian aristocrat. His cortege consisted only of Lord Prelate Balountar, followed by four dark-robed suffragens bearing the cylindrical block of white gypsum in which Glo's body had already been encased. Balountar, with head thrust forward and black vestments draping a bony figure, resembled a raven as he slow-marched to the circular hole which had been bored into the bedrock of the cemetery.

He intoned a short prayer, consigning Lord Glo's discarded shell to the parent body of the planet for reabsorption, and calling for his spirit to be given a safe passage to Overland, followed by a fortuitous rebirth and a long and prosperous life on the sister world.

Toller was troubled by guilt as he watched the lowering of the cylinder and the sealing of the hole with cement poured from a decorated urn. He wanted to be torn by sadness and grief on parting with Glo for ever, but his wayward consciousness was dominated by the fact that Gesalla—who had never touched him before—had allowed her hand to remain resting on his arm. Did it signal a change in her attitude towards him, or was it incidental to some twist in her relationship with Lain, who in turn had been acting strangely? And underlying everything else in Toller's mind was the pounding realisation that he was soon to ascend so far into the sky's blue dome that he would pass beyond the reach of even the most powerful telescopes.

He was relieved, therefore, when the brief ceremony drew to a close and the knots of mourners—most of them blood relatives—began to disperse.

"I must return to the base now," he said. "There are many things yet to be..." He left the sentence unfinished as he noticed that the Lord Prelate had separated himself from his entourage and was approaching the trio. Assuming that Balountar's business had to be with Lain, Toller took a discreet step backwards. He was surprised when Balountar came straight to him, close-set eyes intent and furious, and flicked him on the chest with loosely dangling fingers.

"I remember you," he said, "Maraquine! You're the one who laid hands on me in the Rainbow Hall, before the King." He flicked Toller again, clearly intending the gesture to be offensive.

"Well, now that you have evened the score," Toller said easily, "may I be of service to you, my lord?"

"Yes, you can rid yourself of that uniform—it is an offence to the Church in general and to me in particular."

"In what way does it offend?"

"In every way! The very colour symbolises the heavens, does it not? It flaunts your intention to defile the High Path, does it not? Even though your evil ambition will be thwarted, Maraquine, those blue rags are an affront to every

right-thinking citizen of this country.”

“I wear this uniform in the service of Kolcorron, my lord. Any objections you have to that should be presented directly to the King. Or to Prince Leddravohr.”

“Huh!” Balountar stared venomously for a moment, his face working with frustrated rage. “You won’t get away with it, you know. Even though the likes of you and your brother turn your backs on the Church, in all your sophistry and arrogance, you will learn to your cost that the people will stand for just so much. You’ll see! The great blasphemy, the great evil, will not go unpunished.” He spun and strode away to the cemetery gate, where the four suffragens were waiting.

Toller watched him depart and turned to the others with raised eyebrows. “The Lord Prelate appears to be unhappy.”

“There was a time when you would have crushed his hand for doing that.” Lain imitated Balountar’s gesture, flicking limp fingers against Toller’s chest. “Do you no longer see red so easily?”

“Perhaps I have seen too much red.”

“Oh, yes. How could I have forgotten?” The mockery in Lain’s voice was now unmistakable. “This is your new role, isn’t it? The man who has drunk too deeply from the cup of experience.”

“Lain, I have no inkling of what I have done to earn your displeasure, and even though I’m saddened by it I have no time now to enquire into the matter.” Toller nodded to his brother and bowed to Gesalla, whose concerned gaze was switching between the two. He was about to leave when Lain, eyes deepening with tears, abruptly spread his arms in an embrace which brought his brother and wife together.

“Don’t take any foolish risks up there in the sky, little brother,” Lain whispered. “It’s your family duty to come back safely, so that when the time of the migration arrives we can all fly to Overland together. I won’t entrust Gesalla to any but the very best pilot. Do you understand?”

Toller nodded, not attempting to speak. The feel of Gesalla’s gracile body against his own was asexual, as it had to be, but there was a *rightness* to it, and with his brother completing the psychic circuit there was a sense of comfort and healing, of vital energies being augmented rather than dissipated.

When Toller broke free of the embrace he felt light and strong, fully capable of soaring to another world.

CHAPTER 15

“We, have sunwriter reports from as far away as fifty miles upwind,” said Vato Armduran, the S.E.S. chief engineer. “The look-outs say there is very little ptertha activity—so you should be all right on that score—but the wind speed is rather higher than I would have wished.”

“If we wait for perfect conditions we’ll *never* go.” Toller shaded his eyes from the sun and scanned the blue-white dome of the sky. Wisps of high cloud had overpainted the brighter stars without screening them from view, and the broad crescent of illumination on Overland’s disk established the time as mid-foreday.

“I suppose that’s true, but you’re going to have trouble with false lift when you clear the enclosure. You’ll need to watch out for it.”

Toller grinned. “Isn’t it a little late for lessons in aerodynamics?”

“It’s all very well for you—I’m the one who’s going to have to do all the explaining if you kill yourself,” Armduran said drily. He was a spiky haired man whose flattened nose and sword-scarred chin gave him something of the appearance of a retired soldier, but his practical engineering genius had led to his personal appointment by Prince Chakkell. Toller liked him for his caustic humour and lack of condescension towards less gifted subordinates.

“For your sake, I’ll try not to get killed.” Toller had to raise his voice to overcome the noise in the enclosure. Members of the inflation crew were busily cranking a large fan whose gears and wooden blades emitted a continuous clacking sound as they forced unheated air into the skyship’s balloon, which had been laid out downwind of the gondola. They were creating a cavity within the envelope so that hot gas from the power crystal burner could later be introduced without it having to impinge directly on the lightweight material. The technique had been developed to avoid burn damage, especially to the base panels around the balloon mouth. Overseers were bellowing orders to the men who were holding up the sides of the gradually swelling balloon and paying out attachment lines.

The square, room-sized gondola was lying on its side, already provisioned for the flight. In addition to food, drink and fuel it contained sandbags equivalent to the weight of sixteen people which, when taken with the weight of the test crew,

brought the load up to the operational maximum. The three men who were to fly with Toller were standing by the gondola, ready to leap on board on command. He knew the ascent had to begin within a matter of minutes, and the emotional turmoil connected with Lain and Gesalla and Glo's burial was steadily fading to a murmur in lower levels of his consciousness. In his mind he was already voyaging in the ice-blue unknown, like a migrating soul, and his preoccupations were no longer those of an ordinary Land-bound mortal.

There was a sound of hoofbeats nearby and he turned to see Prince Leddravohr riding into the enclosure, followed by an open carriage in which sat Prince Chakkell, his wife Daseene and their three children. Leddravohr was dressed as for a military ceremony, wearing a white cuirass. The inevitable battle sword was at his side and a long throwing knife was sheathed on his left forearm. He dismounted from his tall bluehorn, head turning as he took in every detail of the surrounding activity, and padded towards Toller and Armduran.

Toller had not seen him at all during his time in the army and only at a distance since returning to Ro-Atabri, and he noted that the prince's glossy black hair was now tinged with grey at the temples. He was also a little heavier, but the weight appeared to have been added in an even subcutaneous layer all over his body, doing little more than blur the muscle definition and render the statuesque face smoother than ever. Toller and Armduran saluted as he approached.

Leddravohr nodded in acknowledgement. "Well, Maraquine, you have become an important man since last we met. I trust it has made you somewhat easier to live with."

"I don't class myself as important, Prince," Toller said in a carefully neutral voice, trying to gauge Leddravohr's attitude.

"But you *are*! The first man to take a ship to Overland! It's a great honour, Maraquine, and you have worked hard for it. You know, there were some who felt that you were too young and inexperienced for this mission, that it should have been entrusted to an officer with a long Air Service career behind him, but I overruled them. You obtained the best results in the training courses, and you're not encumbered with an aircaptain's obsolete skills and habits, and you are a man of undoubted courage—so I decreed that the captaincy of the proving flight should be yours,

"What do you think of that?"

"I'm deeply grateful to you, Prince," Toller said.

"Gratitude isn't called for." Leddravohr's old smile, the smile which had nothing to do with amity, flickered on his face for an instant and was gone. "It is only just that you should receive the fruits of your labours."

Toller understood at once that nothing had changed, that Leddravohr was still

the deadly enemy who never forgot or forgave. There was a mystery surrounding the prince's apparent forbearance of the last year, but no doubt at all that he still hungered for Toller's life. *He hopes the flight will fail! He hopes he is sending me to my death!*

The intuition gave Toller a sudden new insight into Leddravohr's mind. Analysing his own feelings towards the prince he now found nothing but a cool indifference, with perhaps the beginnings of pity for a creature so imprisoned by negative emotion, awash and drowning in its own venom.

"I'm grateful nevertheless," Toller said, relishing the private double meaning of his words. He had been apprehensive about coming face to face with Leddravohr again, but the encounter had proved that he had transcended his old self, truly, once and for all. From now on his spirit would soar as far above Leddravohr and his kind as the skyship was soon to do over the continents and oceans of Land, and that was genuine cause for rejoicing.

Leddravohr scanned his face for a moment, searchingly, then transferred his attention to the skyship. The inflation crew had progressed to the stage of raising the balloon up on the four acceleration struts which constituted the principal difference between it and a craft designed for normal atmospheric flight. Now three-quarters full, the balloon sagged among the struts like some grotesque leviathan deprived of the support of its natural medium. The varnished linen skin flapped feebly in the mild air currents coming through the perforations in the enclosure wall.

"If I'm not mistaken," Leddravohr said, "it is time for you to join your ship, Maraquine."

Toller saluted him, squeezed Armduran's shoulder and ran to the gondola. He gave a signal and Zavotle, co-pilot and recorder for the flight, swung himself on board. He was closely followed by Rillomyner, the mechanic, and the diminutive figure of Flenn, the rigger. Toller went in after them, taking his position at the burner. The gondola was still on its side, so he had to lie on his back against a woven cane partition to operate the burner's controls.

The trunk of a very young brakka tree had been used in its entirety to form the main component of the burner. On the left side of the bulbous base was a small hopper filled with pikon, plus a valve which admitted the crystals to the combustion chamber under pneumatic pressure. On the opposite side a similar device controlled the flow of halvell, and both valves were operated by a single lever. The passageways in the right-hand valve were slightly enlarged, automatically providing the greater proportion of halvell which had been found best for providing sustained thrust.

Toller pumped the pneumatic reservoir by hand, then signalled to the

inflation supervisor that he was ready to begin burning. The noise level in the enclosure dropped as the fan crew ceased cranking and pulled their cumbersome machine and its nozzle aside.

Toller advanced the control lever for about a second. There was a hissing roar as the power crystals combined, firing a burst of hot miglign gas into the balloon's gaping mouth. Satisfied with the burner's performance, he instigated a series of blasts—keeping them brief to reduce the risk of heat damage to the balloon fabric—and the great envelope began to distend and lift clear of the ground. As it gradually rose to the vertical position the crew holding the balloon's crown lines came walking in and attached them to the gondola's load frame, while others rotated the gondola until it was in the normal attitude. All at once the skyship was ready to fly, only held down by its central anchor.

Mindful of Armduran's warning about false lift, Toller continued burning for another full minute, and as the hot gas displaced more and more unheated air through the balloon mouth the entire assemblage began to strain upwards. Finally, too intent on his work to feel any sense of occasion, he pulled the anchor link and the skyship left the ground.

It rose quickly at first, then the curved crown of the balloon entered the wind above the enclosure walls, generating such a fierce extra lift that Rillomyner gasped aloud as the ship accelerated skywards. Toller, undeceived by the phenomenon, fired a long blast from the burner. In a few seconds the balloon had fully entered the airstream and was travelling with it, and as the relative airflow across the top dropped to zero the extra lift also disappeared.

At the same time, a rippling distortion caused by the initial impact of the wind expelled some gas back out through the mouth of the balloon, and now the ship was actually losing height as it was borne away to the east at some ten miles an hour. The speed was not great compared to what other forms of transport could achieve, but the airship was designed for vertical travel only and any contact with the ground at that stage was likely to be disastrous.

Toller fought the unintentional descent with prolonged burns. For a tense minute the gondola headed straight for the line of elvart trees at the eastern edge of the airfield as though attached to an invisible rail, then the balloon's buoyancy began to reassert itself. The ground slowly sank away and Toller was able to rest the burner. Looking back towards the line of enclosures, some of which were still under construction, he was able to pick out the white gleam of Leddravohr's cuirass among the hundreds of spectators, but—already—the prince seemed to be part of his past, his psychological importance diminishing with perspective.

"Would you like to make a note?" Toller said to Ilven Zavotle. "It appears that the maximum wind speed for take off with full load is in the region of ten

miles an hour. Also, those trees should go.”

Zavotle glanced up briefly from the wicker table at his station. “I’m already doing it, captain.” He was a narrow-headed youngster with tiny clenched ears and a permanent frown, as fussy and fastidious in his ways as a very old man, but already a veteran of several test flights.

Toller glanced around the square gondola, checking that all was well. Mechanic Rillomyner had slumped down on the sandbags in one of the passenger compartments, looking pale of face and distinctly sorry for himself. Ree Flenn, the rigger, was perched like some arboreal animal on the gondola’s rail, busily shortening the tether on one of the free-hanging acceleration struts. Toller’s stomach produced a chill spasm as he saw that Flenn had not secured his personal line to the rail.

“What do you think you’re doing, Flenn?” he said. “Get your line attached.”

“I can work better without it, captain.” A grin split the rigger’s bead-eyed, button-nosed face. “I’m not afraid of heights.”

“Would you *like* something to be afraid of?” Toller spoke mildly, almost courteously, but Flenn’s grin faded at once and he snapped his karabiner on to the brakka rail. Toller turned away to hide his amusement. Capitalising on his dwarfish stature and comic appearance, Flenn habitually breached discipline in ways which would have earned the lash for other men, but he was highly expert at his work and Toller had been glad to accept him for the flight. His own background inclined him to be sympathetic towards rebels and misfits.

By now the ship was climbing steadily above the western suburbs of Ro-Atabri. The city’s familiar configurations were blurred and dulled by the blanket of anti-ptertha screens which had spread over it like some threaded mould, but the vistas of Arle Bay and the Gulf were as Toller remembered them from childhood aerial excursions. Their nostalgic blue faded into a purple haze near the horizon above which, subdued by sunlight, shone the nine stars of the Tree.

Looking down, Toller was able to see the Great Palace, on the south bank of the Borann, and he wondered if King Prad could be at a window at that very moment, gazing up at the fragile assemblage of fabric and wood which represented his stake in posterity. Since appointing his son to the position of absolute power the King had become a virtual recluse. Some said that his health had deteriorated, others that he had no heart for skulking like a furtive animal in the shrouded streets of his own capital city.

Surveying the complex and variegated scene beneath him, Toller was surprised to discover that he felt little emotion. He seemed to have severed his bonds with the past by taking the first step along the five-thousand-mile high road to Overland. Whether he would in fact reach the sister planet on a later

flight and begin a new life there was a matter for the future—and his present was bounded by the tiny world of the skyship. The microcosm of the gondola, only four good paces on a side, was destined to be his whole universe for more than twenty days, and he could have no other commitments...

Toller's meditation came to an abrupt end when he noticed a purplish mote drifting against the white-feathered sky some distance to the north-west.

"On your feet, Rillomyner," he called out. "It's time you started earning your pay on this trip."

The mechanic stood up and came out of the passenger compartment. "I'm sorry, captain—the way we took off did something to my gut."

"Get on to the cannon if you don't want to be really sick," Toller said. "We might be having a visitor soon."

Rillomyner swore and lurched towards the nearest cannon. Zavotle and Flenn followed suit without needing to be ordered. There were two of the anti-ptertha guns mounted on each side of the gondola, their barrels made of thin strips of brakka bonded into tubes by glass cords and resin. Below each weapon was a magazine containing glass power capsules and a supply of the latest type of projectile—hinged bundles of wooden rods which opened radially in flight. They demanded better accuracy than the older scattering weapons, but compensated with improved range.

Toller remained at the pilot's station and fired intermittent bursts of heat into the balloon to maintain the rate of climb. He was not unduly concerned about the lone ptertha and had issued his warning as much to rouse Rillomyner as anything else. As far as was known, the globes depended on air currents to transport them over long distances, and only moved horizontally of their own volition when close to their prey. How they obtained impulsion over the final few yards was still a mystery, but one theory was that a ptertha had already begun the process of self-destruction at that stage by creating a small orifice in its surface at the point most distant from the victim. Expulsion of internal gases would propel the globe to within the killing radius before the entire structure disintegrated and released its charge of toxic dust. The process remained a matter for conjecture because of the impossibility of studying ptertha at close range.

In the present case the globe was about four-hundred yards from the ship and was likely to stay at that distance because the positions of both were governed by the same airflow. Toller knew, however, that the one component of their motion over which the ptertha had good control was in the vertical dimension. Observation through calibrated telescopes showed that a ptertha could govern its attitude by increasing or decreasing its size, thus altering its density, and Toller was interested in carrying out a double experiment which might be of value to

the migration fleet.

“Keep your eye on the globe,” he said to Zavotle. “It seems to be keeping on a level with us, and if it is that proves it can sense our presence over that distance. I also want to find out how high it will go before giving up.”

“Very good, captain.” Zavotle raised his binoculars and settled down to studying the ptertha.

Toller glanced around his circumscribed domain, trying to imagine how much more cramped its dimensions would seem with a full complement of twenty people on board. The passenger accommodation consisted of two narrow compartments, at opposite sides of the gondola for balance, bounded by chest-high partitions. Nine or so people would be crammed into each, unable either to lie down properly or move around, and by the end of the long voyage their physical condition was likely to be poor.

One corner of the gondola was taken up by the galley, and the diagonally opposite one by the primitive toilet, which was basically a hole in the floor plus some sanitation aids. The centre of the floor was occupied by the four crew stations surrounding the burner unit and the downward facing drive jet. Most of the remaining space was filled by the pikon and halvell magazines, which were also at opposite sides of the gondola, with the food and drink stores and various equipment lockers.

Toller could foresee the interplanetary crossing, like so many other historic and glorious adventures, being conducted in squalor and degradation, becoming a test of physical and mental endurance which not all would survive.

In contrast to the meanness and compression of the gondola, the upper element of the skyship was awesomely spacious, rarified, a giant form almost without substance. The linen panels of the envelope had been dyed dark brown to absorb the sun’s heat and thereby gain extra lift, but when Toller looked up into it through the open mouth he could see light glowing through the material. The seams and horizontal and vertical load tapes appeared as a geometric web of black lines, emphasising the vastness of the balloon’s curvatures. Up there was the gossamer dome of a cloud-borne cathedral, impossible to associate with the handiwork of mere weavers and stitchers.

Satisfied that the ship was stable and ascending steadily, Toller gave the order for the four acceleration struts to be drawn in and attached by their lower ends to the corners of the gondola. Flenn completed the task within a few minutes, imparting to the balloon/gondola assemblage the slight degree of structural stiffness needed to cope with the modest forces which would act on it when the drive or attitude jets were in use.

Attached to a lashing hook at the pilot’s station was the rip line, dyed red,

which ran up through the balloon to a crown panel which could be torn out for rapid deflation. As well as being a safety device it served as a rudimentary climb speed indicator, becoming slack when the crown was depressed by a strong vertical air flow. Toller fingered the line and estimated that they were ascending at about twelve miles an hour, aided by the fact that the miglign gas was slightly lighter than air even when unheated. Later he would almost double that speed by using the drive jet when the ship entered the regions of low gravity and attenuated air.

Thirty minutes into the flight the ship was high above the summit of Mount Opelmer and had ceased its eastward drift. The garden province of Kail stretched to the southern horizon, its strip farms registering as a shimmering mosaic, with each tessera striated in six different shades varying from yellow to green. To the west was the Otollan Sea and to the east was the Mirlgiver Ocean, their curving blue reaches flecked here and there by sailing ships. The ochraceous mountains of Upper Kolcorron filled the view to the north, their ranges and folds compacted by perspective. A few airships gleamed like tiny elliptical jewels as they plied the trade lanes far below.

From an altitude of some six miles the face of Land looked placid and achingly beautiful. Only the relative scarcity of airships and sailing craft indicated that the entire prospect, apparently drowsing in benign sunlight, was actually a battle-ground, an arena in which mankind had fought and lost a deadly duel.

Toller, as had become his habit when deep in thought, located the curiously massive object given to him by his father and rubbed his thumb over its gleaming surface. In the normal course of history, he wondered, how many centuries would men have waited before essaying the voyage to Overland? Indeed, would they ever have done so had they not been fleeing from the ptertha?

The thought of the ancient and implacable enemy prompted him to cast around and check on the position of the solitary globe he had detected earlier. Its lateral separation from the ship had not changed and, more significantly, it was still matching the rate of climb. Was that proof of sentience and purpose? If so, why had the ptertha as a species singled out man as the focus of its hostility? Why was it that every other creature on Land, with the exception of the Sorka gibbon, was immune to pterthacosis?

As though sensing Toller's renewed interest in the globe, Zavotle lowered his binoculars and said, "Does it look bigger to you, captain?"

Toller picked up his own glasses and studied the purple-black smudge, finding that its transparency defied his attempts to define its boundaries. "Hard

to say.”

“Littlenight will be here soon,” Zavotle commented. “I don’t relish the idea of having that thing hanging around us in the dark.”

“I don’t think it can close in—the ship is almost the same shape as a ptertha, and our response to a crosswind will be roughly similar.”

“I hope you’re right,” Zavotle said gloomily.

Rillomyner looked round from his post at a cannon and said, “We haven’t eaten since dawn, captain.” He was a pale and pudgy young man with an enormous appetite for even the vilest food, and it was said that he had actually gained weight since the beginning of the shortages by scavenging all the substandard food rejected by his workmates. In spite of a show of diffidence, he was a good mechanic and intensely proud of his skills.

“I’m glad to hear your gut is back to its normal condition,” Toller said. “I would hate to think I had done it some permanent mischief with my handling of the ship.”

“I didn’t mean to criticise the take-off, captain—it’s just that I have always been cursed with this weak stomach.”

Toller clicked his tongue in mock sympathy and glanced at Flenn. “You’d better feed this man before he becomes faint.”

“Right away, captain.” As Flenn was getting to his feet his shirt parted at the chest and the green-striped head of a carble peered out. Flenn hastily covered the furry creature with his hand and pushed it back into concealment.

“What have you got there?” Toller snapped.

“Her name is Tinny, captain.” Flenn brought the carble out and cradled it in his arms. “There was nobody I could leave her with.”

Toller sighed his exasperation. “This is a scientific mission, not a... Do you realise that most commanders would put that animal over the side?”

“I swear she won’t be any trouble, captain.”

“She’d better not. Now get the food.”

Flenn grinned and, agile as a monkey, disappeared into the galley to prepare the first meal of the voyage. He was small enough to be completely hidden by the woven partition which was chest high to the rest of the crew. Toller settled down to refining his control over the ship’s ascent.

Deciding to increase speed, he lengthened the burns from three to four seconds and watched for the time-lagged response of the balloon overhead. Several minutes went by before the extra lift he was generating overcame the inertia of the many tons of gas inside the envelope and the rip line became noticeably slacker. Satisfied with a new rate of climb of around eighteen miles an hour, he concentrated on making the burner rhythm—four seconds on and

twenty off—part of his awareness, something to be paced by the internal clocks of his heart and lungs. He needed to be able to detect the slightest variation in it even when he was asleep and being spelled at the controls by Zavotle.

The food served up by Flenn was from the limited fresh supplies and was better than Toller had expected—strips of reasonably lean beef in gravy, pulse, fried grain-cakes and beakers of hot green tea. Toller stopped operating the burner while he ate, allowing the ship to coast upwards in silence on stored lift. The heat emanating from the black combustion chamber mingled with the aromatic vapours issuing from the galley, turning the gondola into a homely oasis in a universe of azure emptiness.

Partway through the meal littlenight came sweeping from the west, a brief flash of rainbow colours preceding a sudden darkness, and as the crew's eyes adjusted the heavens blazed into life all around them. They reacted to the unearthliness of their situation by generating an intense camaraderie. There was an unspoken conviction that lifelong friendships were being formed, and in that atmosphere every anecdote was interesting, every boast believable, every joke profoundly funny. And even when the talk eventually died away, stilled by strangeness, communication continued on another plane.

Toller was set apart to some extent by the responsibilities of command, but he was warmed nonetheless. From his seated position the rim of the gondola was at eye level, which meant there was nothing to be seen beyond it but enigmatic whirlpools of radiance, the splayed mist-fans of comets, and stars and stars and ever more stars. The only sound was the occasional creak of a rope, and the only sensible movement was where the meteors scribed their swift-fading messages on the blackboard of night.

Toller could easily imagine himself adrift in the beacons depths of the universe, and all at once, unexpectedly, there came the longing to have a woman at his side, a female presence which would somehow make the voyage meaningful. It would have been good to be with Fera at that moment, but her essential carnality would scarcely have been in accord with his mood. The right woman would have been one who was capable of enhancing the mystical qualities of the experience. Somebody like...

Toller reached out with his imagination, blindly, wistfully. For an instant the feel of Gesalla Maraquine's slim body against his own was shockingly real. He leapt to his feet, guilty and confused, disturbing the equilibrium of the gondola.

"Is anything wrong, captain?" Zavotle said, barely visible in the darkness.

"Nothing. A touch of cramp, that's all. You take over the burner for a while. Four-twenty is what we want."

Toller went to the side of the gondola and leaned on the rail. *What is*

happening to me now? he thought. Lain said I was playing a role—but how did he know? The new cool and imperturbable Toller Maraquine ... the man who has drunk too deeply from the cup of experience ... who looks down on princes ... who is undaunted by the chasm between the worlds ... and who, because his brother's solewife does no more than touch his arm, is immediately smitten with adolescent fantasies about her! Was Lain, with that frightening perception of his, able to see me for the betrayer that I am? Is that why he seemed to turn against me?

The darkness below the skyship was absolute, as though Land had already been deserted by all of humanity, but as Toller gazed down into it a thin line of red, green and violet fire appeared on the western horizon. It widened, growing increasingly brilliant, and suddenly a tide of pure light was sweeping across the world at heart-stopping speed, recreating oceans and land masses in all their colour and intricate detail. Toller almost flinched in expectation of a palpable blow as the speeding terminator reached the ship, engulfing it in fierce sunlight, and rushed on to the eastern horizon. The columnar shadow of Overland had completed its daily transit of Kolcorron, and Toller felt that he had emerged from yet another occultation, a littlenight of the mind.

Don't worry, beloved brother, he thought. Even in my thoughts I'll never betray you. Not ever!

Ilven Zavotle stood up at the burner and looked out to the north-west. "What do you think of the globe now, captain? Is it bigger or closer? Or both?"

"It might be a little closer," Toller said, glad to have an external focus for this thoughts, as he trained his binoculars on the ptertha. "Can you feel the ship dancing a little? There could be some churning of warmer and cooler air as littlenight passes, and it might have worked out to the globe's advantage."

"It's still on a level with us—even though we changed our speed."

"Yes. I think it wants us."

"I know what *I* want," Flenn announced as he slipped by Toller on his way to the toilet. "I'm going to have the honour of being the first to try out the long drop—and I hope it all lands right on old Puehilter." He had nominated an overseer whose petty tyrannies had made him unpopular with the S.E.S. flight technicians.

Rillomyner snorted in approval. "That'll give him something worth complaining about, for once."

"It'll be worse when you go—they're going to have to evacuate the whole of Ro-Atabri when you start bombing them."

"Just take care you don't fall down the hole," Rillomyner growled, not appreciating the reference to his dietary foibles. "It wasn't designed for

midgets.”

Toller made no comment about the exchange. He knew the two were testing him to see what style of command he was going to favour on the voyage. A strict interpretation of flight regulations would have precluded any badinage at all among his crew, let alone grossness, but he was solely concerned with their qualities of efficiency, loyalty and courage. In a couple of hours the ship would be higher than any had gone before—if one discounted the semi-mythical Usader of five centuries earlier—entering a region of strangeness, and he could foresee the little group of adventurers needing every human support available to them.

Besides, the same subject had given rise to a thousand equally coarse jokes in the officers’ quarters, ever since the utilitarian design of the skyship gondola had become common knowledge. He himself had derived a certain amusement from the frequency with which ground-based personnel had reminded him that the toilet was not to be used until the prevailing westerlies had carried the ship well clear of the base...

The bursting of the ptertha took Toller by surprise.

He was gazing at the globe’s magnified image when it simply ceased to exist, and in the absence of a contrasting background there was not even a dissipating smudge of dust to mark its location. In spite of his confidence in their ability to deal with the threat, he nodded in satisfaction. Sleep was going to be difficult enough during the first night aloft without having to worry about capricious air currents bringing the silent enemy to within its killing radius.

“Make a note that the ptertha has just popped itself out of existence,” he said to Zavotle, and—expressing his relief—added a personal comment. “Put down that it happened about four hours into the flight ... just as Flenn was using the toilet ... but that there is probably no connection between the two events.”

Toller awoke shortly after dawn to the sound of an animated discussion taking place at the centre of the gondola. He raised himself to a kneeling position on the sandbags and rubbed his arms, uncertain as to whether the coolness he could feel was external or an aftermath of sleep. The intermittent roar of the burner had been so intrusive that he had achieved only light dozes, and now he felt little more refreshed than if he had been on duty all night. He walked on his knees to the opening in the passenger compartment’s partition and looked out at the rest of the crew.

“You should have a look at this, captain,” Zavotle said, raising his narrow head. “The height gauge actually does work!”

Toller insinuated his legs into the cramped central floorspace and went to the

pilot's station, where Flenn and Rillomyner were standing beside Zavotle. At the station was a lightweight table, attached to which was the height gauge. The latter consisted of nothing more than a vertical scale, from the top of which a small weight was suspended by a delicate coiled spring made from a hair-like shaving of brakka. On the previous morning, at the beginning of the flight, the weight had been opposite to the lowest mark on the scale—but now it was several divisions higher.

Toller stared hard at the gauge. "Has anybody interfered with it?"

"Nobody has touched it," Zavotle assured him. "It means that everything they told us must be true. Everything is getting lighter as we go higher! We're getting lighter!"

"That's to be expected," Toller said, unwilling to admit that in his heart he had never quite accepted the notion, even when Lain had taken time to impress the theory on him in private tutorials.

"Yes, but it means that in three or four days from now we won't weigh anything at all. We'll be able to float around in the air like ... like ... ptertha! It's all *true*, captain!"

"How high does it say we are?"

"About three-hundred-and-fifty miles—and that agrees well with our computations."

"I don't feel any different," Rillomyner put in. "I say the spring has tightened up."

Flenn nodded. "Me too."

Toller wished for time in which to arrange his thoughts. He went to the side of the gondola and experienced a whirling moment of vertigo as he saw Land as he had never seen it before—an immense circular convexity, one half in near-darkness, the other a brilliant sparkling of blue ocean and subtly shaded continents and islands.

Things would be quite different if you were lifting off from the centre of Chamteth and heading out into open space, Lain's voice echoed in his mind. But when travelling between the two worlds you will soon reach a middle zone—slightly closer to Overland than to Land, in fact—where the gravitational pull of each planet cancels out the other. In normal conditions, with the gondola being heavier than the balloon, the ship has pendulum stability—but where neither has any weight the ship will be unstable and you will have to use the lateral jets to control its attitude.

Lain had already completed the entire journey in his mind, Toller realised, and everything he had predicted would come to pass. Truly, they were entering a region of strangeness, but the intellects of Lain Maraquine and other men like

him had already marked the way, and they had to be trusted...

"Don't get so excited that you lose the burn rhythm," Toller said calmly, turning to Zavotle. "And don't forget to check the height gauge readings by measuring the apparent diameter of Land four times a day."

He directed his gaze at Rillomyner and Flenn. "And as for you two—why did the Squadron take the trouble to send you to special classes? The spring has *not* altered in strength. We're getting lighter as we get higher, and I will treat any disputing of that fact as insubordination. Is that clear?"

"Yes, captain."

Both men spoke in unison, but Toller noticed a troubled look in Rillomyner's eyes, and he wondered if the mechanic was going to have difficulty in adjusting to his increasing weightlessness. *This is what the proving flight is for, he reminded himself. We are testing ourselves as much as the ship.*

By nightfall the weight on the height gauge had risen to near the halfway mark on the scale, and the effects of reduced gravity were apparent, no longer a matter for argument.

When a small object was allowed to drop it fell to the floor of the gondola with evident slowness, and all members of the crew reported curious sinking sensations in their stomachs. On two occasions Rillomyner awoke from sleep with a panicky shout, explaining afterwards that he had been convinced he was falling.

Toller noticed the dreamlike ease with which he could move about, and it came to him that it would soon be advisable for the crew to remain tethered at all times. The idea of an unnecessarily vigorous movement separating a man from the ship was one he did not like to contemplate.

He also observed that, in spite of its decreased weight, the ship was tending to rise more slowly. The effect had been accurately predicted—a result of the fading weight differential between the hot gas inside the envelope and the surrounding atmosphere. To maintain speed he altered the burn rhythm to four-eighteen, and then to four-sixteen. The pikon and halvell hoppers on the burner were being replenished with increasing frequency and, although there were ample reserves, Toller began to look forward to reaching the altitude of thirteen-hundred miles. At that point the ship's weight, decreasing by squares, would be only a fourth of normal, and it would become more economical to change over to jet power until the zone of zero gravity had been passed.

The need to interpret every action and event in the dry languages of mathematics, engineering and science conflicted with Toller's natural response to his new environment. He found he could spend long periods leaning on the

rim of the gondola, not moving a muscle, mesmerised, all physical energies annulled by pure awe. Overland was directly above him, but screened from view by the patient, untiring vastness of the balloon; and far below was the home world, gradually becoming a place of mystery as its familiar features were blurred by a thousand miles of intervening air.

By the third day of the ascent the sky, although retaining its normal coloration above and below, was shading on all sides of the ship into a deeper blue which glistened with ever-increasing numbers of stars.

When Toller was lost in his tranced vigils the conversation of the crew members and even the roar of the burner faded from his consciousness, and he was alone in the universe, sole possessor of all its scintillant hoards. Once during the hours of darkness, while he was standing at the pilot's station, he saw a meteor strike across the sky *below* the ship. It traced a line of fire from what seemed to be one edge of infinity to the other, and minutes after its passing there came a single pulse of low-frequency sound—blurred, dull and mournful—causing the ship to give a tentative heave which drew a murmur of protest from one of the sleeping men. Some instinct, a kind of spiritual acquisitiveness, prompted Toller to keep the knowledge of the event from the others.

As the ascent continued Zavotle was kept busy with his copious flight records, many of the entries concerned with physiological effects. Even at the summit of the highest mountain on Land there was no discernible drop in air pressure, but on previous high-altitude sorties by balloon some crew members had reported a hint of thinness to the air and the need to breathe more deeply. The effect had been slight and the best scientific estimate was that the atmosphere would continue to support life midway between the two planets, but it was vital that the predication should be verified.

Toller was almost comforted by the feel of his lungs working harder during the third day—more evidence that the problems of interworld flight had been correctly foreseen—and he was therefore less than happy when an unexpected phenomenon forced itself on his attention. For some time he had been aware of feeling cold, but had dismissed the matter from his thoughts. Now, however, the others in the gondola were complaining almost continuously and the conclusion was inescapable—as the ship gained altitude the surrounding air was growing colder.

The S.E.S. scientists, Lain Maraquine included, had been of the opinion that there would be an increase in temperature as the ship entered ratified air which would be less able to screen it from the sun's rays. As a native of equatorial Kolcorron, Toller had never experienced really severe coldness, and he had thought nothing of setting off on the interplanetary voyage clad in only a shirt,

breeches and sleeveless jupon. Now, although not actually shivering, he was continuously aware of the increasing discomfort and a dismaying thought was beginning to lurk in his mind—that the entire flight might have to be abandoned for the lack of a bale of wool.

He gave permission for the crew to wear all their spare clothing under their uniforms, and for Flenn to brew tea on demand. The latter decision, far from improving the situation, led to a series of arguments. Time after time Rillomyner insisted that Flenn, acting out of malice or ineptitude, was either infusing the tea before the water had boiled properly or was allowing it to cool before serving it around. It was only when Zavotle, who had also been dissatisfied, kept a critical eye on the brewing process that the truth emerged—the water had begun to boil before it had reached the appropriate temperature. It was hot, but not “boiling” hot.

“I’m worried about this finding, captain,” Zavotle said as he completed the relevant entry in the log. “The only explanation I can think of is that as the water gets lighter it boils at a progressively lower temperature. And if that is the case, what is going to happen to us when the weight of everything fades away to nothing? Is the spit going to boil in our mouths? Are we going to piss steam?”

“We would be obliged to turn back before you had to suffer that indignity,” Toller said, showing his displeasure at the other man’s negative attitude, “but I don’t think it will come to that. There must be some other reason—perhaps something to do with the air.”

Zavotle looked dubious. “I don’t see how air could affect water.”

“Neither do I—so I’m not wasting time on useless speculation,” Toller said curtly. “If you want something to occupy your mind take a close look at the height gauge. It says we’re eleven-hundred miles up—and if that is correct we have been seriously underestimating our speed all day.”

Zavotle studied the gauge, fingered the rip line and looked up into the balloon, the interior of which was growing dim and mysterious with the onset of dusk. “Now *that* could be something to do with the air,” he said. “I think that what you have discovered is that thinner air would depress the crown of the envelope less at speed and make it seem that we’re going slower than we actually are.”

Toller considered the proposition and smiled. “You worked that out—and I didn’t—so give yourself credit for it in the record. I’d say you’re going to be the senior pilot on your next flight.”

“Thanks, captain,” Zavotle said, looking gratified.

“It’s no more than you deserve.” Toller touched Zavotle on the shoulder, making tacit reparation for his irritability. “At this rate we’ll have passed the

thirteen-hundred mark by dawn—then we can take a rest from the burner and see how the ship handles on the jet.”

Later, while he was settling down on the sandbags to sleep, he went over the exchange in his mind and identified the true cause of the ill temper he had vented on Zavotle. It had been the accumulation of unforeseen phenomena—the increasing coldness, the odd behaviour of the water, the misleading indication of the balloon’s speed. It had been the growing realisation that he had placed too much faith in the predictions of scientists. Lain, in particular, had been proved wrong in three different respects, and if his vaulting intellect had been defeated so soon—on the very edge of the region of strangeness—nobody could know what lay in store for those setting out along the perilous fractured glass bridge to another world.

Until that moment, Toller discovered, he had been naively optimistic about the future, convinced that the proving flight would lead to a successful migration and the foundation of a colony in which those he cared about would lead lives of endless fulfilment. It was chastening to realise that the vision had been largely based on his own egotism, that fate had no obligation to honour the safe conducts he had assigned to people like Lain and Gesalla, that events could come to pass regardless of his considering them unthinkable.

All at once the future had clouded over with uncertainty and danger.

And in the new order of things, Toller thought as he drifted into sleep, one had to learn to interpret a new kind of portent. Day-to-day trivia ... the degree of slackness in a cord ... bubbles in a pot of water... These were niggardly omens ... whispered warnings, almost too faint to hear...

By morning the height gauge was showing an altitude of fourteen-hundred miles, and its supplementary scale indicated that gravity was now less than a quarter of normal.

Toller, intrigued by the lightness of his body, tested the conditions by jumping, but it was an experiment he tried only once. He rose much higher than he had intended and for a moment as he seemed to hang in the air there was a terrible feeling of having parted from the ship for ever. The open gondola, with its chest-high walls, was revealed as a flimsy edifice whose pared-down struts and wicker panels were quite inadequate for their purpose. He had time to visualise what would happen if a floor section gave way when he landed on it, plunging him into the thin blue air fourteen-hundred miles above the surface of the world.

It would take a long time to fall that distance, fully conscious, with nothing to do but watch the planet unfurl hungrily below him. Even the bravest man would

eventually have to begin screaming...

"We seem to have lost a good bit of speed during the night, captain," Zavotle reported from the pilot's station. "The rip line is getting quite taut—though, of course, you can't rely on it much any more."

"It's time for the jet, anyway," Toller said. "From now on, until turn-over, we'll use the burner only enough to keep the balloon inflated. Where's Rillomyner?"

"Here, captain." The mechanic emerged from the other passenger compartment. His pudgy figure was partially doubled over, he was clutching the partitions and his gaze was fixed on the floor.

"What's the matter with you, Rillomyner? Are you sick?"

"I'm not sick, captain. I ... I just don't want to look outside."

"Why not?"

"I can't do it, captain. I can feel myself being drawn over the side. I think I'm going to float away."

"You know that's nonsense, don't you?" Toller thought of his own moment of unmanly fear and was inclined towards sympathy. "Is this going to affect your work?"

"No, captain. The work would help."

"Good! Carry out a full inspection of the main jet and the laterals, and make very sure we have a smooth injection of crystals—we can't afford to have any surges at this stage."

Rillomyner directed a salute towards the floor and slouched away to fetch his tools. There followed an hour of respite from the full burn rhythm while Rillomyner checked the controls, some of which were common to the downward-facing jet. Flenn prepared and served a breakfast of gruel studded with small cubes of salt pork, all the while complaining about the cold and the difficulty he was having in keeping the galley fire going. His spirits improved a little when he learned that Rillomyner was not going to eat, and as a change from lavatorial humour he subjected the mechanic to a barrage of jokes about the dangers of wasting away to a shadow.

True to his earlier boast, Flenn seemed quite unaffected by the soul-withering void which glimmered through chinks in the decking. At the end of the meal he actually chose to sit on the gondola wall, with one arm casually thrown around an acceleration strut, as he goaded the unhappy Rillomyner. Even though Flenn had tethered himself, the sight of him perched on the sky-backed rim produced such icy turmoil in Toller's gut that he bore the arrangement for only a few minutes before ordering the rigger to descend.

When Rillomyner had finished his work and retired to lie down on the

sandbags, Toller took up his position at the pilot's station. He entered the new mode of propulsion by firing the jet in two-second bursts at wide intervals and studying the effects on the balloon. Each thrust brought creaks from the struts and rigging, but the envelope was affected much less than in experimental firings at low altitudes. Encouraged, Toller varied the timings and eventually settled on a two-four rhythm which acted in much the same manner as continuous impulsion without building up excessive speed. A short blast from the burner every second or third minute kept the balloon inflated and the crown from sagging too much as it nosed through the air.

"She handles well," he said to Zavotle, who was industriously writing in the log. "It looks as though you and I are going to have an easy run for the next day or two—until the instability sets in."

Zavotle tilted his narrow head. "It's easier on the ears, too."

Toller nodded his agreement. Although the jet was firing for a greater proportion of every minute than the burner had been doing, its exhaust was not being directed into the great echo chamber of the balloon. The sound of it was flatter and less obtrusive, quickly absorbed by the surrounding oceans of stillness.

With the ship behaving so docilely and according to plan Toller began to feel that his forebodings of the night had been nothing more than a symptom of his growing tiredness. He was able to dwell on the incredible idea that in a mere seven or eight days, all being well, he was due to have a close look at another planet. The ship could not actually touch down on Overland, because doing so would involve pulling out the rip panel, and with no inflation facilities it would be unable to depart again. But it was to go within a few yards of the surface, dispelling the last traces of mystery about conditions on the sister planet.

The thousands of miles of air separating the two worlds had always made it difficult for astronomers to say much more than that there was an equatorial continent spanning the visible hemisphere. It had always been assumed, partly on religious grounds, that Overland closely resembled Land, but there remained the possibility that it was inhospitable, perhaps because of surface features beyond the resolving power of telescopes. And there was the further possibility—an article of faith for the Church, a moot case for philosophers—that Overland was already inhabited.

What would the Overlanders look like? Would they be builders of cities? And how would they react on seeing a fleet of strange ships float down from the sky?

Toller's musing was interrupted by the realisation that the coldness in the gondola had intensified in a matter of minutes. Simultaneously, he was approached by Flenn, who had the pet carble clutched to his chest and was

visibly shivering. The little man's face was tinged with blue.

"This is killing me, captain," he said, trying to force his customary grin. "The cold has got worse all of a sudden."

"You're right." Toller felt a stirring of alarm at the idea of having crossed an invisible danger line in the atmosphere, then inspiration came to him. "It's since we eased off on the burner. The blow-back of miglign was helping to keep us warm."

"There was something else," Zavotle added. "The air streaming down over the hot envelope would have helped as well."

"Damn!" Toller frowned up into the geometric trceries of the balloon. "This means we'll have to put more heat in there. We have plenty of green and purple—so that's all right—but there's going to be a problem later on."

Zavotle nodded, looking gloomy. "The descent."

Toller gnawed his lip as, yet again, difficulties unforeseen by the earthbound S.E.S. scientists confronted him. The only way for the hot-air craft to lose altitude was through shedding heat—suddenly a vital commodity as far as the crew were concerned—and to make matters worse the direction of the air flow would be reversed during the descent, carrying the reduced amount of warmth upwards and away from the gondola. The prospect was that they would have to endure days in conditions very much worse than those of the present—and there was a genuine possibility that death would intervene.

A dilemma had to be resolved.

Was the fact that so much depended on the outcome of the proving flight an argument for going on and on, even at the risk of passing an imperceptible point of no return? Or was there a higher obligation to be prudent and turn back with their hard-won store of knowledge?

"This is your lucky day," Toller said to Rillomyner, who was watching him from his usual recumbent position in a passenger compartment. "You wanted work to occupy your mind, and now you've got it. Find a way of diverting some heat from the burner exhaust back down into the gondola."

The mechanic sat up with a startled expression. "How could we do it, captain?"

"I don't know. It's your job to work out things like that. Rig up a scoop or something, and start right now—I'm tired of seeing you lie around like a pregnant guilt."

Flenn's eyes gleamed. "Is that any way to talk to our passenger, captain?"

"You've spent too much time on your backside, as well," Toller told him. "Have you needles and thread in your kit?"

"Yes, captain. Big needles, little needles, enough threads and twines to rig a

sailing ship.”

“Then start emptying sandbags and making over-suits out of the sacking. We’ll also need gloves.”

“Leave it to me, captain,” Flenn said. “I’ll fit us all out like kings.” Obviously pleased at having something constructive to do, Flenn tucked the carble into his clothing, went to his locker and began rummaging in its various compartments. He was whistling in shivery vibrato.

Toller watched him for a moment, then turned to Zavotle, who was blowing into his hands to keep them warm. “Are you still worrying about relieving yourself in weightless conditions?”

Zavotle’s eyes became wary. “Why do you ask, captain?”

“You should be—it looks like a toss-up as to whether you produce steam or snow.”

Shortly before littlenight on the fifth day of the flight the gauge registered a height of 2,600 miles and a gravity value of zero.

The four members of the crew were tied into their wicker chairs around the power unit, their feet outstretched towards the warm base of the jet tube. They were muffled in crude garments of ragged brown sacking which disguised their human form and concealed the heaving of their chests as they laboured to deal with the thin and gelid air. Within the gondola the only signs of movement were the vapour featherings of the men’s breath; and on the outside meteors flickered in deep blue infinities, briefly and randomly linking star to star.

“Well, here we are,” Toller said, breaking a lengthy silence. “The hardest part of the flight is behind us, we have coped with every unpleasant surprise the heavens could throw at us, and we are still in good health. I’d say we are entitled to drink the brandy with the next meal.”

There was another protracted silence, as though thought itself had been chilled into sluggishness, and Zavotle said, “I’m still worried about the descent, captain—even with the heater.”

“If we survived this far we can go on.” Toller glanced at the heating device which Rillomyner had designed and installed with some assistance from Zavotle. It consisted of nothing more than an elongated S-shape of brakka tubing sections jointed with glass cord and fireclay. Its top end curved over into the mouth of the burner and its bottom end was secured to the deck beside the pilot’s station. A small proportion of each blast on the burner was channelled back down through the tube to send scorching miglign gas billowing through the gondola, making an appreciable difference to the temperature levels. Although the burner would necessarily be used less during the descent, Toller believed the heat drawn off

from it would be sufficient for their needs in the two severest days.

"It's time for the medical report," he said, signalling for Zavotle to make notes. "How does everybody feel?"

"I still feel like we're falling, captain." Rillomyner was gripping the sides of his chair. "It's making me queasy."

"How could we fall if we have no weight?" Toller said reasonably, ignoring the fluttering lightness in his own stomach. "You'll have to get used to it. How about you, Flenn?"

"I'm all right, captain—heights don't bother me." Flenn stroked the green-striped carble which was nestling on his chest with only its head protruding through a vent in his outer garment. "Tinny is all right, as well. We help keep each other warm."

"I suppose I'm in reasonable condition, considering." Zavotle made an entry in the log, writing clumsily with gloved hand, and raised his reproachful gaze to Toller. "Shall I put you down as being in fine fettle, captain? Best of health?"

"Yes, and all the sarcasm in the world won't get me to change my decision—I'm turning the ship over immediately after littlenight." Toller knew the co-pilot was still clinging to his opinion, voiced earlier, that they should delay turning the ship over for a full day or even longer after passing the zero gravity point. The reasoning was that doing so would get them through the region of greatest cold more quickly and with lost heat from the balloon protecting them from the chill. Toller could see some merit in the idea, but he would have exceeded his authority by putting it into practice.

As soon as you pass the midpoint Overland will begin attracting you towards it, Lain had impressed upon him. The pull will be very slight at first, but it will quickly build up. If you augment that pull with the thrust from the drive jet you will soon exceed the design speed of the ship—and (hat must never be allowed to happen.

Zavotle had argued that the S.E.S. scientists had not anticipated the life-threatening coldness, nor had they allowed for the fact that the thin air of the mid-passage exerted less force on the envelope, thus increasing the maximum safe speed. Toller had remained adamant. As captain of the ship he had considerable discretionary powers, but not when it was a case of challenging basic S.E.S. directives.

He had not admitted that his determination had been reinforced by an instinctive distaste for flying the ship upside down. Although during training he had been privately sceptical about the notion of weightlessness, he fully understood that as soon as the ship had passed the midpoint it would have entered the gravitational domain of Overland. In one sense the journey would

have been completed, because—barring an act of human will translated into mechanical action—the destinies of the ship and its crew could no longer be affected by their home world. They would have been cast out, redefined as aliens by the terms of celestial physics.

Toller had decided that postponing the attitude reversal until littlenight had passed would use up all the leeway he had in the matter. Throughout the ascent Overland, though screened from view by the balloon, had steadily increased in apparent size and littlenight had grown longer accordingly. The approaching one would last more than three hours, and by the time it had ended the ship would have begun falling towards the sister planet. Toller found the progressive change in the patterns of night and day a powerful reminder of the magnitude of the voyage he had undertaken. There was no surprise as far as the intellect of the grown man was concerned, but the child in him was bemused and awed by what was happening. Night was becoming shorter as littlenight grew, and soon the natural order of things would be reversed. Land's night would have dwindled to become Overland's littlenight...

While waiting for darkness to arrive, Toller and the others investigated the miracle of weightlessness. There was a rare fascination in suspending small objects in the air and watching them hold their positions, in defiance of all of life's teachings, until the next blast from the drive jet belatedly caused them to sink.

It is almost as if the jet somehow restores a fraction of their natural weight, ran Zavotle's entry in the log, but of course that is a fanciful way of regarding the phenomenon. The real explanation is that they are invisibly fixed in place, and that the thrust from the jet enables the ship to overtake them.

Littlenight came more suddenly than ever, wrapping the gondola in jewelled and fire-streaked blackness, and for its duration the four conversed in muted tones, recreating the mood of their first starlit communion of the flight. The talk ranged from gossip about life in the S.E.S. base to speculation about what strange things might be found on Overland, and once there was even an attempt to foresee the problems of flying to Farland, which could be observed hanging in the west like a green lantern. Nobody felt disposed, Toller noticed, to dwell on the fact that they were suspended between two worlds in a fragile open-topped box, with thousands of miles of emptiness lapping at the rim.

He also noticed that the crew had stopped addressing him as captain for the time being, and he was not displeased. He knew there was no lessening of his necessary authority—it was an unconscious acknowledgement of the fact that four ordinary men were venturing into the extraordinary, the region of strangeness, and that in their mutual need for each other they were equal...

One prismatic flash brought the daytime universe back into existence.

“Did you mention brandy, captain?” Rillomyner said. “It has just occurred to me that some internal warmth might fortify this cursed delicate stomach of mine. The medicinal properties of brandy are well known.”

“We’ll have the brandy with the next meal.” Toller blinked and looked about him, re-establishing connections with history. “Before that the ship gets turned over.”

Earlier he had been pleased to discover that the ship’s predicted instability in and close to the weightless zone was easy to overcome and control with the lateral jets. Occasional half-second bursts had been all that was necessary to keep the edge of the gondola in the desired relationship with the major stars. Now, however, the ship—or the universe—had to be stood on its head. He pumped the pneumatic reservoir to full pressure before feeding crystals to the east-facing jet for a full three seconds. The sound from the miniature orifice was devoured by infinity.

For a moment it seemed that its puny output would have no effect on the mass of the ship, then—for the first time since the beginning of the ascent—the great disk of Overland slid fully into view from behind the curvature of the balloon. It was lit by a crescent of fire along one rim, almost touching the sun.

At the same time Land rose above the rim of the gondola wall on the opposite side, and as air resistance overcame the impulsion from its jet the ship steadied in an attitude which presented the crew with a vision of two worlds.

By turning his head one way Toller could see Overland, mostly in blackness because of its proximity to the sun; and in the other direction was the mind-swamping convexity of the home world, serene and eternal, bathed in sunshine except at its eastern rim, where a shrinking curved section still lay in littlenight. He watched in rapt fascination as Overland’s shadow swung clear of Land, feeling himself to be at the fulcrum of a lever of light, an intangible engine which had the power to move planets.

“For pity’s sake, captain,” Rillomyner cried hoarsely, “put the ship to rights.”

“You’re in no danger.” Toller fired the lateral jet again and Land drifted majestically upwards to be occulted by the balloon as Overland sank below the edge of the gondola. The rigging creaked several times as he used the opposing lateral to balance the ship in its new attitude. Toller permitted himself a smile of satisfaction at having become the first man in history to turn a skyship over. The manoeuvre had been carried out quickly and without mishap—and from that point on the natural forces acting on the ship would do most of his work for him.

“Make a note,” he said to Zavotle. “Midpoint successfully negotiated. I foresee no major obstacles in the descent to Overland.”

Zavotle freed his pencil from its restraining clip. “We’re still going to freeze, captain.”

“That isn’t a major obstacle—if necessary we’ll burn some green and purple right here on the deck.” Toller, suddenly exhilarated and optimistic, turned to Flenn. “How do you feel? Can your head for heights cope with our present circumstances?”

Flenn grinned. “If it’s food you want, captain, I’m your man. I swear my arsehole has cobwebs over it.”

“In that case, see what you can do about a meal.” Toller knew the order would be particularly welcome because for more than a day the crew had opted to go without food or drink to obviate the indignity, discomfort and sheer unpleasantness of using the toilet facilities in virtual weightlessness.

He watched benignly as Flenn pushed the carble back into its warm sanctuary inside his clothing and untied himself from his chair. The little man was obviously struggling for breath as he swung his way into the galley, but the black cabochons of his eyes were glinting with good humour. He reappeared just long enough to hand Toller the single small flask of brandy which had been included in the ship’s provisions, then there followed a long period during which he could be heard working with the cooking equipment, panting and swearing all the time. Toller took a sip of the brandy and had given the flask to Zavotle when it dawned on him that Flenn was trying to prepare a hot meal.

“You don’t need to heat anything,” he called out. “Cold jerky and bread will be enough.”

“It’s all right, captain,” came Flenn’s breathless reply. “The charcoal is still lit ... and it’s only a matter of ... fanning it hard enough. I’m going to serve you ... a veritable banquet. A man needs a good... *Hell!*”

Concurrent with the last word there was a clattering sound. Toller turned towards the galley in time to see a burning piece of firewood rise vertically into the air from behind the partition. Lazily spinning, wrapped in pale yellow flame, it sailed upwards and glanced off a sloping lower panel of the balloon. Just when it seemed that it had been deflected harmlessly away into the blue it was caught by an air current which directed it into the narrowing gap between an acceleration strut and the envelope. It lodged in the juncture of the two, still burning.

“It’s mine!” Flenn shouted. “I’ll get it!”

He appeared on the gondola wall at the corner, unhooking his tether, and went up the strut at speed, using only his hands in a curious weightless scramble. Toller’s heart and mind froze over as he saw brownish smoke puff out from the varnished fabric of the balloon. Flenn reached the burning stick and grasped it

with a gloved hand. He hurled the stick away with a lateral sweep of his arm and suddenly he too was separated from the ship, tumbling in thin air. Hands clawing vainly towards the strut, he floated slowly outwards.

Toller's consciousness was sundered by two focuses of terror. Fear of personal annihilation kept his gaze centred on the smoking patch of fabric until he saw that the flame had extinguished itself, but all the while he was filled with a silent-shrieking awareness of the bright void between Flenn and the balloon growing wider.

Flenn's initial impetus had not been great, but he had drifted outwards for some thirty yards before air resistance brought him to a halt. He hung in the blue emptiness, glowing in the sunlight which the balloon screened from the gondola, scarcely recognisable as a human being in his ragged swaddling of sackcloth.

Toller went to the side and cupped his hands around his mouth to aim a shout. "Flenn! Are you all right?"

"Don't worry about me, captain." Flenn waved an arm and, incredibly, he was able to sound almost cheerful. "I can see the envelope well from here. There's a scorched area all around the strut attachment, but the fabric isn't holed."

"We're going to bring you in." Toller turned to Zavotle and Rillomyner. "He isn't lost. We need to throw him a line."

Rillomyner was doubled in his chair. "Can't do it, captain," he mumbled. "I can't look out there."

"You're going to look and you're going to work," Toller assured him grimly.

"I can help," Zavotle said, leaving his chair. He opened the rigger's locker and brought out several coils of rope. Toller, impatient to effect a rescue, snatched one of the ropes. He secured one end of it and flung the coil out towards Flenn, but as he did so his feet rose clear of the deck, and what he had intended as a powerful throw proved to be feeble and misdirected. The rope unfurled for only part of its length and froze uselessly, still retaining its undulations.

Toller drew the rope in and while he was coiling it again Zavotle threw his line with similar lack of success. Rillomyner, who was moaning faintly with every breath, hurled out a thinner line of glasscord. It extended fully in roughly the right direction, but stopped too short.

"Good for nothing!" Flenn jeered, seemingly undaunted by the thousands of miles of vacancy yawning below him. "Your old grandmother could do better, Rillo."

Toller removed his gloves and made a fresh attempt to bridge the void, but even though he had braced himself against a partition the cold-stiffened rope

again failed to unwind properly. It was while he was retrieving it that he noticed an unnerving fact. At the beginning of the rescue effort Flenn had been considerably higher in relation to the ship, level with the upper end of the acceleration strut—but now he was only slightly above the rim of the gondola.

A moment's reflection told Toller that Flenn was falling. The ship was also falling, but as long as there was warmth inside the balloon it would retain some degree of buoyancy and would descend more slowly than a solid object. This close to the midpoint the relative speeds were negligible, but Flenn was nonetheless in the grip of Overland's gravity, and had begun the long plunge to the surface.

"Have you noticed what's happening?" Toller said to Zavotle in a low voice. "We're running out of time."

Zavotle assessed the situation. "Is there any point in using the laterals?"

"We'd only start cartwheeling."

"This is serious," Zavotle said. "First of all Flenn damages the balloon—then he puts himself in a position where he can't repair it."

"I doubt if he did that on purpose." Toller wheeled on Rillomyner. "The cannon! Find a weight that will go into the cannon. Maybe we can fire a line."

At that moment Flenn, who had been quiescent, appeared to notice his gradual change of position relative to the ship and to draw the appropriate conclusions. He began struggling and squirming, then made exaggerated swimming movements which in other circumstances might have been comic. Discovering that nothing was having any good effect he again became still, except for an involuntary movement of his hands when Zavotle's second throw of the rope failed to reach him.

"I'm getting scared, captain." Although Flenn was shouting his voice seemed faint, its energies leaching away into the surrounding immensities. "You've got to bring me home."

"We'll bring you in. There's..." Toller allowed the sentence to tail off. He had been going to assure Flenn there was plenty of time, but his voice would have lacked conviction. It was becoming apparent that not only was Flenn falling past the gondola, but that—in keeping with the immutable laws of physics—he was gaining speed. The acceleration was almost imperceptible, but its effects were cumulative. Cumulative and lethal...

Rillomyner touched Toller's arm. "There's nothing that will fit in the cannon, captain, but I joined two bits of glasscord and tied it to this." He proffered a hammer with a large brakka head. "I think it will reach him."

"Good man," Toller said, appreciative of the way the mechanic was overcoming his acrophobia in the emergency. He moved aside to let Rillomyner

make the throw. The mechanic tied the free end of the glasscord to the rail, judged the distances and hurled the hammer out into space.

Toller saw at once that he had made the mistake of aiming high, compensating for a full-gravity drop that was not going to occur. The hammer dragged the cord out behind it and came to a halt in the air a tantalising few yards above Flenn, who was galvanised into windmilling his arms in a futile attempt to reach it. Rillomyner jiggled the cord in an effort to move the hammer downwards, but only succeeded in drawing it a short distance back towards the ship.

“That’s no good,” Toller snapped. “Pull it in fast and throw straight at him next time.” He was trying to suppress a growing sense of panic and despair. Flenn was now visibly sinking below the level of the gondola, and the hammer was less likely to reach him as the range increased and the angles became less conducive to accurate throwing. What Flenn desperately needed was a means of reducing the distance separating him from the gondola, and that was impossible unless ... unless...

A familiar voice spoke inside Toller’s head. *Action and reaction*, Lain was saying. *That’s the universal principle...*

“Flenn, you can bring yourself closer,” Toller shouted. “Use the carble! Throw it straight away from the ship, as hard as you can. That will drift you in this direction.”

There was a pause before Flenn responded. “I couldn’t do that, captain.”

“This is an order,” Toller bellowed. “Throw the carble, and throw it right now! We’re running out of time.”

There was a further pounding delay, then Flenn was seen to be fumbling with the coverings on his chest. Sunlight flared on the lower surfaces of his body as he slowly produced the green-striped animal.

Toller swore in frustration. “Hurry, *hurry*! We’re going to lose you.”

“You’ve already lost me, captain.” Flenn’s voice was resigned. “But I want you to take Tinny home with you.”

There was a sudden sweeping movement of his arm and he went tumbling backwards as the carble sailed towards the ship. It was travelling too low. Toller watched numbly as the terrified animal, mewling and clawing at the air, passed out of sight below the gondola. Its yellow eyes had seemed to be boring into his own. Flenn receded a short distance before he stabilised himself by spreading his arms and legs. He came to rest in the attitude of a drowned man, floating face-down on an invisible ocean, his gaze directed towards Overland—thousands of miles below—which had taken him in its gravitational arms.

“You stupid little midget,” Rillomyner sobbed as he again sent the hammer

snaking towards Flenn. It stopped short and a little to one side of its target. Flenn, body and limbs rigid, continued to sink with gathering speed.

“He’ll be falling for maybe a day,” Zavotle whispered. “Just think of it ... a whole day ... falling... I wonder if he’ll still be alive when he hits the ground.”

“I’ve got other things to think about,” Toller said harshly, turning away from the gondola wall, unable to watch Flenn dwindling out of sight.

His brief required him to abort the flight in the event of losing a crew member or sustaining some serious structural damage to the ship. Nobody could have foreseen both circumstances arising as a result of one trivial-seeming accident with the galley stove, but he felt no less responsible—and it remained to be seen if the S.E.S. administrators would also regard him as culpable.

“Switch us back to jet power,” he said to Rillomyner. “We’re going home.”

PART III
Region of Strangeness

CHAPTER 16

The cave was in the side of a ragged hill, in an area of broken terrain where numerous gullies, rocky projections and a profusion of spiky scrub made the going difficult for man or beast.

Lain Maraquine was content to let the bluehorn pick its own way around the various obstacles, giving it only an occasional nudge to keep it heading for the orange flag which marked the cave's position. The four mounted soldiers of his personal guard, obligatory for any senior official of the S.E.S., followed a short distance behind, the murmur of their conversation blending with the heavy drone of insects. Littlenight was not long past and the high sun was baking the ground, clothing the horizon in tremulous purple-tinted blankets of hot air.

Lain felt unusually relaxed, appreciating the opportunity to get away from the skyship base and turn his mind to matters which had nothing to do with world crises and interplanetary travel. Toller's premature return from the proving flight, ten days earlier, had involved Lain in a harrowing round of meetings, consultations and protracted studies of the new scientific data obtained. One faction in the S.E.S. administration had wanted a second proving flight with a full descent to Overland and detailed mapping of the central continent. In normal circumstances Lain would have been in agreement, but the rapidly worsening situation in Kolcorron overrode all other consideration...

The production target of one thousand skyships had been achieved with some to spare, thanks to the driving ruthlessness and Leddravohr and Chakkell.

Fifty of the ships had been set aside for the transportation of the country's royalty and aristocrats in small family groups who would travel in comparative luxury, though by no means all of the nobility had decided to take part in the migration. Another two-hundred were designated as cargo vessels which would carry food, livestock, seeds, weapons and essential machinery and materials; and a further hundred were for the use of military personnel. That left six-hundred-and-fifty ships which, with reduced two-man crews, had the capability of transporting almost twelve thousand of the general population to Overland.

At an early stage of the great undertaking King Prad had decreed that emigration would be on a purely voluntary basis, with equal numbers of males and females, and that fixed proportions of the available places would be

allocated to men with key skills.

For a long time the hard-headed citizenry had declined to take the proposal seriously, regarding it as a diversion, a regal folly to be chuckled over in taverns. The small numbers who put their names forward were treated with derision, and it seemed that if the skyship fleet were ever to be fitted it would only be at swordpoint.

Prad had chosen to bide his time, knowing in advance that greater forces than he could ever muster were on the move. The ptertha plague, famine and the abrupt crumbling of social order had exerted their powerful persuasions, and—in spite of condemnation from the Church—the roster of willing emigrants had swollen. But such was the conservatism of the Kolcorronians and so radical the solution to their problems that a certain degree of reserve still had to be overcome, a lingering feeling that any amount of deprivation and danger on Land was preferable to the near-inevitability of a highly unnatural death in the alien blue reaches of the sky.

Then had come the news that an S.E.S. ship had voyaged more than halfway to Overland and had returned intact.

Within hours every remaining place on the emigration flight had been allocated, and suddenly those who held the necessary warrants were objects of envy and resentment. There was a reversal of public opinion, swift and irrational, and many who had scorned the very notion of flying to the sister world began to see themselves as victims of discrimination.

Even the majority who were too apathetic to care much either way about the broad historical issues were disgruntled by stories of wagons loaded with scarce provisions disappearing through the gates of Skyship Quarter...

Against that background Lain had argued that the proving flight had achieved all its major objectives by successfully turning over and passing the midpoint. The descent to the surface of Overland would have been a passive and predictable business; and Zavotle's sketches of the central continent, viewed through binoculars, were good enough to show that it was remarkably free of mountains and other features which would have jeopardised safe landings.

Even the loss of a crew member had occurred in such a way as to provide a valuable lesson about the inadvisability of cooking in weightless conditions. The commander of the ship was to be congratulated on his conduct of a uniquely demanding mission, Lain had concluded, and the migration itself should begin in the very near future.

His arguments had been accepted.

The first squadron of forty skyships, mainly carrying soldiers and construction workers, was scheduled to depart on Day 80 of the year 2630.

That date was only six days in the future, and as Lain's steed picked its way up the hill to the cave it came to him that he was curiously unexcited by the prospect of flying to Overland. If all went according to plan he and Gesalla would be on a ship of the tenth squadron, which—allowing for delays caused by unsuitable weather or ptertha activity—was due to leave the home world in perhaps only twenty days' time. Why was he so little moved by the imminence of what would be the greatest personal adventure of his life, the finest scientific opportunity he could ever conceive, the boldest undertaking in the entire history of mankind?

Was it that he was too timorous even to allow himself to think about the event? Was it that the growing rift with Gesalla—unacknowledged but ever present in his awareness—had severed a spiritual taproot, rendering him emotionally sere and sterile? Or was it a simple failure of the imagination on the part of one who prided himself on his superior qualities of mind?

The torrent of questions and doubts subsided as the bluehorn reached a rock-strewn shelf and Lain saw the entrance to the cave a short distance ahead. Grateful for the internal respite, he dismounted and waited for the soldiers to catch up on him. The four men's faces were beaded with sweat below their leather helmets, and they were obviously puzzled at having been brought to such a desolate spot.

"You will wait for me here," Lain said to the burly sergeant. "Where will you post your look-outs?"

The sergeant shaded his eyes from the near-vertical rays of the sun which were stabbing past the fire-limned disk of Overland. "On top of the hill, sir. They should be able to see five or six observation posts from there."

"Good! I'm going into this cave and I don't want to be disturbed. Only call me if there is a ptertha warning."

"Yes, sir."

While the sergeant dismounted and deployed his men Lain opened the panniers strapped to his bluehorn and took out four oil lanterns. He ignited the wicks with a lens, picked the lanterns up by their glasscord slings and carried them into the cave. The entrance was quite low and as narrow as a single door. For a moment the air was even warmer than in the open, then he was in a region of dim coolness where the walls receded to form a spacious chamber. He set the lanterns on the dirt floor and waited for his eyes to adjust to the poor light.

The cave had been discovered earlier in the year by a surveyor investigating the hill as a possible site for an observation post. Perhaps through genuine enthusiasm, perhaps out of a desire to sample Lord Glo's noted hospitality, the surveyor had made his way to Greenmount and lodged a description of the

cave's startling contents. The report had reached Lain a short time later and he had decided to view the find for himself as soon as he had time to spare from his work. Now, surrounded by a fading screen of after-images, he understood that his coming to the dark place was symbolic. He was turning towards Land's past and away from Overland's future, confessing that he wanted no part of the migration flight or what lay beyond it...

The pictures on the cave walls were becoming visible.

There was no order to the scenes portrayed. It appeared that the largest and flattest areas had been used first, and that succeeding generations of artists had filled in the intervening spaces with fragmentary scenes, using their ingenuity to incorporate bosses, hollows and cracks as features of their designs.

The result was a labyrinthian montage in which the eye was compelled to wander unceasingly from semi-naked hunters to family groups to stylised bracka trees to strange and familiar animals, erotica, demons, cooking pots, flowers, human skeletons, weapons, suckling babes, geometrical abstracts, fish, snakes, unclassifiable artifacts and impenetrable symbols. In some cases cardinal lines had been graven into the rock and filled with pitch, causing the images to advance on the sight with relentless power; in others there was a spatial ambiguity by which a human or animal form might be defined by nothing more than the changing intensity of a patch of colour. For the most part the pigments were still vivid where they were meant to be vivid, and restrained where the artist had chosen to be subtle, but in some places time itself had contributed to the visual complexity with the stainings of moisture and fungal growths.

Lain was overwhelmed, as never before, by a sense of duration.

The basic thesis of the Kolcorronian religion was that Land and Overland had always existed and had always been very much as they were in modern times, twin poles for the continuous alternation of discarnate human spirits. Four centuries earlier a war had been fought to stamp out the Bithian Heresy, which claimed that a person would be rewarded for a life of virtue on one world by being given a higher station when reincarnated on the sister planet. The Church's main objection had been to the idea of a progression and therefore of change, which conflicted with the essential teaching that the present order was immutable and eternal. Lain found it easy to believe that the macrocosm had always been as it was, but on the small stage of human history there was evidence of change, and by extrapolating backwards one could arrive at ... *this!*

He had no way of estimating the age of the cave paintings, but his instinct was to think in millennia and not in centuries. Here was evidence that men had once existed in vastly different circumstances, that they had thought in different ways, and had shared the planet with animals which no longer existed. He

experienced a pang of mingled intellectual stimulation and regret as he realised that here, in the confines of one rocky cavity, was the material for a lifetime of work. It would have been possible for him to complement the abstractions of mathematics with the study of his own kind, a course which seemed infinitely more natural and rewarding than fleeing to another world.

Could I still do it?

The thought, only half serious though it was, seemed to intensify the coolness of the cave and Lain raised his shoulders in the beginnings of a shudder. He found himself, as had happened several times recently, trying to analyse his commitment to flying to Overland.

Was it the logical thing to do—the coolly considered action of a philosopher—or did he feel that he owed it to Gesalla, and the children she was determined to have, to give them a divergent future? Until he had begun examining his own motives the issue had seemed clear cut—fly to Overland and embrace the future, or stay on Land and die with the past.

But the majority of the population had not had to make that decision. They would be following the very human course of refusing to lie down until they were dead, of simply ignoring the defeatist notion that the blind and mindless ptertha could triumph over mankind. Indeed, the migration flight could not even take place without the cooperation of those who were staying behind—the inflation crews, the men in the ptertha observation posts, the military who would defend Skyship Quarter and continue to impose order after the King and his entourage had departed.

Human life was not going to cease overnight on Land, Lain had realised. There could be many years, decades, of shrinkage and retrenchment, and perhaps the process would eventually produce a hard core of unkillables, few in number, living underground in conditions of unimaginable privation. Lain did not want to be part of that grim scenario, but the point was that he might be able to find a niche within it. The point was that, given sufficient will, he could probably live out his allotted span on the planet of his birth, where his existence had relevance and meaning.

But what about Gesalla?

She was too loyal to consider leaving without him. Such was her character that the very fact of their drifting apart mentally would cause her to cleave to him all the more in body, in obedience to her marriage vows. He doubted if she had even yet admitted to herself that she was...

Lain's eyes, darting urgently over the time-deep panorama surrounding him, fastened on the image of a small child at play. It was a vignette, at the triangular juncture of three larger scenes, and showed a male infant absorbed with what

appeared to be a doll which he was holding in one hand. His other hand was outstretched to the side, as though carelessly reaching for a familiar pet, and just beyond it was a featureless circle. The circle was devoid of coloration and could have represented several things—a large ball, a balloon, a whimsically placed Overland—but Lain was oddly tempted to see it as a ptertha.

He picked up a lantern and went closer to the picture. The intensified illumination confirmed that the circle had never contained any pigment, which was strange considering that the long-dead artists had shown great scrupulousness and subtlety in their rendering of other less significant subjects. That implied that his interpretation had been wrong, especially as the child in the fragmentary scene was obviously relaxed and unperturbed by the nearness of what would have been an object of terror.

Lain's deliberations were interrupted by the sound of someone entering the cave. Frowning with annoyance, he raised the lantern, then took an involuntary pace backwards as he saw that the newcomer was Leddravohr. The prince's smile flicked into existence for a moment as he emerged from the narrow passage, battle sword scraping the wall, and ran his gaze around the cave.

"Good aftday, Prince," Lain said, dismayed to find that he was beginning to tremble. Many meetings with Leddravohr during the course of his work for the S.E.S. had taught him to retain most of his composure when they were with others and in the humdrum atmosphere of an office, but here in the constricted space of the cave Leddravohr was huge, inhumanly powerful and frightening. He was far enough removed from Lain in mind and outlook to have stepped out of one of the primitive scenes glowing in the surrounding half-light.

Leddravohr gave the entire display a cursory inspection before speaking. "I was told there was something remarkable here, Maraquine. Was I misinformed?"

"I don't think so, Prince." Lain hoped he had been able to keep a tremor out of his voice.

"You don't think so? Well, what is it that your fine brain appreciates and mine doesn't?"

Lain sought an answer which would not frame the insult Leddravohr had devised for him. "I haven't had time to study the pictures, Prince—but I am interested in the fact that they are obviously very old."

"How old?"

"Perhaps three or four thousand years."

Leddravohr snorted in amusement. "That's nonsense. You're saying these scrawls are far older than Ro-Atabri itself?"

"It was just my opinion, Prince."

"You're wrong. The colours are too fresh. This place has been a bolt hole

during one of the civil wars. Some insurgents have hidden out here and...” Leddravohr paused to peer closely at a sketch depicting two men in a contorted sexual position. “And you can see what they did to pass the time. Is this what intrigues you, Maraquine?”

“No, Prince.”

“Do you ever lose your temper, Maraquine?”

“I try not to, Prince.”

Leddravohr snorted again, padded around the cave and came back to Lain. “All right, you can stop shaking—I’m not going to touch you. It may interest you to learn that I’m here because my father has heard about this spider hole. He wants the drawings accurately copied. How long will that take?”

Lain glanced around the walls. “Four good draughtsmen could do it in a day, Prince.”

“You arrange it.” Leddravohr stared at him with an unreadable expression on his smooth face. “Why does anybody give a fig about the likes of this place? My father is old and worn out; he has soon to face flying to Overland; most of our population has been wiped out by the plague, and the remainder are getting ready to riot; and even some units of the army are becoming unruly now that they are hungry and it has dawned on them that I soon won’t be here to look after their welfare—and yet all my father is concerned about is seeing these miserable scrawls for himself. Why, Maraquine, *why*?”

Lain was unprepared for the question. “King Prad appears to have the instincts of a philosopher, Prince.”

“You mean he’s like you?”

“I didn’t intend to elevate myself to...”

“Never mind all that. Was that supposed to be your answer? He wants to know things because he wants to know things?”

“That’s what ‘philosopher’ means, Prince.”

“But...” Leddravohr broke off as there was a clattering of equipment in the cave entrance and the sergeant of Lain’s personal guard appeared. He saluted Leddravohr and, although agitated, waited for permission to speak.

“Go on, man,” Leddravohr said.

“The wind is rising in the west, Prince. We are warned of ptertha.”

Leddravohr waved the sergeant away. “All right—we will leave soon.”

“The wind is rising quickly, Prince,” the sergeant said, obviously deeply unhappy at lingering beyond his dismissal.

“And a crafty old soldier like you sees no point in taking unnecessary risks.” Leddravohr placed a hand on the sergeant’s shoulder and shook him playfully, an intimacy he would not have granted the loftiest aristocrat. “Take your men

and leave now, sergeant.”

The sergeant’s eyes emitted a single flash of gratitude and adoration as he hurried away. Leddravohr watched him depart, then turned to Lain.

“You were explaining this passion for useless knowledge,” he said. “Continue!”

“I...” Lain tried to organise his thoughts. “In my profession all knowledge is regarded as useful.”

“Why?”

“It’s part of a whole ... a unified structure ... and when that structure is complete Man will be complete and will have total control of his destiny.”

“Fine words!” Leddravohr’s discontented gaze steadied on the section of wall closest to where Lain was standing. “Do you really believe the future of our race hinges on that picture of a brat playing ball?”

“That isn’t what I said, Prince.”

“That isn’t what I said, Prince,” Leddravohr mocked. “You have told me nothing, philosopher.”

“I am sorry that you heard nothing,” Lain said quietly.

Leddravohr’s smile appeared on the instant. “That was meant to be an insult, wasn’t it? Love of knowledge must be an ardent passion indeed if it begins to stiffen your backbone, Maraquine. We will continue this discussion on the ride back. Come!”

Leddravohr went to the entrance, turned sideways and negotiated the narrow passage. Lain blew out the four lanterns and, leaving them where they were, followed Leddravohr to the outside. A noticeable breeze was streaming over the uneven contours of the hill from the west. Leddravohr, already astride his bluehorn, watched in amusement as Lain gathered the skirts of his robe and inexpertly dragged himself up into his own saddle. After a searching look at the sky, Leddravohr led the way down the hill, controlling his mount with the straight-backed nonchalance of the born rider.

Lain, yielding to an impulse, urged his bluehorn forward on a roughly parallel track, determined to keep abreast of the prince. They were almost halfway down the hill when he discovered he was guiding his animal at speed into a patch of loose shale. He tried to pull the bluehorn to the right, but only succeeded in throwing it off balance. It gave a bark of alarm as it lost its footing on the treacherous surface and fell sideways. Lain heard its leg snap as he threw himself clear, aiming for a clump of yellow grass which had mercifully appeared in his view. He hit the ground, rolled over and jumped to his feet immediately, unharmed but appalled by the agonised howling of the bluehorn as it threshed on the clattering flakes of rock.

Leddravohr dismounted in a single swift movement and strode to the fallen animal, black sword in hand. He moved in quickly and drove the blade into the bluehorn's belly, angling the thrust forward to penetrate the chest cavity. The bluehorn gave a convulsive heave and emitted a slobbering, snoring sound as it died. Lain clapped a hand over his mouth as he fought to control the racking upsurges of his stomach.

"Here's another morsel of useful knowledge for you," Leddravohr said calmly. "When you're killing a bluehorn, never go straight into the heart or you'll get blood all over you. This way the heart discharges into the body cavities, and there is very little mess. See?" Leddravohr withdrew his sword, wiped it on the dead animal's mane and spread his arms, inviting inspection of his unmarked clothing. "Don't you agree that it's all very ... philosophical?"

"I made it fall," Lain mumbled.

"It was only a bluehorn." Leddravohr sheathed his sword, returned to his mount and swung himself into the saddle. "Come on, Maraquine—what are you waiting for?"

Lain looked at the prince, who had one hand outstretched in readiness to assist him on to the bluehorn, and felt a powerful aversion to making the physical contact. "Thank you, Prince—but it would be improper for one of my station to ride with you."

Leddravohr burst out laughing. "What are you talking about, you fool? We're out in the real world now—the soldier's world—and the ptertha are on the move."

The reference to the ptertha went through Lain like a dagger of ice. He took a hesitant step forward.

"Don't be so bashful," Leddravohr said, his eyes amused and derisive. "After all, it wouldn't be the first time you and I had shared a mount."

Lain came to a standstill, his brow dewing over with cool perspiration, and he heard himself say, "On consideration, I prefer to make my own way back to the Quarter on foot."

"I'm losing patience with you, Maraquine." Leddravohr shaded his eyes and scanned the western sky. "I'm not going to plead with you to preserve your own life."

"My life is my responsibility, Prince."

"It must be something in the Maraquine blood," Leddravohr said, shrugging as he addressed a notional third party.

He turned his bluehorn's head to the east and urged the beast into a canter. Within a few seconds he had passed out of sight behind a shoulder of rock, and Lain was alone in a harsh landscape which suddenly seemed as alien and

unforgiving as a distant planet. He gave a shaky, incredulous laugh as he took stock of the predicament he had placed himself in with a single failure of reason.

Why now? he demanded of himself. *Why did I wait until now?*

There was a faint scraping sound from nearby. Lain wheeled in fright and saw that pallid multipedes were already writhing upwards out of their burrows, disturbing small pebbles in their eagerness to converge on the dead bluehorn. He lunged away from the spectacle. For a moment he considered returning to the cave, then realised it would offer only minimal protection during daylight—and after nightfall the entire hill was likely to be swarming with globes, patiently nuzzling and probing. The best plan was to head eastwards to Skyship Quarter with all possible speed and try to get there before the ptertha came riding down the wind.

The decision made, Lain began to run through the murmurous heat. Near the base of the hill he emerged on an open slope which gave him an unrestricted view to the east. A far-off plume of dust marked Leddravohr's course and a long way ahead of him, almost at the drab boundaries of the Quarter, a larger cloud showed how far the four soldiers had gone. He had not appreciated the difference in speed between a man on foot and one mounted on a galloping bluehorn. He would be able to make better progress when he reached the flat grassland, but even so it would probably be an hour before he reached safety.

An hour!

Is there any hope at all of my surviving for that length of time?

As a distraction from his growing physical distress, he tried to bring his professional skills to bear on the question. The statistics, when looked at dispassionately, were more encouraging than he might have expected.

Daylight and flat terrain were conditions which did not favour the ptertha. They had virtually no self-propulsive capability in the horizontal plane, depending on air currents to carry them across the face of the land, which meant that an active man had little to fear from ptertha while he was crossing open ground. Assuming they had not blanketed the area—something which rarely happened in daytime—all he had to do was observe the globes closely and be aware of the wind direction. When menaced by a ptertha, it was simply a matter of waiting until just before it came within the killing radius, then running crosswind for a short distance and allowing the globe to drift helplessly by.

Lain stumbled to a halt in a gully, his mouth filling with the salt froth of exhaustion, and leaned on a rock to recover his breath. It was vital that he should still have reserves of strength and be nimble on his feet when he reached the plain. As the tumult in his chest gradually subsided he indulged himself in a visualisation of his next encounter with Leddravohr, and—incredibly—he felt

his gaping mouth trying to form a grin. This was the irony of ironies! While the renowned military prince had fled to seek refuge from the ptertha, the mild-mannered philosopher had strolled back to the city, in need of no armour but his intellect. This was proof indeed that he was no coward, proof for all to see, proof that even his wife would have to...

I've gone mad! The thought caused Lain to moan aloud in sheer self-loathing. I have truly lost what used to be my mind!

I permitted a savage to breach my defences with all his crossness and malice, his celebration of stupidity and glorification of ignorance. I let him debase me until I was prepared to throw away life itself in a weltering of hatred and pride—what laudable emotions!—and now I'm indulging in fantasies of childish revenge, so gratified by my own superiority that I haven't even taken the basic precaution of making sure there are no ptertha at hand!

Lain straightened up and—sick with premonition—turned to look back along the gully.

The ptertha was barely ten paces away, well within its killing radius, and the breeze coursing along the gully was sweeping it closer to him with mind-freezing swiftness.

It swelled to encompass his view, its glistening transparencies tinged with purple and black. In one part of his mind Lain felt a perverse flicker of gratitude that the issue had been decided for him, so quickly and so finally. There was no point in trying to run, no point in trying to fight. He saw the ptertha as he had never seen one before, saw the livid swirlings of the toxic dust inside it. Was there a hint of structure there? A globe within a globe? Was a malign proto-intelligence knowingly sacrificing itself in order to destroy him ?

The ptertha filled Lain's universe.

It was everywhere—and then it was nowhere.

He took a deep breath and looked about him with the ruefully placid gaze of the man who has only one further decision to make.

Not here, he thought. Not in this blind and circumscribed place—it isn't at all suitable.

Recalling the higher slope which had afforded the good view to the east, he retraced his steps along the bed of the ancient stream, walking slowly now and emitting occasional sighs. When he reached the slope he sat on the ground with his back to an agreeably shaped boulder and arranged his robe in neat folds around his outstretched legs.

The world of his last day was laid out before him. The triangular outline of Mount Opelmer floated low in the sky, seemingly detached from the horizontal ribbons and speckled bands which represented Ro-Atabri and the derelict

suburbs on the shores of Arle Bay. Closer and lower was the artificial community of the Skyship Quarter, its dozens of balloon enclosures an illusory city of rectangular towers. The Tree glittered in the southern heavens, its nine stars challenging the sun's brilliance, and at the zenith a broad crescent of mellow light was spreading insensibly across the disk of Overland.

The whole span of my life and work is in that scene, Lain mused. I have brought my writing materials and should try to make some kind of a summation ... not that the last thoughts of one who precipitated his own demise in such a ludicrous fashion would be of much interest or value to others ... at most I could record what is already known—that pterthacosis is not a bad death ... as deaths go, that is ... nature can be merciful ... as the most horrific shark bites are often unaccompanied by pain, so the inhalation of ptertha dust can sometimes engender a strange mood of resignation, a chemical fatalism ... in that respect at least, I appear to be fortunate ... except that I am deprived of feelings which are mine by ancient right...

A burning sensation manifested itself below Lain's chest and spread radial tendrils into the rest of his torso. At the same time the air about him seemed to grow cold, as though the sun had lost its heat. He put a hand into a pocket of his robe, brought out a bag made of yellow linen and spread it on his lap. There was a final duty to be performed—but not yet.

I wish Gesalla were here... Gesalla and Toller ... so that I could give them to each other, or ask them to accept each other ... irony piles upon irony ... Toller always wanted to be different, to be more like me ... and when he became the new Toller, I was forced to become the old Toller ... to the final extent of throwing down my life for the sake of honour, a gesture which should have been made before my beautiful solewife was ravaged and defiled by Leddravohr... Toller was right about that, and I—in my so-called wisdom—told him he was wrong... Gesalla knew in her head that he was wrong, and in her heart that he was right...

A stab of pain in Lain's chest was accompanied by a bout of shivering. The view before him was curiously flat. He could see more ptertha now. They were drifting down towards the plain in groups of two and three, but they had no relevance to what was left of his life. The dream-flow of his fragmentary thoughts was the new reality.

Poor Toller ... he became what he aspired to be, and how did I reward him? ...with resentment and envy... I hurt him on the day of Glo's interment, only able to do so because he loves me, but he responded to my childish spite with dignity and forbearance ... brakka and ptertha go together... I love my "little brother" and I wonder if Gesalla even yet realises that she too ... these things can take

such a long time ... of course brakka and ptertha go together—it's a symbiotic partnership ... only now do I understand why it was not in my heart to fly to Overland ... the future is there, and the future belongs to Gesalla and Toller ... could that be the underlying reason for my refusing to ride with Leddravohr, for choosing my own Bright Road? ...was I making Toller's way clear?... was I excising an unbalancing factor from the equation? ... equations used to mean so much to me...

The fire in Lain's chest was becoming hotter, expanding, causing him to struggle for breath. He was sweating profusely and yet his skin felt deathly cold, and the world was merely a scene painted on rippling cloth. It was time for the yellow hood.

Lain lifted it with clumsy fingers and drew it over his head—a warning to anyone who might come by that he had died of pterthacosis and that the body was not to be approached for at least five days. The eye slits were not in the right place, but he allowed his hands to fall to his side without adjusting them, content to remain in a private universe of formless and featureless yellow.

Time and space ran together in that undemanding microcosm.

Yes, I was right about the cave painting ... the circle represents a ptertha ... a colourless ptertha ... one which has not yet developed its specialised toxins ... who was it who once asked me if the ptertha used to be pink? ...and what was my reply?... did I say the naked child is not afraid of the globe because he knows it will not harm him?... I know I have always disappointed Toller in one respect, by my lack of physical courage ... my disregard for honour ... but now he can be proud of me... I wish I could be there to see his face when he hears that I preferred to die rather than to ride with ... isn't it strange that the answer to the riddle of the ptertha has always been visible in the sky? ... the Tree and the circle of Overland, symbolising the ptertha, co-existing in harmony ... the brakka pollination discharges feed the ptertha with ... with what? ... pollen, green and purple, miglign? ... and in return the ptertha seek out and destroy the brakka's enemies... Toller should be protected from Prince Leddravohr ... he believes himself to be equal to him, but I fear... I FEAR I HAVE NOT TOLD ANYONE ABOUT THE BRAKKA AND THE PTERTHA! ...how long have I known? ... is this a dream? ... where is my lovely Gesalla? ... can I still move my hands? ... can I still...

CHAPTER 17

Prince Leddravohr picked up a looking glass and frowned at his reflection. Even when resident in the Great Palace he preferred not to be attended by body servants, and for his morning toilet he had spent a considerable time in honing a brakka razor to a perfect edge and softening his facial stubble with hot water. As a result, annoyingly, he had pared away too much skin at his throat. There were no real incisions, but droplets of blood were oozing through the skin, and no matter how often he dabbed them away more appeared in their place.

This what comes of living like a pampered maiden, he told himself, pressing a damp cloth to his throat and postponing the act of dressing until the bleeding had stopped. The mirror, made from two different kinds of glass bonded together, was almost totally reflective, but when he faced the window he could discern its brilliant rectangles through the glass sandwich, apparently occupying the same space as his own body.

It's only appropriate, he thought. *I'm becoming insubstantial, aghast, in preparation for the ascent to Overland. My real life, the only life that has any significance, will be over and done with when...* His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of running footsteps in the adjoining apartment. He turned and saw in the doorway of the toilet chamber the square-shouldered figure of Major Yachimalt, the adjutant responsible for communications between the palace and Skyship Quarter. Yachimalt's anxious eyes took in the fact that Leddravohr was naked and he made as if to back out of the room.

"Forgive me, Prince," he said. "I didn't realise..."

"What's the matter with you, man?" Leddravohr snapped. "If you have a message for me, spit it out."

"It's a signal from Colonel Hippern, Prince. He says a mob is gathering at the main entrance to the Quarter."

"He has a full regiment at his disposal, hasn't he? Why should I concern myself with the activities of a rabble?"

"The signal says that the Lord Prelate is inciting them, Prince," Yachimalt replied. "Colonel Hippern requests your authority to place him under arrest."

"Balountar! That miserable sack of bones!" Leddravohr threw the looking glass aside and went to the rack which held his clothing. "Tell Colonel Hippern

that he is to hold his ground, but to make no move against Balountar until I arrive. I will deal with our Lord Scarecrow in person.”

Yachimalt saluted and vanished from the doorway. Leddravohr found himself actually smiling as he dressed quickly and strapped on his white cuirass. With only five days to go until the first squadron departed for Overland the preparations for the migration were virtually complete and he had not looked forward to a span of enforced idleness. When there was no work to be done his thoughts all too easily turned to the unnatural ordeal which lay ahead, and it was then that the pale maggots of fear and self-doubt began the insidious attack. Now he could almost feel grateful to the ranting Lord Prelate for presenting him with a diversion, the opportunity to be fully alive and functional once more.

Leddravohr buckled on his sword and the knife he wore on his left arm. He hurried out of his suite, heading for the principal forecourt, choosing a downward route on which there was little chance of encountering his father. The King maintained an excellent intelligence network and would almost certainly have heard about Lain Maraquine’s suicidal behaviour of the previous aftday. Leddravohr had no wish to be quizzed about the absurd incident at that moment. He had given orders for a team of draughtsmen to go to the cave and copy the drawings, and he wanted to be able to present the transcription to his father at their next meeting. Instinct told him that the King would be angry and suspicious if, as was almost certainly the case, Maraquine proved to be dead, but it was possible that the drawings would mollify him.

On reaching the forecourt Leddravohr signalled for an ostiary to bring forward the dappled bluehorn he normally rode and in a matter of seconds he was galloping towards the Skyship Quarter. Emerging from the double cocoon of netting which enveloped the palace he entered one of the tubular covered ways which crossed the four ornamental moats. The sheath of varnished linen was proof against ptertha dust and provided safe passage into Ro-Atabri itself, but the sense of being enclosed and herded was irksome to Leddravohr. He was glad when he reached the city, where the sky was at least visible through the overhead mesh works, and he could follow the embankments of the Borann to the west.

There were few citizens abroad and most of those he saw were making their way towards the Quarter, seemingly guided by an extra sense which told them of significant events taking place far ahead. It was a hot and windless morning, with no threat from ptertha. When he reached the western limit of the city he ignored the covered way which ran to the perimeter of the skyship base, riding south of it in the open air to where he could see a crowd gathered at the main entrance. The side panels of the flimsy tube had been furled, enabling the crowd

to form a continuous obstruction across the security gate. On the far side of the gate he could see a line of pikes projecting into the air, indicating the presence of soldiers, and he nodded in approval—the pike was a good weapon for demonstrating to unruly civilians the error of their ways.

As he neared the mass of people Leddravohr slowed his bluehorn to a walking pace. When his approach was noticed the crowd parted respectfully to make way for him, and he was surprised to note how many were dressed in ragged garments. The plight of the ordinary citizens of Ro-Atabri was obviously worse than he had realised. Amid much whispering and jostling, the edge of the crowd flowed outwards to create a semicircular space at the focus of which was the black-robed figure of Balountar.

The Lord Prelate, who had been haranguing an officer on the other side of the closed gate, turned to face Leddravohr. He started visibly at the sight of the military prince, but the expression of anger on his squeezed-in features did not change. Leddravohr rode to him at a leisurely pace, dismounted with a deliberate display of lazy confidence and signalled for the gate to be opened. Two soldiers drew the heavy gate inwards and now Leddravohr and Balountar were at the centre of a public arena.

“Well, priest,” Leddravohr said calmly, “what brings you here?”

“I think you know why I am here.” Balountar waited a full three seconds before adding the royal form of address, thereby detaching it from his first remark and creating a deliberate insolence. “Prince.”

Leddravohr smiled. “If you have come to beg a migration warrant, you are too late—they have all been disbursed.”

“I beg for nothing,” Balountar said, raising his voice, addressing the crowd rather than Leddravohr. “I come to make demands. Demands which must be met.”

“Demands!” Nobody had ever dared use that word to Leddravohr, and as he repeated it a strange thing happened to him. His body became two bodies—one physical and solid, anchored to the ground; the other weightless and ethereal, seemingly capable of drifting on the slightest breeze. The latter self severed the connection between the two by taking a step backwards. He felt as if he were no longer in contact with the surface of the plain, but poised at grass-top height, like a ptertha, with a comprehensive but detached view of all that was taking place. From that vantage point he watched, bemused, as his corporeal self played out an immature game...

“Do not dare speak to me of demands!” the fleshly Leddravohr cried. “Have you forgotten the authority invested in me by the King?”

“I speak with a higher authority,” Balountar insisted, yielding no ground. “I

speaking for the Church, for the Great Permanence, and I command you to destroy the vehicles with which you plan to desecrate the High Path. Furthermore, all the food and crystals and other vital supplies which you have stolen from the people must be returned to them immediately. Those are my final words."

"You speak truer than you know," Leddravohr breathed. He unsheathed his battle sword, but some lingering vestige of regard for the processes of law dissuaded him from driving the black blade through the Lord Prelate's body. Instead, he moved away from Balountar, turned to the watchful army officers nearby and addressed himself to a stony-faced Colonel Hippern.

"Arrest the traitor," he said sharply.

Hippern gave a low command and two soldiers ran forward, swords drawn. A curious growling, grumbling sound arose from the crowd as the soldiers took Balountar by the arms and marched him, in spite of his struggles, inside the line of the Quarter's perimeter. Hippern looked questioningly at Leddravohr.

"What are you waiting for?" Leddravohr stabbed a forefinger towards the ground, indicating that he wanted the Lord Prelate forced to his knees. "You know the punishment for high treason. Get on with it!"

Hippern, face impassive beneath the rim of his ornate helmet, spoke again to the officers near him and a few seconds later a burly high-sergeant ran towards the two soldiers who were restraining Balountar. The Lord Prelate redoubled his efforts to break free, his black-swathed body undergoing inhuman contortions as his captors forced him to the ground. He raised his face to his executioner. His mouth opened wide as he tried to utter a prayer or a curse, creating a target which the sergeant chose unthinkingly on the murderous instant. The sergeant's blade drove into Balountar's mouth and emerged under the base of his skull, severing the spine, ending his life between heartbeats. The two soldiers released his body and stepped back from it as a moan of consternation went up from the crowd. A large pebble arched through the air and skittered through the dust near Leddravohr's feet.

For a moment the prince looked as though he would launch himself at the mob and attack them single-handed, then he wheeled on the high-sergeant. "Get the priest's head off. Elevate it on a pike so that his followers can continue to look up to him."

The sergeant nodded and went about his grisly work with the unruffled dexterity of a pork butcher, and within a minute Balountar's head had been raised on a pikestaff which was then lashed to a gatepost. Rivulets of blood spread swiftly down the staff.

There was a long moment of utter silence—a silence which burrowed into the ears—and it seemed that an impasse had been reached. Then it gradually

became apparent to those watching from within the base that the situation was not truly static—the semi-circle of ground visible beyond the gate was slowly shrinking. Those on the edge of the mass of human beings appeared not to be moving their feet, but they were advancing nonetheless, like ranks of statues which were being inched forward by an inexorable pressure from behind. Evidence of the tremendous force being exerted came when a fence post to the right of the gate creaked and began to lean inwards.

“Close the gate,” Colonel Hippern shouted.

“Leave the gate!” Leddravohr faced the colonel. “The army does not cower away from a civilian rabble. Order your men to clear the entire area.”

Hippern swallowed, showing his unease, but he met Leddravohr’s gaze directly. “The situation is difficult, Prince. This is a local regiment, mostly drawn from Ro-Atabri itself, and the men won’t take to the idea of going against their own.”

“Do I hear you properly, colonel?” Leddravohr altered his grip on his sword and a worm of white light coiled in his eyes. “Since when have common soldiers become arbiters in the affairs of Kolcorron?”

Hippern’s throat worked again, but his courage did not desert him. “Since they became hungry, Prince. It was ever the way.”

Unexpectedly, Leddravohr smiled. “That’s your professional judgment, is it, colonel? Now observe me closely—I am going to teach you something about the essential nature of command.” He turned, took several paces towards the triple row of waiting soldiers and raised his sword.

“Disperse the rabble!” he shouted, sweeping his sword downwards to indicate the direction of attack against the advancing crowd. Soldiers broke rank immediately and ran to engage the foremost of the intruders, and the comparative silence which had pervaded the scene was lost in a sudden uproar. The crowd fell back, but instead of fleeing in complete disarray its members compacted again, having receded but a short distance, and it was then that a significant fact emerged—that only one third of the soldiers had obeyed Leddravohr’s command. The others had scarcely moved and were gazing unhappily at their nearest junior officers. Even the soldiers who had confronted the mob appeared to have done so in a tame and half-hearted manner. They were allowing themselves to be overcome easily, losing their weapons with such rapidity that they had become an asset to the surging throng. Cheering was heard as a large section of the covered way was pulled to the ground and its framing broken up to provide even more weapons...

The other Leddravohr—cool, ethereal and uninvolved—watched with a mild degree of interest as the body-locked, carnate Leddravohr ran to a fresh-faced

lieutenant and ordered him to lead his men against the crowd. The lieutenant was seen to shake his head in argument and a second later he was dead, almost decapitated by a single stroke of the prince's blade. Leddravohr had lost his humanity, had ceased to register on the senses as a human being. Craned forward and shambling, black sword hurling a crimson spray, he went among his officers and men like a terrible demon, wreaking destruction.

How long can this go on? the other Leddravohr mused. Is there no limit to what the men will stand?

His attention was suddenly drawn to a new phenomenon. The sky in the east was growing dark as columns of smoke ascended from several districts of the city. It could only mean that the ptertha screens were burning, that some members of the community had been driven by anger and frustration to make the ultimate protest against the present order.

The message was clear—that all would go down together. Rich man and poor man alike. King and pauper alike.

At the thought of the King, alone and vulnerable in the Great Palace, the other Leddravohr's composure disintegrated. Vital and urgent work had to be done; he had responsibilities whose importance far outweighed that of a clash involving a few hundred citizens and soldiers.

He took a step towards his complementary self, and there came a swooping sensation, a blurring of time and space...

Prince Leddravohr Neldeever opened his eyes to a flood of harsh sunlight. The haft of his sword was wet in his hand, and around him were the sounds of turmoil and the colours of carnage. He surveyed the scene for a moment, blinking as he sought to reorientate himself in a changed reality, then he sheathed his sword and ran towards his waiting bluehorn.

CHAPTER 18

Toller stared at the yellow-hooded body without moving for perhaps ten minutes, trying to understand how he was to deal with the pain of loss.

Leddravohr has done this, he thought. This is the harvest I reap for allowing the monster to stay alive. He abandoned my brother to the ptertha!

The foreday sun was still low in the east, but in the total absence of air movement the rocky hillside was already beginning to throw up heat. Toller was torn between passion and prudence—the desire to run to his brother’s body and the need to remain at a safe distance. His blurred vision showed something white gleaming on the sunken chest, held in place by the waistcord of the grey robe and one slim hand.

Paper? Could it be, Toller’s heart speeded up at the thought, *an indictment of Leddravohr?*

He took out the stubby telescope he had carried since boyhood and directed it at the white rectangle. His tears conspired with the fierce brilliance of the image to make the scrawled words difficult to read, but at length he received Lain’s final communication:

PTERTHA FRIENDS OF BRAK. KILL US BECAU WE KILL BRAK. BRAK FEED
PTERTH. IN RETURN P PROTEC B. CLEAR → PINK → PURPLE P EVOLV TOXINS. WE
MUS LIVE IN HARMONY WITH B. LOOK TO SKY

Toller lowered the telescope. Somewhere under the thundering turmoil of his grief was the realisation that Lain’s message had a significance which reached far beyond the present circumstances, but for the present he was unable to relate to it. Instead he was overwhelmed by a baffled disappointment. Why had Lain not used the dregs of his mental and physical energy to accuse his murderer and thus pave a straight path for retribution? After a moment’s thought the answer came to Toller, and he almost managed to smile with affection and respect. Lain, even in death, had been the true pacifist, far removed from thoughts of revenge. He had withdrawn his personal light from the world in a manner befitting his way of life—and Leddravohr still endured...

Toller turned to walk across the slope to where the sergeant was waiting with the two bluehorns. He was fully in control of himself and there were no longer

any tears to interfere with his vision, but now his thoughts were dominated by a new question which was raking his brain with the force and persistence of waves clawing at a beach.

How can I live without my brother? The heat reflected from slabs of stone pressed against his eyes, entered his mouth. *It's going to be a long hot day, and how am I going to live through it without my brother?*

"I grieve with you, captain," Engluh said. "Your brother was a good man."

"Yes." Toller stared at the sergeant, trying to suppress his feelings of dislike. This was the man who had been formally entrusted with Lain's safety, and who remained alive while Lain was dead. There was little the sergeant could have done against ptertha in this kind of terrain, and according to his story he had been dismissed by Leddravohr; and yet his presence among the living was an affront to the primitive in Toller's character.

"Do you want to go back now, captain?" Engluh showed no signs of being discomfited by Toller's scrutiny. He was a hardlooking veteran, undoubtedly skilled in the art of preserving his own skin, but Toller could not judge him as being untrustworthy.

"Not yet," Toller said. "I want to find the bluehorn."

"Very good, captain." A flickering in the depths of the sergeant's brown eyes showed his awareness of the fact that Toller had not fully accepted Prince Leddravohr's terse account of the previous day's events. "I'll show you the path we took."

Toller mounted his bluehorn and rode behind Engluh as they worked their way up the hill. About halfway to the top they came to an area of laminated rock bounded on its lower edge by an accumulation of flakes. The remains of the bluehorn lay on the loose material, already stripped to a skeleton by multipedes and other scavengers. Even the saddle and harness had been shredded and gnawed in places. Toller felt a coolness on his spine as he realised that Lain's body would have suffered a similar fate but for the ptertha poison in the tissues. His bluehorn had begun to toss its head and behave nervously, but he guided it closer to the skeleton and frowned as he saw the fractured shinbone. *My brother was living when that happened—and now he's dead.* As the pain raged through him with renewed force he closed his eyes and tried to think about the unthinkable.

According to what he had been told, Sergeant Engluh and the other three soldiers had ridden to the west entrance of Skyship Quarter after being dismissed by Leddravohr. They had waited there for Lain and had been astonished to see Leddravohr returning alone.

The prince had been in a strange mood, angry and jovial at once, and on

seeing Engluh was reported to have said, “Prepare yourself for a long wait, sergeant—your master disabled his mount and now he is playing hide-and-seek with the ptertha.” Thinking it was expected of him, Engluh had volunteered to gallop back to the hill with a spare bluehorn, but Leddravohr had said, “Stay where you are! He chose to play a dangerous game with his own life—and that is no sport for a good soldier.”

Toller had made the sergeant repeat his account several times and the only interpretation he could place on it was that Lain had been offered transportation to safety, but had wilfully elected to flirt with death. Leddravohr was above the need to lie about any of his actions—and still Toller was unable to accept what he had been told. Lain Maraquine, who had been known to faint at the sight of blood, would have been the last man in the world to pit himself against the globes. Had he wanted to take his life he would have found a better way—but in any case there had been no reason for him to commit suicide. He had had too much to live for. No, there was a mystery central to what had happened on the barren hillside on the previous day, and Toller knew of only one man who could clear it up. Leddravohr may not have lied, but he knew more than...

“Captain!” Engluh spoke in a startled whisper. “Look over there!”

Toller followed the line of his pointing finger to the east and blinked as he saw the unmistakable dark brown shape of a balloon lifting into the sky above Ro-Atabri. A few seconds later it was joined by three others climbing in close formation, almost as though the mass ascent to Overland was beginning days ahead of schedule.

Something has gone wrong, Toller thought before he was stricken by a sense of personal outrage. The death of Lain would have been more than enough to contend with on its own, but to that had been added aggravating doubt and suspicion—and now skyships were rising from the Quarter in contravention of all the rigid planning that had gone into the migration flight. There was a limit to how much his mind could encompass at a single time, and the universe was unfairly choosing to disregard it.

“I have to go back now,” he said, urging his bluehorn into motion. They rode down the hill, rounded a briar-covered shoulder and reached the open slope where Lain’s body lay. The unrestricted view to the east showed that more balloons were rising from the line of enclosures, but Toller’s gaze was drawn to the dappled sweeps of the city beyond. Columns of dark smoke were rising from the central districts.

“It looks like a war, captain,” Engluh said in wonderment, rising in his stirrups.

“Perhaps that’s what it is.” Toller glanced once towards the inert anonymous

shape that had been his brother—*You will live in me, Lain*—then spurred his mount forward in the direction of the city.

He had been aware of the growing restlessness among Ro-Atabri's beleaguered population, but he found it hard to imagine how civil disturbances could have any real effect on the ordered course of events within the Quarter. Leddravohr had installed army units in a crescent between the skyship base and the edge of the city itself, and had seen to it that they were controlled by officers he could trust even in the unique circumstances of the migration. The commanders were men who had no personal wish to fly to Overland and were stubbornly committed to preserving Ro-Atabri as an entity, come what may. Toller had believed the base to be secure, even in the event of full-scale riots, but the skyships were taking off long before their appointed time...

On reaching flat grassland he put the bluehorn into a full gallop and watched intently as the base's perimeter barrier expanded across his field of view. The west entrance was little used because it faced open countryside, but as he drew closer he saw there were large groups of mounted soldiers and infantry behind the gate, and supply wagons could be seen on the move beyond the double screens where they curved away to the north and south. More ships were drifting up into the morning sky, and the hollow roars of their burners were mingling with the clacking of the inflation fans and the background shouting of overseers.

The outer gates were swung open for Toller and the sergeant, then slammed shut again as soon as they had entered the buffer zone. Toller reined his bluehorn to a halt as he was approached by an army captain who was carrying his orange-crested helmet under his arm.

"Are you Skycaptain Toller Maraquine?" he said, mopping his glistening brow.

"Yes. What has happened?"

"Prince Leddravohr orders you to report to Enclosure 12 immediately."

Toller nodded his assent. "What has happened?"

"What makes you think anything has happened?" the captain said bitterly. He turned and strode away, issuing angry orders to the nearest soldiers, who had an overtly sullen look.

Toller considered going after him and extracting an informative reply, but at that moment he noticed a blue-uniformed figure beckoning to him from the inner gate. It was Ilven Zavotle, newly commissioned to the rank of pilot lieutenant. Toller rode to him and dismounted, noting as he did so that the young man looked pale and troubled.

"I'm glad you're back, Toller," Zavotle said anxiously. "I heard you had gone out to look for your brother, and I came to warn you about Prince Leddravohr."

“Leddravohr?” Toller glanced upwards as a skyship briefly occulted the sun. “What about Leddravohr?”

“He’s insane,” Zavotle said, looking about him to ensure the treasonous statement had not been overheard. “He’s at the enclosures now ... driving the loaders and inflation crews ... sword in hand ... I saw him cut a man down just for stopping to take a drink.”

“He...!” Toller’s consternation and bafflement increased. “What brought all this about?”

Zavotle looked up at him in surprise. “You don’t know? You must have left the Quarter before... Everything happened in a couple of hours, Toller.”

“*What* happened? Speak up, Ilven, or there’ll be more swordplay.”

“Lord Prelate Balountar led a citizens’ march on the base. He demanded that all the ships be destroyed and the supplies distributed among the people. Leddravohr had him arrested and beheaded on the spot.”

Toller narrowed his eyes as he visualised the scene. “That was a mistake.”

“A bad one,” Zavotle agreed, “but that was only the beginning. Balountar had the crowds worked up with religion and promises of food and crystals. When they saw his head on a pole they started tearing down our screens. Leddravohr sent the army against them, but ... it was an amazing thing, Toller ... most of the soldiers refused to fight.”

“They defied Leddravohr?”

“They’re local men—most of them drawn from Ro-Atabri itself—and they were being ordered to massacre their own people.” Zavotle paused as a skyship overhead produced a thunderous roar. “The soldiers are hungry, too, and there’s a feeling abroad that Leddravohr is turning his back on them.”

“Even so...” Toller found it almost impossible to imagine ordinary soldiers rebelling against the military prince.

“That was when Leddravohr really became possessed. They say he killed more than a dozen officers and men. They wouldn’t obey his orders ... but they wouldn’t defend themselves against him either ... and he butchered them...” Zavotle’s voice faltered. “Like pigs, Toller. Just like pigs.”

In spite of the enormity of what he was hearing, Toller developed an unaccountable feeling that he had another and more pressing cause for concern. “How did it end?”

“The fires in the city. When Leddravohr saw the smoke ... realised the ptertha screens were burning ... he came to his senses. He pulled all the men who remained loyal to him back inside the perimeter, and now he’s trying to get the whole skyship fleet off the ground before the rebels organise themselves and invade the base.” Zavotle studied the nearby soldiers from beneath lowered

brows. "This lot are supposed to defend the west gate, but if you ask me they aren't too sure which side they're on. Blue uniforms are no longer popular around here. We should get back to the enclosures as soon as..."

The words faded from Toller's hearing as his mind made a rapid series of leaps, each one bringing him closer to the source of his subconscious alarm. *The fires in the city ... ptertha screens burning ... there has been no rain for many days ... when the screens go the city will be indefensible ... the migration MUST get under way at once ... and that means...*

"Gesalla!" Toller blurted the name in a sudden accession of panic and self-recrimination. How could he have forgotten her for so long? She would be waiting at home in the Square House ... still without confirmation of Lain's death ... and the flight to Overland had already begun...

"Did you hear me?" Zavotle said. "We should be..."

"Never mind that," Toller cut in. "What's been done about notifying the migrants and bringing them in?"

"The King and Prince Chakkell are already at the enclosures. All the other royals and nobles have to get here under the protection of their own guards. It's a shambles, Toller. The ordinary migrants will have to get through by themselves, and the way things are out there I doubt if..."

"I'm indebted to you for meeting me here, Ilven," Toller said, turning to mount his bluehorn. "I seem to remember you telling me when we were up there—freezing to death and with nothing to do but count the falling stars—that you have no family. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"In that case you should get back to the enclosures and take the first ship that becomes available to you. I am not free to leave just yet."

Zavotle came forward as Toller swung himself into the saddle. "Leddravohr wants us both as royal pilots, Toller. You especially, because nobody else has turned a ship over."

"Forget that you saw me," Toller said. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

He rode into the base, taking a route which kept him well away from the balloon enclosures. The ptertha nets overhead were casting their patterns of shadow on a scene of confused and frenetic activity. It had been intended that the migration fleet would depart in an orderly manner over a period of between ten and twenty days, depending on weather conditions. Now there was a race to see how many ships could be despatched before the Quarter was overrun by dissenters, and the situation was made even more desperate by the fact that the vulnerable ptertha screens had been attacked. It was fortunate that there was no perceptible air movement—a circumstance which aided the skyship crews and

kept ptertha activity to the minimum—but with the arrival of night the livid globes would come in force.

In their haste to load supply carts workers were tearing down the wooden storage huts with their bare hands. Soldiers belonging to the newly formed Overland Regiment—their loyalty guaranteed because they were due to fly with Leddravohr—roamed the area, noisily exhorting base personnel to make greater efforts and in some cases joining in the work. Here and there amid the chaos wandered small groups of men, women and children who had obtained migration warrants in the provinces and had arrived at the Quarter well in advance of their flights. Above and through everything drifted the racket of the inflation fans, the unnerving spasmodic roar of skyship burners and the marshy odour of free miglign gas.

Toller attracted scant attention from anybody as he rode through storage and workshop sections, but on reaching the covered way which ran east to the city he found its entrance guarded by a large detachment of soldiers. Officers with them were questioning everybody who passed through. Toller moved to one side and used his telescope to survey the distant exit. Compressed perspectives made the image hard to interpret, but he could see massed foot soldiers and some mounted groups, and beyond them crowds thronging the sloping streets where the city proper began. There was little evidence of movement, but it was obvious that a confrontation was still taking place and that the normal route to the city was impassable.

He was considering what to do when his attention was caught by shifting specks of colour in the scrubby land which stretched off to the south-east in the direction of the Greenmount suburb. The telescope revealed them to be civilians hurrying towards the centre of the base. From the high proportion of women and children Toller deduced they were emigrants who had breached the perimeter fence at a point remote from the main entrance. He turned away from the tunnel, located an auxiliary exit through the double ptertha meshes and rode out towards the advancing citizenry. When he got close to the leaders they brandished their blue-and-white migration warrants.

“Keep heading towards the balloon enclosures,” he shouted to them. “We’ll get you away.”

The anxious-faced men and women called out their thanks and hurried on, some carrying or dragging infants. Turning to look after them, Toller saw that their arrival had been noticed and mounted men were coming out to meet them. The sky behind the riders made a unique spectacle. Perhaps fifty ships were now in the air over the enclosures, dangerously crowded at the lower levels and straggling out as they receded into the zenith.

Not pausing to see what kind of reception the migrants would receive, Toller spurred his bluehorn on towards Greenmount. Far off to his right, in Ro-Atabri itself, the fires appeared to be spreading. The city was built of stone, but the timber and rope with which it had been cocooned to ward off the ptertha were highly flammable and the fires were becoming large enough to create their own convection systems, gaining ground with no assistance from the elements. It was only necessary, Toller knew, for a slight breeze to spring up and the whole city would be engulfed in a matter of minutes.

He urged the bluehorn into a gallop, judging his direction from the groups of refugees he met, and eventually espied a place where the perimeter barricade had been pulled to the ground. He rode through the gap, ignoring apprehensive stares from people who were clambering across the stakes, and chose a direct route up the hill towards the Square House. The streets he had roamed as a boy were littered and deserted, part of the alien territory of the past.

A minute after entering Greenmount district he rounded a corner and encountered a band of five civilians who had armed themselves with staves. Although obviously not migrants, they were hurrying towards the Quarter. Toller divined at once that it was their intention to harass and perhaps rob some of the migrant families he had seen earlier.

They spread out to block the narrow street and their leader, a slack-jawed hulk in a cloak thonged with dried pillar snakes, said, "What do you think you're doing, bluecoat?"

Toller, who could easily have ridden the man down, reined to a halt. "As you ask so politely, I don't mind telling you that I'm deciding whether or not I should kill you."

"Kill *me*!" The man pounded the ground imperiously with his staff, apparently in the belief that all skyemen went unarmed. "And exactly how...?"

Toller drew his sword with a horizontal sweep which lopped the staff just above the man's hand. "That could just have easily been your wrist or your neck," he said mildly. "Do any or all of you wish to pursue the matter?"

The four others eyed each other and backed away.

"We have no quarrel with you, sir," the cloaked man said, nursing the hand which had been jarred by the fierce impact on his staff. "We'll go peaceably on our way."

"You won't." Toller used his brakka blade to point out an alley which led away from the skyship base. "You will go that way, and back to your dens. I will be returning to the Quarter in a few minutes—and I swear that if I set eyes on any of you again it will be my sword that does all the talking. Now *go*!"

As soon as the men had passed out of sight he sheathed his sword and

resumed the ascent of the hill. He doubted if his warning would have a lasting effect on the ruffians, but he had spared as much time as he could on behalf of the migrants, all of whom would have to learn to face many rigours in the coming days. A glance at the narrowing crescent of light on the disk of Overland told him there was not much more than an hour until littlenight, and it was imperative that he should take Gesalla to the base before then.

On reaching the crest of Greenmount he galloped through silent avenues to the Square House and dismounted in the walled precinct. He went into the entrance hall and was met by Sany, the rotund cook, and a balding manservant who was unknown to him.

“Master Toller!” Sany cried. “Have you news of your brother?”

Toller felt a renewed shock of bereavement—the pressure of events had suspended his normal emotional processes. “My brother is dead,” he said. “Where is your mistress?”

“In her bedchamber.” Sany pressed both hands to her throat. “This is a terrible day for all of us.”

Toller ran to the main stair, but paused on the first flight. “Sany, I’m returning to the Skyship Quarter in a few minutes. I strongly advise you and...” He looked questioningly at the manservant.

“Harribend, sir.”

“...you and Harribend—and any other domestics who are still here—to come with me. The migration has started ahead of time in great confusion, and even though you don’t have warrants I think I can get you places on a ship.”

Both servants backed away from him. “I couldn’t go into the sky before my time,” Sany said. “It isn’t natural. It isn’t right.”

“There are riots in the city and the ptertha screens are burning.”

“Be that as it may, Master Toller—we’ll take our chances here where we belong.”

“Think hard about it,” Toller said. He went up to the landing and through the familiar corridor which led to the south side of the house, unable to accept fully that this was the last occasion on which he would see the ceramic figurines glowing in their niches, or his blurred reflection ghosting along the polished glasswood panels. The door to the principal bedchamber was open.

Gesalla was standing at the window which framed a view of the city in which the dominant features were the seemingly motionless columns of grey and white smoke intersecting the natural blue and green horizontals of Arle Bay and the Gulf of Tronom. She was dressed as he had never seen her before, in a waistcoat and breeches of grey whipcord complemented by a lighter grey shirt—the whole being almost a muted echo of his own skyman’s uniform. A sudden timidity

made him refrain from speaking or tapping the door. How was one to impart the kind of news he bore?

Gesalla turned and looked at him with wise, sombre eyes. "Thank you for coming, Toller."

"It's about Lain," he said, entering the room. "I'm afraid I bring bad news."

"I knew he had to be dead when there was no message by nightfall." Her voice was cool, almost brisk. "All that was needed was the confirmation."

Toller was unprepared for her lack of emotion. "Gesalla, I don't know how to tell you this ... at a time like this ... but you have seen the fires in the city. We have no choice but to..."

"I'm ready to leave," Gesalla said, picking up a tightly rolled bundle which had been on a chair. "These are all the personal possessions I'll need. It isn't too much, is it?"

He stared at her beautiful unperturbed face for a moment, battling with an irrational resentment. "Have you any idea where we're going?"

"Where else but to Overland? The skyships are leaving. According to what I could decipher of the sunwriter messages coming out of the Great Palace, civil war is breaking out in Ro-Atabri and the King has already fled. Do you think I'm stupid, Toller?"

"Stupid? No, you're very intelligent—very logical."

"Did you expect me to be hysterical? Was I to be carried out of here screaming that I was afraid to go into the sky, where only the heroic Toller Maraquine has been? Was I to weep and plead for time to strew flowers around my husband's body?"

"No, I didn't expect you to weep." Toller was dismayed by what he was saying, yet was unable to hold back. "I don't expect you to feign grief."

Gesalla struck him across the face, her hand moving so quickly that he was given no chance to avoid the blow. "Never say anything like that to me again. *Never* make that kind of presumption about me! Now, are we leaving or are we going to stand here and talk all day?"

"The sooner we leave the better," he said stonily, resisting the urge to finger the stinging patch on his cheek. "I'll take your pack."

Gesalla snatched the bundle away from him and slung it from her shoulders. "I made it for *me* to carry—you have enough to do." She slipped past him into the corridor, moving lightly and with deceptive speed, and had reached the main stair before he caught up with her.

"What about Sany and the other servants?" he said. "Leaving them doesn't sit easy with me."

She shook her head. "Lain and I both tried to talk them into applying for

warrants, and we failed. You can't force people to go, Toller."

"I suppose you're right." He walked with her to the entrance, taking a last nostalgic look around the hall, and went out to the precinct where his bluehorn was waiting. "Where is your carriage?"

"I don't know—Lain took it yesterday."

"Does that mean we have to ride together?"

Gesalla sighed. "I have no intention of trotting along beside you."

"Very well." Feeling oddly selfconscious, Toller climbed into the saddle and extended a hand to Gesalla. He was surprised at how little effort it took to help her spring into place behind him, and even more so when she slipped her arms around his waist and pressed herself to his back. Some bodily contact was necessary, but it almost seemed as though she... He dismissed the half-formed thought, appalled by his obscene readiness to think of Gesalla in a sexual context, and put the bluehorn into a fast trot.

On leaving the precinct and turning north-west he saw that many more ships were now in the sky above the Quarter, dwindling into specks as they were absorbed by the blue depths of the upper atmosphere. A slight eastward drift was becoming apparent in their movement, which meant that the chaos of the departure might soon be made worse by the arrival of ptertha. Off to his left the towers of smoke rising from the city were being horizontally sheared and smeared where they reached high level air currents. Burning trees created occasional powdery explosions.

Toller rode down the hill as fast as was compatible with safety. The streets were as empty as before, but he was increasingly aware of the sounds of tumult coming from directly ahead. He emerged from the last screen of abandoned buildings and found that the scene at the Quarter's periphery had changed.

The break in the barricade had been enlarged and groups totalling perhaps a hundred had gathered there, denied entry to the base by ranks of infantry. Stones and pieces of timber were being hurled at the soldiers who, although armed with swords and javelins, were not retaliating. Several mounted officers were stationed behind the soldiers, and Toller knew by their sleeved swords and the green flashes on their shoulders that they were part of a Sorka regiment, men who were loyal to Leddravohr and had no particular affiliations with Ro-Atabri. It was a situation which could erupt into carnage at any moment, and if that happened rebel soldiers would probably be drawn to the spot to turn it into a miniature theatre of war.

"Hold on and keep your head down," he said to Gesalla as he drew his sword. "We have to go in hard."

He spurred the bluehorn into a gallop. The powerful beast responded readily,

covering the intervening ground in a few wind-rushing seconds. Toller had hoped to take the rioters completely unawares and burst through them before they could react, but the pounding of hooves on the hard clay attracted the attention of men who had turned to gather stones.

“There’s a bluecoat,” the cry went up. “Get the filthy bluecoat!”

The sight of the massive charging animal and of Toller’s battle sword was enough to scatter all from his path, but there was no escaping the irregular volley of missiles. Toller was struck solidly on the upper arm and thigh, and a skimming piece of slate laid open the knuckles of his rein hand. He kept the bluehorn on course through the overturned timbers of the barricade and had almost reached the lines of soldiers when he heard a thud and felt an impact transmitted through Gesalla’s body. She gasped and slackened her hold for an instant, then recovered her strength. The lines of soldiers parted to make way for him and he pulled the bluehorn to a halt.

“Is it bad?” he said to Gesalla, unable to turn in the saddle or dismount because of her grip on him.

“It isn’t serious,” she replied in a voice he could scarcely hear. “You must go on.”

A bearded lieutenant approached them, saluted and caught the bluehorn’s bridle. “Are you Skycaptain Toller Maraquine?”

“I am.”

“You are to report immediately to Prince Leddravohr at Enclosure 12.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do, lieutenant,” Toller said. “It would be easier if you stepped aside.”

“Sir, Prince Leddravohr’s orders made no mention of a woman.”

Toller raised his eyebrows and met the lieutenant’s gaze directly. “What of it?”

“I... Nothing, sir.” The lieutenant released the bridle and moved back.

Toller urged the bluehorn forward, heading for the row of balloon enclosures. It had been found, though nobody had explained the phenomenon, that perforated barriers protected balloons from air disturbances better than solid screens. The open western sky was shining through square apertures in the enclosures, making them look more than ever like a line of lofty towers, at the foot of which was the seething activity of thousands of workers, air crew and emigrants with all their paraphernalia and supplies.

It said much for the organising ability of Leddravohr, Chakkell and their appointees that the system was able to function at all in such extreme circumstances. Ships were still taking off in groups of two or three, and it occurred to Toller that it was almost a miracle that there had been no serious

accidents.

At that moment, as if the thought had engendered the event, the gondola of a ship rising too quickly struck the rim of its enclosure. The ship was oscillating as it shot into clear air and at a height of two-hundred feet overtook another which had departed some seconds earlier. At the limit of one of its pendulum swings the gondola of the uncontrolled ship drove sideways into the balloon of the slower craft. The latter's envelope split and lost its symmetry, flapping and rippling like some wounded creature of the deep, and the ship plunged to the ground, its acceleration struts trailing loosely. It landed squarely on a group of supply wagons. The impact must have severed its burner feed lines for there was an immediate gouting of flame and black smoke, and the barking of injured or terrified bluehorns was added to the general commotion.

Toller tried not to think about the fate of those on board. The other ship's appallingly bad take-off had looked like the work of a novice, making it seem that many of the one thousand qualified pilots assigned to the migration fleet were not available, possibly stranded by the disturbances in the city. New dangers had been added to the already daunting array of hazards facing the interworld voyagers.

He could feel Gesalla's head lolling against his back as they rode towards the enclosure, and his anxiety about her increased. Her lightweight frame was ill-equipped to withstand the sort of blow he had felt at a remove. As he neared the twelfth enclosure he saw that it and the three adjoining to the north were heavily ringed by foot soldiers and cavalry. In the protected zone there was an area of comparative calm. Four balloons were waiting in the enclosures, with the inflation teams to hand, and knots of richly dressed men and women were standing by heaps of ornamented cases and other belongings. Some of the men were sipping drinks as they craned to see the crashed ship, while small children darted around their legs as though at play on a family outing.

Toller scanned the area and was able to pick out a group at the core of which were Leddravohr, Chakkell and Pouche, all standing close to the seated figure of King Prad. The ruler, slumped on an ordinary chair, was staring at the ground, apparently oblivious to all that was happening. He looked old and dispirited, in marked contrast to the vigorous aspect which Toller remembered.

A youngish army captain came forward to meet Toller as he reined the bluehorn to a halt. He looked surprised when he saw Gesalla, but helped her to the ground readily enough and without any comment. Toller dismounted and saw that her face was totally without colour. She was swaying a little and her eyes had a distant, abstracted look which told him she was in severe pain.

"Perhaps I should carry you," he said as the ranks of soldiers parted at a

signal from the captain.

"I can walk, I can *walk*," she whispered. "Take your hands away, Toller—the beast is not to see me being assisted."

Toller nodded, impressed by her courage, and walked ahead of her towards the royal group. Leddravohr turned to face him and for once did not produce his snake-strike of a smile. His eyes were smouldering in the marble-smooth face. There was a diagonal spattering of crimson on his white cuirass, and blood was congealing thickly around the top of his scabbard, but his manner was suggestive of controlled anger rather than the insane rage of which Zavotle had spoken.

"I sent for you hours ago, Maraquine," he said icily. "Where have you been?"

"Viewing the remains of my brother," Toller said, deliberately omitting the required form of address. "There is something highly suspicious about his death."

"Do you know what you are saying?"

"Yes."

"I see you have returned to your old ways." Leddravohr moved closer and lowered his voice. "My father once extracted a vow from me that I would not harm you, but I will regard myself as released from that vow when we reach Overland. Then, I promise you, I will give you what you have sought so long—but for now more important matters must engage my attention."

Leddravohr turned and padded away, giving a signal to the launch supervisors. At once the balloon inflating crews went to work, cranking the big fans into noisy life. King Prad raised his head, startled, and looked about him with his single troubled eye. The spurious festive mood deserted the various noblemen as the clatter of the fans impressed on them that the unprecedented flight into the unknown was about to begin. Family groups drew together, the children ceased their play, and servants made ready to transfer their masters' belongings to the ships which would depart in the wake of the royal flight.

Beyond the protective lines of guards was a sea of apparently undirected activity as the work of despatching the migration fleet continued. Men were running everywhere, and supply wagons careered among the lumbering flatbed carts which were transporting skyships to the enclosures. Farther away across the open ground of the Quarter, taking advantage of the near-perfect weather conditions, the pilots of cargo ships were inflating their balloons and taking off without the aid of windbreaks. The sky was now thronged with ships, rising like a cloud of strange airborne spores towards the fiery crescent of Overland.

Toller was awed by the sheer drama of the spectacle, the proof that when driven to the limit his own kind had the courage and ability to stride like gods from one world to another, but he was also bemused by what he had just heard

from Leddravohr.

The vow of which Leddravohr had spoken explained certain things—but why had he been asked to make it in the first place? What had prompted the King to single one of his subjects out of so many and place him under his personal protection? Intrigued by the new mystery, Toller glanced thoughtfully in the direction of the seated figure of the King and experienced a peculiar thrill when he saw that Prad was staring directly at him. A moment later the King pointed a finger at Toller, casting a line of psychic force through the groups of bystanders, and then beckoned to him. Ignoring the curious gazes of royal attendants, Toller approached the King and bowed.

“You have served me well, Toller Maraquine,” Prad said in a tired but firm voice. “And now it is in my mind to charge you with one further responsibility.”

“You have but to name it, Majesty,” Toller replied, his sense of unreality increasing as Prad gestured for him to move closer and stoop to receive a private message.

“See to it,” the King whispered, “that my name is remembered on Overland.”

“Majesty...” Toller straightened up, beset with confusion. “Majesty, I don’t understand.”

“Understanding will come—now go to your post.”

Toller bowed and backed away, but before he had time to ponder on the brief exchange he was summoned by Colonel Kartkang, former chief administrator for the S.E.S. Following the dissolution of the Experimental Squadron the colonel had been given the responsibility for coordinating the departure of the royal flight, a task he could hardly have foreseen carrying out in such adverse conditions. His lips were moving silently as he directed Toller to a spot where Leddravohr was addressing three pilots. One of them was Ilven Zavotle, and another was Gollav Amber—an experienced man who had been short-listed for the proving flight. The third was a thick-bodied red-bearded man in his forties, who wore the uniform of a skycommander. After a moment’s thought, Toller identified him as Halsen Kedalse, a former aircaptain and royal messenger.

“...decided that we will travel in separate ships,” Leddravohr was saying as his gaze flickered towards Toller. “Maraquine—the one officer who has experience of taking a ship past the midpoint—will have the responsibility of piloting my father’s ship. I will fly with Zavotle. Prince Chakkell will go with Kedalse, and Prince Pouche with Amber. Each of you will now go to his designated ship and prepare to ascend before littlenight is on us.”

The four pilots saluted and were about to walk to the enclosures when Leddravohr halted them by raising a hand. He studied them for what seemed a long time, looking uncharacteristically irresolute, before he spoke again. “On

reflection, Kedalse has flown my father many times during his long service as an aircaptain. He will fly the King's ship on this occasion, and Prince Chakkell will go with Maraquine. That is all."

Toller saluted again and turned away, wondering what was signified by Leddravohr's change of mind. He had been quick to take the point when Toller had said he was suspicious about Lain's death. *My brother is dead!* Was that an indication of guilt? Had some grotesque twist of thought made Leddravohr unwilling to entrust his father's life to a man whose brother he had murdered, or at least caused to die?

The unmistakable sound of a heavy cannon being fired somewhere in the distance reminded Toller that he had no time to spare for speculation. He looked around for Gesalla. She was standing alone, isolated from the surrounding activity, and something about her posture told him she was still in extreme pain. He ran to the gondola where Prince Chakkell was waiting with his wife, daughter and two small sons. The pearl-coiffed Princess Daseene and the children gazed up at Toller with expressions of wary surmise, and even Chakkell seemed tentative in his manner. They were all deeply afraid, Toller realised, and one of the unknowns facing them was the nature of the relationship to be dictated by the man into whose hands chance had delivered their lives.

"Well, Maraquine," Chakkell said, "are we about to leave?"

Toller nodded. "We could all be safely away from here in a few minutes, Prince—but there is a difficulty."

"A difficulty? What difficulty?"

"My brother died yesterday." Toller paused, taking advantage of the fresh anxiety he had glimpsed in Chakkell's eyes. "My obligation to his widow can only be discharged by bringing her with me on this flight."

"I'm sorry, Maraquine, but that is out of the question," Chakkell said. "This ship is for my use only."

"I know that, Prince, but you are a man who understands family ties, and you can appreciate that it is impossible for me to abandon my brother's widow. If she can't travel on this ship, then I must decline the honour of being your pilot."

"You're talking about treason," Chakkell snapped, wiping perspiration from his bald brown scalp. "I ... Leddravohr would have you executed on the spot if you dared disobey his orders."

"I know that too, Prince, and it would be a great pity for all concerned." Toller directed a thin smile at the watchful children. "If I weren't here an inexperienced pilot would have to take you and your family through that strange region between the worlds. I'm familiar with all the terrors and dangers of the middle passage, you see, and could have prepared you for them."

The two boys continued to gaze up at him, but the girl hid her face in her mother's skirts. Chakkell stared at her with pain-filled eyes and shuffled his feet in an agony of frustration as, for the first time in his life, he had to consider subordinating himself to the will of an ordinary man. Toller smiled at him, falsely sympathetic, and thought, *If this is power, may I never need it again.*

"Your brother's widow may travel in my ship," Chakkell finally said. "And I won't forget about this, Maraquine."

"I'll always remember you with gratitude too," Toller said. As he was climbing into the pilot's station of the gondola he resigned himself to having hardened the enmity that Chakkell already felt for him, but he could feel no guilt or shame this time. He had acted with deliberation and logic to achieve what was necessary, unlike the Toller Maraquine of old, and had the further consolation of knowing he was in tune with the realities of the situation. Lain—*My brother is dead!*—had once said that Leddravohr and his kind belonged to the past, and Chakkell had just vindicated those words. In spite of all the catastrophic changes which had overwhelmed their world, men like Leddravohr and Chakkell acted as though Kolcorron would be created anew on Overland. Only the King seemed to have intuited that everything would be different.

Lying on his back against a partition, Toller signalled to the inflation crew that he was ready to start burning. They stopped cranking and hauled the fan aside, giving him a clear view of the balloon's interior. The envelope, partially filled with cool air, was sagging and rolling between the upraised acceleration struts. He fired a series of blasts into it, drowning out the sound of the other burners which were being operated all along the line of enclosures, and watched it distend and lift itself clear of the ground. As it reached the vertical position the men holding the crown lines closed in and fastened them to the gondola's load frame, and others rotated the lightweight structure until it was horizontal. The huge assemblage of balloon and gondola, now lighter than air, began to strain gently at its central anchor as though Overland was calling to it.

Toller leapt down from the gondola and nodded to Chakkell and the waiting attendants as a sign that the passengers and belongings could go aboard. He went to Gesalla and she made no objection as he unslung the bundle from her shoulder.

"We're ready to go," he said. "You'll be able to lie down and rest as soon as you're on board."

"But that's a royal ship," she replied, unexpectedly hanging back. "I'm supposed to find a place on one of the others."

"Gesalla, please forget all about what was *supposed* to happen. Many ships will fail to leave this place altogether, and it's likely that blood will be shed in

the fight to get on to some of those that do. You must come now.”

“Has the Prince given his consent?”

“We talked it over, and he wouldn’t even consider departing without you.” Toller took Gesalla by the arm and walked with her to the gondola. He went on board first and found that Chakkell, Daseene and the children had taken their places in one passenger compartment, tacitly assigning the other to him and Gesalla. She winced with pain as he helped her climb over the side, and as soon as he had shown her into the vacant compartment she lay down on the wool-filled quilts stored there.

He unbuckled his sword, placed it beside her and returned to the pilot’s station. A heavy cannon again sounded in the distance as he reactivated the burner. The ship was lightly loaded compared to the one he had taken on the proving flight, and he waited less than a minute before pulling the anchor link. There was a gentle lurch and the walls of the enclosure began to slide vertically past him. The climb continued well even when the balloon had fully entered the open air, and in a few seconds Toller had a full-circle view of the Quarter. The three other ships of the royal flight—distinguished by white lateral stripes on their gondolas—had already cleared their enclosures and were slightly above him. All other launches had been temporarily halted, but he still felt the air to be uncomfortably crowded, and he kept a careful watch on the companion ships until the beginnings of a westerly breeze had brought about some dispersion.

In a mass flight there was always the risk of collision between two ships ascending or descending at different speeds. As it was impossible for a pilot to see anything directly above him, because of the balloon, the rule was that the uppermost of a pair had the responsibility of taking action to avoid the lower. The theory was sound as far as it went, but Toller had misgivings about it because almost the only option available in the climb phase was to climb faster and thus increase the risk of overtaking a third ship. That risk would have been minimal had the fleet been able to depart according to plan, but now he was uneasily aware of being part of a straggling vertical swarm.

As the ship gained height the scene on the ground below was revealed in all its astonishing complexity.

Balloons, inflated or laid out flat on the grass, were the dominant features in a matrix of paths and wagon tracks, supply dumps, carts, animals and thousands of people milling about in seemingly aimless activities. Toller could almost see them as communal insects labouring to save bloated queens from some imminent catastrophe. Off to the south, crowds formed a variegated mass at the main entrance to the base, but the foreshortened perspective made it impossible to tell if fighting was already breaking out between newly sundered military

units.

Sketchy lines of people, presumably determined emigrants, were converging on the launch area from several points on the field's perimeter. And beyond them the fires were now spreading more quickly in Ro-Atabri, aided by the freshening breeze, stripping the city of its ptertha defences. In contrast to the seething turmoil engendered by human beings and their appurtenances, Arle Bay and the Gulf of Tronom formed a placid backdrop of turquoise and blue. A two-dimensional Mount Opelmer floated in the hazy distance, serene and undisturbed.

Toller, operating the burner by means of the extension lever, stood at the side of the gondola and tried to assimilate the fact that he was departing the scene for ever, but within him there was only a tremulous void, a near-subliminal agitation which told of suppressed emotions. Too much had happened in the space of a single foreday—*My brother is dead!*—and pain and regret had been laid in store for him, to be drawn upon when the first quiet hours came.

Chakkell was also looking outwards from his compartment, arms around Daseene and his daughter, who appeared to be aged about twelve. Toller, who had previously regarded him as a man motivated by nothing but ambition, wondered if he should revise his opinion. The ease with which he had been coerced in the matter of Gesalla indicated an overriding concern for his family.

Spectators could be seen at the rails of two other royal ships—King Prad and his personal attendants in one, the withdrawn Prince Pouche and retainers in another. Only Leddravohr, who seemed to have decided to travel unaccompanied, was not visible. Zavotle, a lonely figure at the controls of Leddravohr's ship, gave Toller a wave, then began drawing in and fastening his acceleration struts. As his ship was the least burdened of the four he could leave the burner for quite long periods and still match the others' rate of climb.

Toller, who had settled on a two-and-twenty rhythm, did not have the same latitude. As a result of what had been learned from the proving flight it had been decided that the migration ships could safely be operated by unaided pilots, thus freeing more lifting ability for passengers and cargo. During a pilot's rest periods he would entrust the burner or jet to a passenger, though always continuing to monitor the rhythm.

"Littlenight is almost here, Prince," Toller said, speaking courteously to make amends for his earlier insubordination. "I want to secure our struts before then, so I must request you to relieve me at the burner."

"Very well." Chakkell seemed almost pleased at having something useful to do as he took over the extension lever. His dark-haired boys, still shooting timid glances at Toller, came to his side and listened attentively while he explained the

workings of the machinery to them. By the time Toller had hauled in and lashed the struts to the corners of the gondola, Chakkell had taught the boys to count the burner rhythm by making a chanting game of it.

Seeing that all three were engrossed for the time being, Toller went into the compartment where Gesalla was lying. Her eyes were alert and the strained expression had left her face. She extended a hand and offered him a rolled-up bandage which must have come from her bundle of possessions.

He knelt beside her on the bed of soft quilts, reviling himself for the flicker of sexual excitement the action brought, and took the bandage. "How are you?" he said quietly.

"I don't think any of my ribs are actually broken, but they'll have to be bound if I'm to do my share of the work. Help me up." With Toller's assistance she gingerly raised herself to a kneeling position, half-turned away from him and pulled up her grey shirt to expose a massive bruise at one side of her lower ribs. "What do you think?"

"You should be bandaged," he said, unsure of what was expected of him.

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Nothing." He passed the bandage around her and began to lap it tight, but his actions were made awkward by the constrictions of her waistcoat and gathered shirt. Time after time, in spite of all his efforts to the contrary, his knuckles brushed against her breasts and the sensation darted through him like ambersparks, adding to his clumsiness.

Gesalla gave an audible sigh. "You're useless, Toller. Wait!" She pulled open her shirt and removed both it and the waistcoat in a single movement, and now the slimness of her was naked from the waist up. "Try it now."

A vision of Lain's yellow-hooded body turned him into a senseless machine. He completed the bandage with the efficiency and briskness of a battlefield surgeon, and allowed his hands to fall to his sides. Gesalla remained as she was for a few protracted seconds, her gaze warm and solemn, before she picked up the shirt and put it on.

"Thank you," she said, then put out her hand and lightly touched him on the lips.

There was a blaze of rainbow colours and suddenly the ship was in darkness. In the other passenger compartment Daseene or her daughter whimpered with alarm. Toller stood up and looked over the side. The fringed, curved shadow of Overland was speeding towards the eastern horizon, and almost directly below the ship Ro-Atabri was a tangle of orange-burning threads caught in a spreading pool of pitch.

When daylight returned the four ships of the royal flight had attained a height of some twenty miles—and were accompanied by a loose cluster of ptertha.

Toller scanned the sky all around and saw that one globe was only thirty yards away to the north. He went immediately to one of the two rail-mounted cannon on that side, took aim and released the pin which shattered the bilobed glass container in the gun's breech. There was a brief delay while the charges of pikon and halvell mixed, reacted and exploded. The projectile blurred along its trajectory, followed by a glitter of glass fragments, spreading its radial arms as it flew. It curved down through the ptertha and annihilated it, releasing a fast-fading smudge of purple dust.

"That was a good shot," Chakkell said from behind Toller. "Would you say we're safe from the poison at this range?"

Toller nodded. "The ship goes with any wind there is, so the dust can't reach us. The ptertha are not much of a threat, really, but I destroyed that one because there can be some air turbulence at the edge of littlenight. I didn't want to risk the globe picking up a stray eddy and moving in on us."

Chakkell's swarthy face bore an expression of concern as he stared at the remaining globes. "How did they get so close?"

"Pure chance, it seems. If they are spread out over an area of sky and a ship happens to rise up through them, they match its rate of climb. The same thing happened on the..." Toller broke off on hearing two more cannon shots, some distance away, followed by faint screaming which seemed to come from below.

He leaned over the gondola wall and looked straight down. The convex immensity of Land provided an intricate blue-green background for a seemingly endless series of balloons, the nearest of which were only a few hundred yards away and looking very large. Many others were ranged out below them in irregular steps and random groupings, progressively shrinking in apparent size until they reached near-invisibility.

Ptertha could be seen mingling with the uppermost ships and, as Toller watched, another cannon fired and picked off a globe. The projectile quickly lost momentum and faded from sight in a dizzy plunge, losing itself in the cloud patterns far below. The screaming continued, regular as breathing, for some time before gradually fading away.

Toller moved back from the rail, wondering if the screams had been inspired by groundless panic, or if someone had actually seen one of the globes hovering close to a gondola wall—blind, malignant and utterly invincible—just before it darted in for the kill. He was experiencing relief tinged with guilt over having been spared such a fate when a new thought occurred to him. The ptertha had no need to wait for daylight before closing in. There was no guarantee that one or

more of the globes had not driven itself against his own ship during the spell of darkness—and if that were the case neither he, Gesalla nor any of his passengers would live to set foot on Overland.

As he tried to come to terms with the notion he slipped a hand into his pocket, located the curious keepsake given to him by his father, and allowed his thumb to begin circling on the ice-smooth surface.

CHAPTER 19

By the tenth day of the flight the ship was only a thousand miles above the surface of Overland, and the ancient patterns of night and day had been reversed.

The period Toller still tended to think of as littlenight—when Overland was screening out the sun—had grown to be seven hours in length; whereas night—when they were in the shadow of the home world—now lasted less than half that time. He was sitting alone at the pilot's station, waiting for daybreak and trying to foresee his people's future on the new world. It seemed to him that even native Kolcorronians, who had always been accustomed to living directly below the fixed sphere of Overland, might feel oppressed by the sight of a larger planet suspended directly above them and depriving them of a proportionately greater part of their day. Assuming Overland to be uninhabited, the migrants could be disposed towards building their new nation on the far side of the planet, in latitudes corresponding to those of Chamteth on Land. Perhaps a time would come when all memory of their origins had faded and...

Toller's thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of Chakkell's seven-year-old son, Setwan, at the entrance to their compartment. The boy came to his side and leaned his head on Toller's shoulder.

"I can't sleep, Uncle Toller," he whispered. "May I stay here with you?"

Toller lifted the boy on to his knee, smiling to himself as he visualised Daseene's reaction if she heard one of her children address him as uncle.

Of the seven people confined to the punishing microcosm of the gondola, Daseene was the only one who had made no concessions to their situation. She had not spoken to Toller or Gesalla, still wore her pearl coif, and ventured out of the passenger compartment only when it was absolutely necessary. She had gone without food or drink for three whole days rather than submit to the ordeal of using the primitive toilet when near the midpoint of the voyage. Her features had become pale and pinched, and—although the ship had since descended to warmer levels of Overland's atmosphere—she remained huddled in the quilted garments which had been hastily manufactured for the migration flight. She answered in monosyllables when spoken to by her family.

Toller had a certain sympathy for Daseene, knowing that the traumas of

recent days had been greater for her than for any of the others on board. The children—Corba, Oldo and Setwan—had not had enough years in the privileged dreamland of the Five Palaces to condition them irrevocably, and they had a natural sense of curiosity and adventure on their side. Chakkell's responsibilities and ambitions had always kept him fully in touch with the everyday realities of life in Kolcorron, and he had sufficient strength and resourcefulness to let him anticipate a key role in the founding of a new nation on Overland. Indeed Toller had been quite impressed by the way in which the prince, after the initial period of adjustment, had chosen to involve himself with the operation of the ship without shirking any task.

Chakkell had been particularly scrupulous as regards taking long spells at the microjets which gave the ship some control over its lateral position. It was expected and accepted that all other ships of the fleet would be dispersed by air currents over quite a large area of Overland after a journey of five-thousand miles, but Leddravohr had decreed that the royal flight should be able to land in a tight group.

Different methods of tethering the four ships had been dismissed as impracticable, and in the end they had been fitted with miniature horizontal jets delivering only a small fraction of the thrust produced by the attitude control jets. When fired continuously for a long time they added a very slight lateral component to a ship's vertical motion, without causing it to rotate around its centre of gravity, and assiduous use of them had kept the four royal ships in close formation throughout the flight.

The proximity of the others had furnished Toller with one of the most memorable spectacles of his life, when the group had passed the midpoint and it came time to turn the ships over. Although he had been through the experience before, he found something awesome and ineffably beautiful in the sight of the sister planets majestically drifting in opposite directions, Overland gliding out from the occultation of the balloon and down the sky while Land, at the other end of an invisible beam, climbed above the gondola wall.

And with the transposition half complete a new dimension of wonder was added. A receding, dwindling series of ships seemed to reach all the way to each planet, visible as disks which progressively shrank to glowing points. Several of those going in the direction of Overland had delayed turning over and could be seen from underneath with their gondolas, attachments and jet pipes scribed in ever finer detail on the shrinking circles.

As if that were not enough to brim the eye and mind, there was also—against deep blue infinities seeded with swirls and braids and points of frozen brilliance—the sight of the three companion ships carrying out their own inversion

manoeuvres. The structures, which were so fragile that they could be crumpled by a boisterous breeze, remained magically immune to distortion as they stood the universe on its head, proclaiming that this truly was the zone of strangeness. Their pilots, visible as enigmatic mounds of swaddling, surely had to be alien supermen gifted with knowledge and skills inaccessible to ordinary men.

Not all of the scenes witnessed by Toller had possessed such grandeur, but they were imprinted on his memory for different reasons. There was Gesalla's face in its varied moods and aspects—dubiously triumphant as she overcame the waywardness of the galley fire, wanly introspective after hours of “falling” through the region of zero or negligible gravity ... the bursting of all the accompanying ptertha within minutes of each other, after a day of climbing ... the children's looks of astonishment and delight as their breath became visible in the surrounding chill ... the games they played during the brief period when they could suspend beads and trinkets in the air to sketch simplified faces and build three-dimensional designs...

And there had been the other scenes, exterior to the ship, which told of distant tragedies and the kind of death which heretofore had belonged to the realms of purest nightmare.

The royal flight had taken off at quite an early stage in the evacuation of the Quarter, and Toller knew that by the time they were a day and more past the midpoint they had above them an attenuated linear cloud of ships perhaps a hundred miles high. Had they not already been screened from view by the sedate vastness of his own balloon most of them would have been rendered invisible by sheer distance, but he had received disturbing proof of their existence. It took the form of a sparse, spasmodic and dreadful rain. A rain whose droplets were solid and which varied in size, from entire skyships to human bodies.

On three separate occasions he had seen crumpled ships plunge down past him, the gondolas wrapped in the slow-flapping ruins of their balloons, bound on the day-long fall to Overland. It was his guess that all vestiges of order had disappeared during the latter hours of the escape from Ro-Atabri, and that in the chaos some ships had been taken up by inexperienced fliers or had even been commandeered by rebels with no aviation knowledge at all. It looked as though some of them had driven far past the midpoint without turning over, their velocity being augmented by the growing attraction of Overland until the stresses in the flimsy envelopes had torn them apart.

Once he had seen a gondola plummeting down without its balloon, maintaining its proper attitude because of the trailing lines and acceleration struts, and a dozen soldiers had been visible at its rails, mutely surveying the procession of still-airworthy ships which was to be their last tenuous link with

humanity and with life.

But for the most part the falling objects had been smaller—cooking utensils, ornate boxes, sacks of provisions, human and animal forms—evidence of catastrophic accidents tens of miles higher in the wavering stack of ships.

Not very far past the midpoint, while Overland's pull was still weak and the fall speeds were low, a young man had dropped past the ships, so close that Toller could easily discern his features. Perhaps out of bravado, or a desperate craving for a last communion with another human being, the young man had called out to Toller, quite cheerfully, and had waved a hand. Toller had not responded in a way, feeling that to do so would have been to take part in some unspeakable parody of a jest, and had remained petrified at the rail, appalled and yet unable to avert his gaze from the doomed man for the many minutes that it took him to dwindle out of sight.

Hours later, when darkness was all about him and he was trying to sleep, Toller had kept thinking of the falling man—who by then might have been a thousand miles ahead of the migration fleet—and wondering how he was preparing himself for the final impact...

Comforted by the drowsing presence of Setwan on his knee, Toller was operating the burner like an automaton, unconsciously timing the blasts with his heartbeats, when daylight abruptly returned. He blinked several times and saw at once that something was wrong, that only two ships of the royal flight were holding level with him, instead of three.

The missing skyship was the one in which the King was flying.

There was nothing very unusual about that—Kedalse was an ultra-cautious pilot who liked to slow his descent at night, preferring to keep the other ships a little below him where he could easily monitor their positions—but this time he was not even visible in the upper sweeps of the sky.

Toller swiftly lifted Setwan and had just placed him in the passenger compartment with his family when he heard frantic shouts from Zavotle and Amber. He glanced towards them and saw that they were pointing at something above his ship, and in the same moment a gust of hot miglign gas came belching down out of the balloon mouth, bringing a startled whimper from one of the children. Toller looked up into the glowing dome of the balloon and his heart quaked as he saw the square silhouette of a gondola impressed upon it, distorting the spider-web geometries of the load tapes.

The King's ship was directly above him and had come down hard on his own balloon.

Toller could see the circular imprint of the other ship's jet nozzle digging into

the crown of the envelope, endangering the integrity of the rip panel. There was a chorus of creaks from the rigging and from the acceleration struts, and a rippling distortion of the balloon fabric expelled more choking gas down into the gondola.

“Kedalse,” he shouted, not knowing if his voice would be heard in the upper gondola. “Lift your ship! Lift your ship!”

The faint voices of Zavotle and Amber joined with his own, and a sunwriter began to flash from one of their gondolas, but there was no response from above. The King’s ship continued to bear down on the overloaded balloon, threatening to burst or collapse it.

Toller glanced helplessly at Gesalla and Chakkell, who had risen to their feet and were staring at him in open-mouthed dread. The best explanation he could think of for the crisis was that the King’s pilot had been overcome by illness and was unconscious or dead at the controls. If that were the case somebody else in the upper gondola might begin firing the burner and separate the two craft, but it would need to be done very soon. And there was also the possibility—Toller’s mouth went dry at the thought—that the burner had failed in some way and could not be fired.

He strove to force his brain into action as the deck swayed beneath his feet and the fabric of the balloon emitted sounds like the cracking of a whip. The pair of ships had already begun to lose height too quickly, as was evidenced by the fact that the other two visible ships had acquired a relative upward movement.

Leddravohr had appeared at the rail of his own gondola, for the first time since the take-off, and behind him Zavotle was still emitting futile blinks of brilliance from his sunwriter.

It was impossible for Toller to get away from the King’s ship by increasing his own rate of descent. His craft had already lost gas and was coming perilously near the condition in which the air pressures of an excessive fall-speed could collapse the balloon, initiating a thousand-mile drop to the surface of Overland.

In fact, there was an urgent requirement to fire large quantities of hot gas into the balloon—but doing so, with the extra load imposed from above, was to risk increasing the internal pressure so much that the envelope would simply tear itself apart.

Toller locked eyes with Gesalla, and the imperative was born in his mind: *I choose to live!*

He twisted his way into the seat at the pilot’s station and fired the burner in a long thunderous blast, engorging the hungry balloon with hot gas, and a few seconds later he pushed the lever of an attitude-control jet. The jet’s exhaust was lost in the engulfing roar of the burner, but its effect was not diminished.

The other two members of the royal flight drifted downwards and out of sight as Toller's ship rotated around its centre of gravity. There came a series of low-pitched inhuman groans and shudders as the King's ship slid down the side of Toller's balloon and came into view above him. One of its acceleration struts tore free of its lower attachment point and began wandering and circling in the air like a duellist's sword.

As Toller watched, frozen into his own continuum, the sluggish movements so characteristic of skyships abruptly accelerated. The other gondola drew level with him and the free end of the strut came blindly stabbing down into the galley compartment of Toller's ship, imparting a dangerous tilt to the universe. The shock of the impact raced back along the strut and its upper end gouged into the other balloon.

A seam ripped apart—and the balloon *died*.

It collapsed inwards, writhing in a perfect simulation of agony, and now the King's ship was falling unchecked. The leverage it exerted through the strut turned Toller's gondola on its side and Overland flashed into view, eager and expectant. Gesalla screamed as she fell against the lowermost wall and the looking-glass she had been holding spun out into the blue emptiness. Toller threw himself into the galley, risking going over the side in the process, gripped the end of the strut and—summoning all the power of his warrior's physique—raised it and cast it free.

As the gondola righted itself he clung to the rail and watched the other ship begin its lethal plunge. At the height of a thousand miles gravity was at less than half strength and the tempo of events had again lapsed into dreamlike slow motion. He saw King Prad swim to the side of the falling gondola. The King, his blind eye shining like a star, raised one hand and pointed at Toller, then he was hidden from view by the swirls of his ship's ruined balloon. Gaining speed as it settled into the fall, still seeking a balance between gravitation and air resistance, the ship dwindled to become a fluttering speck at the limits of vision, and finally was lost in the fractal patterns of Overland.

Becoming aware of a fierce psychic pressure, Toller raised his head and looked at the two accompanying ships. Leddravohr was gazing at him from the nearer, and as their eyes met he extended both arms towards Toller, like a man calling a loved one to his embrace. He remained like that, mutely imploring, and even when Toller had returned to the burner he could almost feel the prince's hatred as an invisible blade knifing through his soul. A grey-faced Chakkell was gazing at him from the entrance to the passenger compartment, inside which Daseene and Corba were quietly sobbing.

"This is a bad day," Chakkell said in a halting voice. "The King is dead."

Not yet, Toller thought. *He still has quite a few hours to go.* Aloud he said, "You saw what happened. We're lucky to be here. I had no choice."

"Leddravohr won't see it like that."

"No," Toller said pensively. "Leddravohr won't see it like that."

That night, while Toller was vainly trying to sleep, Gesalla came to his side, and in the loneliness of the hour it seemed perfectly natural for him to put his arm around her. She rested her head on his shoulder and brought her mouth close to his ear.

"Toller," she whispered, "what are you thinking about?"

He considered lying to her, then decided he had had enough of barriers. "I'm thinking about Leddravohr. It all has to be settled between us."

"Perhaps he will have thought the thing through by the time we reach Overland and will be of a different mind. I mean, it wasn't even as if sacrificing us would have saved the King. Leddravohr is bound to admit that you had no choice."

"I may have felt I had no choice, but Leddravohr will say I acted too quickly in rolling us out from under his father's ship. Perhaps I would say the same thing if the positions were reversed. If I had waited a little longer Kedalse or somebody else might have got their burner going."

"You mustn't think that way," Gesalla said softly. "You did what had to be done."

"And Leddravohr is going to do what has to be done."

"You can overcome him, can't you?"

"Perhaps—but I fear that he will have already given orders for me to be executed," Toller said. "I can't fight a regiment."

"I see." Gesalla raised herself on one elbow and looked down at him, and in the dimness her face was impossibly beautiful. "Do you love me, Toller?"

He felt he had reached the end of a lifelong journey. "Yes."

"I'm glad." She sat up straighter and began to remove her clothing. "Because I want a child from you."

He caught her wrist, smiling numbly in his disbelief. "What do you think you're doing? Chakkell is on the burner just on the other side of this partition."

"He can't see us."

"But this isn't the way to..."

"I don't care about any of that," Gesalla said, pressing her breast against the hand that was holding her wrist. "I have chosen you to father my child, and there may be very little time for us."

"It won't work, you know." Toller relaxed back on the quilts. "It's physically

impossible for me to make love in these conditions.”

“That’s what you think,” Gesalla said as she moved astride of him and brought her mouth down on his, moulding his cheeks with both her hands to coax him into an ardent response.

CHAPTER 20

Overland's equatorial continent, seen from a height of two miles, looked essentially prehistoric.

Toller had been staring down at the outward-seeping landscape for some time before realising why that particular adjective kept coming to mind. It was not the total absence of cities and roads—first proof that the continent was uninhabited—but the uniform coloration of the grasslands.

Throughout his life every aerial view he had seen had been modified in some way by the six-harvest system which was universal on Land. The edible grasses and all other cultivated vegetation had been arranged in parallel strips in which the colours ranged from brown through several shades of green to harvest yellow, but here the plains were simply ... *green*.

The sunlit expanses of the single colour shimmered in his eyes.

Our farmers will have to start the seed-sorting all over again, he thought. And the mountains and seas and rivers all have to be given names. It really is a new beginning on a new world. And I don't think I'm going to be part of it...

Reminded of his personal problems, he turned his attention to the artificial elements of the scene. The two other ships of the royal flight were slightly below him. Pouche's was the more distant, most of its passengers visible at the rail as they journeyed ahead in their imaginations to the unknown world.

Ilven Zavotle was the only person to be seen on Leddravohr's ship, sitting tiredly at the controls. Leddravohr himself must have been lying down in a passenger compartment, as he had done—except during the traumatic episode two days before—throughout the voyage. Toller had noted the prince's behaviour earlier and wondered if he could be phobic about the boundless emptiness surrounding the migration fleet. If that were the case, it would have been better for Toller if their inevitable duel could have been fought aboard one of the gondolas.

In the two miles of airspace below him he could see twelve other balloons forming an irregular line which increasingly flared off to the west, evidence of a moderate breeze in the lowest levels of the atmosphere. The general area into which they were drifting was sprinkled with the elongated shapes of collapsed balloons, which would later be used to build a temporary township of tents. As

he had expected, Toller's binoculars showed that most of the grounded ships had military markings. Even in the turmoil of the escape from Ro-Atabri, Leddravohr had had the foresight to provide himself with a power base which would be effective from the instant he set foot on Overland.

Analysing the situation, Toller could see no prospect at all of his living for more than a matter of minutes if he put his ship down close to Leddravohr's. Even if he were to defeat Leddravohr in single combat, he would—as the man charged with the death of the King—be taken by the army. His single and desperately slim chance of survival, for a term to be measured in days at most, lay in hanging back during the touchdown and going aloft again as soon as Leddravohr's ship was committed to a landing. There were forested hills perhaps twenty miles west of the landing site, and if he could reach them with his balloon he might be able to avoid capture until the forces of the infant nations were properly organised in the cause of his destruction.

The weakest point of the plan was that it hinged on factors outside his own control, all of them concerned with the mind and character of Leddravohr's pilot.

He had no doubt at all that Zavotle would make the correct deductions when he saw Toller's ship being tardy during the landing, but would he be sympathetic with Toller's aims? And even if he were inclined to be loyal to a fellow skyman, would he take the personal risk of doing what Toller expected of him? He would have to be quick to pull the rip panel and collapse his balloon—just as it was becoming apparent to Leddravohr that his enemy was slipping out of his grasp—and there was no predicting how the prince might react in his anger. He had struck other men down for lesser offences.

Toller stared across the field of brightness at the solitary figure of Zavotle, knowing that his gaze was being returned, then he put his back against the gondola wall and eyed Chakkell, who was operating the burner at the one-and-twenty rhythm of the descent.

“Prince, there is a breeze at ground level and I fear the ship may be dragged,” he said, making his opening move. “You and the princess and your children should be ready to go over the side even before we touch the ground. It might sound dangerous, but there's a good ledge all around the gondola for standing on, and our ground speed will be little more than a walking pace. Jumping off before touchdown is preferable to being in the gondola if it overturns.”

“I'm touched by your solicitude,” Chakkell said, giving Toller a tilt-headed look of surmise.

Wondering if he had blundered so early, Toller approached the pilot's station. “We'll be landing very soon, Prince. You must be prepared.”

Chakkell nodded, vacated the seat and, unexpectedly, said, “I still remember

the first time I saw you, in the company of Glo. I never thought it would come to this.”

“Lord Glo had vision,” Toller replied. “He should be here.”

“I suppose so.” Chakkell gave him another searching look and went into the compartment where Daseene and the children were making ready for the landing.

Toller sat down and took control of the burner, noting as he did so that the pointer on the altitude gauge had fully returned to the bottom mark. As Overland was smaller than Land he would have expected its surface gravity to be less, but Lain had said otherwise. *Overland has a higher density, and therefore everything there will weigh about the same as on Land.* Toller shook his head, half smiling in belated tribute to his brother. How had Lain *known* what to expect? Mathematics was one aspect of his brother’s life which would forever remain a closed book to him, as looked like being the case with...

He glanced at Gesalla, who for an hour had been motionless at the outer wall of their compartment, her attention fully absorbed by the expanding vistas of the new world below. Her bundle of possessions was already slung on her shoulder, giving the impression that she was impatient to set foot on Overland and go about the business of carving out whatever future she had visualised for herself and the child which, possibly, he had seeded into her. The emotions aroused in him by the sight of her slim, straight and uncompromising form were the most complex he had ever known.

On the night she had come to him he had been quite certain he would be unable to fulfil the male role because of his tiredness, his guilt and the unnerving presence of Chakkell, who had been operating the burner only a few feet away. But Gesalla had known better. She had worked on him with fervour, skill and imagination, plying him with her mouth and gracile body until nothing else existed for him but the need to pulse his semen into her. She had remained on top of him until the climactic moment was near, then had insensibly engineered a change of position and had held it, with upthrust pelvis and legs locked around him, for minutes afterwards. Only later, when they had been talking, had he realised that she had been maximising the chances of conception.

And now, as well as loving her, he hated her for some of the things she had said to him during the remainder of that night while the meteors flickered in the dimness all around. There had been no direct statements, but there was revealed to him a Gesalla who, while displaying chilly anger over a fine point of etiquette, was at the same time prepared to defy any convention for the sake of a future child. In the milieu of the old Kolcorron it had seemed to her that the qualities offered by Lain Maraquine would be the most advantageous for her offspring,

and so she had married him. She had loved Lain, but the thing which chafed Toller's sensibilities was that she had loved Lain for a reason.

And now that she was being projected into the vastly different frontier environment of Overland, it had been her considered judgment that attributes available through Toller Maraquine's seed were to be preferred, and so she had coupled with him.

In his confusion and pain, Toller was unable to identify the principal source of his resentment. Was it self-disgust at having been so easily seduced by his brother's widow? Was it lacerated pride over having his finest feelings made part of an exercise in eugenics? Or was he furious with Gesalla for not fitting in with his preconceptions, for not being what he wanted her to be? How was it possible for a woman to be a prude and a wanton at the same time, to be generous and selfish, hard and soft, accessible and remote, his and not his?

The questions were endless, Toller realised, and to dwell on them at this stage would be futile and dangerous. The only preoccupations he could afford were with staying alive.

He fitted the extension tube to the burner lever and moved to the side of the gondola to give himself maximum visibility for the descent. As the horizon began to rise level with him he gradually increased his burn ratio, allowing Zavotle's ship to move farther ahead. It was important to achieve the greatest vertical separation that was possible without arousing the suspicions of Leddravohr and Chakkell. He watched as the dozen ships still airborne ahead of the royal flight touched down one by one, the precise moment of each contact being signalled by the shocked contortion of the balloon, followed by the appearance of a triangular rent in the crown and the wilting collapse of the entire envelope.

The entire area was dotted with ships which had landed previously, and already some sort of order was beginning to be imposed on the scene. Supplies were being brought together and piled, and teams of men were running to each new ship as it touched down.

The sense of awe Toller had expected to accompany such a sight was missing, displaced by the urgency of his situation. He trained his binoculars on Zavotle's ship as it neared the ground and risked firing a long blast of miglign into his own balloon. On that instant, as though his ears had been attuned to the telltale sound, Leddravohr materialised at the gondola rail. His shadowed eyes were intent on Toller's ship, and even at that distance they could be seen flaring with coronas of white as he realised what was happening.

He turned to say something to his pilot, but Zavotle—without waiting for ground contact—pulled his rip line. The balloon above him went into the

heaving convulsions of its death throes. The gondola skidded into the grass and was lost from view as the dark brown shroud of the envelope fluttered down around it. Groups of soldiers—among them one officer mounted on a bluehorn—ran to the ship and that of Pouche, which was making a more leisurely touchdown a furlong farther away.

Toller lowered his binoculars and faced Chakkell. “Prince, for reasons which must be obvious to you, I am not going to land my ship at this time. I have no desire to take you or any other disinterested parties—” he paused to glance at Gesalla—”into an alien wilderness with me, therefore I’m going to go within grass level of the surface. At that point it will be very easy for you and your family to part company with the ship, but you must act quickly and with resolution. Is that understood?”

“No!” Chakkell left the passenger compartment and took a step towards Toller. “You will land the ship in full accordance with normal procedure. That is my command, Maraquine. I have no intention of subjecting myself or my family to any unnecessary hazards.”

“*Hazards!*” Toller drew his lips into a smile. “Prince, we are talking about a drop of a few inches. Compare that to the thousand-mile tumble they almost embarked upon two days ago.”

“Your meaning isn’t lost on me.” Chakkell hesitated and glanced at his wife. “But still I must insist on a landing.”

“And I insist otherwise,” Toller said, hardening his voice. The ship was still about thirty feet above the ground and with each passing moment the breeze bore it farther away from the spot where Leddravohr had come down, but the period of grace had to come to an end soon. Even as Toller was trying to guess how much time he had in hand he saw Leddravohr emerge from under the collapsed balloon. Simultaneously, Gesalla climbed over the gondola wall and positioned herself on the outer ledge, ready to jump free. Her eyes met Toller’s only briefly, and there was no communication. He allowed the descent to continue until he could discern individual blades of grass.

“Prince, you must decide quickly,” he said. “If you don’t leave the ship soon, we all go aloft together.”

“Not necessarily.” Chakkell leaned closer to the pilot’s station and snatched the red line which was connected to the balloon’s rip panel. “I think this restores my authority,” he said, and jabbed a pointing finger as he saw Toller instinctively tighten his grip on the extension lever. “If you try to ascend I’ll vent the balloon.”

“That would be dangerous at this height.”

“Not if I only do it partially,” Chakkell replied, displaying knowledge he had

acquired while controlling production of the migration fleet. “I can bring the ship down quite gently.”

Toller looked beyond him and in the distance saw Leddravohr in the act of commandeering the bluehorn of the officer who had rode to meet his ship. “Any landing would be gentle,” he said, “compared to the one your children would have made after falling a thousand miles.”

Chakkell shook his head. “Repetition doesn’t strengthen your case, Maraquine—it only brings to mind the fact that you were also saving your own skin. Leddravohr is now King, and my first duty is to him.”

There was a whispering sound from underfoot as the jet exhaust funnel brushed the tips of tall grass. Half-a-mile away to the east, Leddravohr was astride the bluehorn and was galloping towards the ship, followed by groups of soldiers on foot.

“And my first loyalty is towards my children,” the Princess Daseene announced unexpectedly, her head appearing above the partition of the passenger compartment. “I’ve had enough of this—and of you, Chakkell.”

With surprising agility and lack of concern for her dignity she swarmed over the gondola wall and helped Corba to follow. Unbidden, Gesalla came swiftly around the gondola on the outside and aided in the lifting of the two boys on to the ledge.

Daseene, still wearing the incongruous pearl coif like a general’s insignia, fixed her husband with an imperious stare. “You are indebted to that man for my life,” she said angrily. “If you refuse to honour the debt it can mean but one thing.”

“But...” Chakkell clapped his brow in perplexity, then pointed at Leddravohr, who was rapidly gaining on the slow-drifting ship. “What will I say to *him*!”

Toller reached down into the compartment he had shared with Gesalla and retrieved his sword. “You could say I threatened you with this.”

“Are you threatening me with it?”

The sound of whipping grass became louder, and the gondola bucked slightly as the jet exhaust made a fleeting contact with the ground. Toller glanced at Leddravohr—now only two-hundred yards away and flailing the bluehorn into a wilder gallop—then shouted at Chakkell.

“For your own good—leave the ship *now*!”

“Something else to remember you for,” Chakkell mumbled as he let go of the rip line. He went to the side, rolled himself over on to the ledge and immediately dropped away to the ground. Daseene and the children followed him at once, one of the boys whooping with pleasurable excitement, leaving only Gesalla holding on to the rail.

“Goodbye,” Toller said.

“Goodbye, Toller.” She continued to stand at the rail, staring at him in what looked like surprise. Leddravohr was now little more than a hundred yards away and the sound of his bluehorn’s hoofbeats was growing louder by the second.

“What are you waiting for?” Toller heard his own voice cracking with urgency. “Get off the ship!”

“No—I’m going with you.” In the time it took her to utter the words Gesalla had climbed back over the rail and dropped to the gondola floor.

“What are you *doing*?” Every nerve in Toller’s body was screaming for him to fire the burner and try to lift the ship out of Leddravohr’s reach, but his arm muscles and hands were locked. “Have you gone crazy?”

“I think so,” Gesalla said strickenly. “It’s idiotic—but I’m going with you.”

“You’re mine, Maraquine,” Leddravohr called out in a strange fervent chant as he drew his sword. “Come to me, Maraquine.”

Almost mesmerised, Toller was tightening his grip on his own sword when Gesalla threw herself past him and dropped her full weight on to the extension lever. The burner roared at once, blasting gas into the waiting balloon. Toller silenced it by pulling the lever up, then he pushed Gesalla back against a partition.

“Thank you, but this is pointless,” he said. “Leddravohr has to be faced at some stage, and this seems to be the ordained time.”

He kissed Gesalla lightly on the forehead, turned back to the rail and locked eyes with Leddravohr, who was on a level with him and now only a dozen yards away. Leddravohr, apparently sensing his change of heart, struck his smile into existence. Toller felt the first stirrings of a shameful excitement, a yearning to have everything settled with Leddravohr once and for all, regardless of the outcome, to know for certain if...

His sequence of thought was broken as he saw an abrupt change of expression on Leddravohr’s face. There was sudden alarm there, and the prince was no longer looking directly at him. Toller swung round and saw that Gesalla was holding the butt of one of the ship’s ptertha cannon. She had already driven home the firing pin and was aiming the weapon at Leddravohr. Before Toller could react the cannon fired. The projectile was a central blur in a spray of glass fragments, spreading its arms as it flew.

Leddravohr twisted away from it successfully, pulling his mount off course, but shards of glass pocked his face with crimson. He gasped with shock and hauled the galloping bluehorn back into line, rapidly making up lost ground.

Staring frozenly at Leddravohr, knowing the rules of their private war had been changed, Toller fired the burner. The skyship had been made lighter by the

departure of Chakkell and his family and had been disposed to rise ever since, but the inertia of the tons of gas inside the balloon made it nightmarishly slow to respond. Toller kept the burner roaring and the gondola began to lift clear of the grass, Leddravohr was now almost within reach and was raising himself in the stirrups. His eyes glared insanely at Toller from a mask of blood.

Is he mad enough to try leaping on to the gondola? Toller wondered. *Does he want to meet the point of my sword?*

In the next pounding second Toller became aware that Gesalla had darted around behind him and was at the other cannon on the windward side. Leddravohr saw her, drew back his arm and hurled his sword.

Toller gave a warning cry, but the sword had not been aimed at a human target. It arced high above him and sank to the hilt in a lower panel of the balloon. The fabric split and the sword fell clear, spinning down into the grass. Leddravohr reined his bluehorn to a halt, jumped down and retrieved the black blade. He remounted immediately and spurred the bluehorn forward, but he was no longer overtaking the ship, being content to pace it at a distance. Gesalla fired the second cannon, but the projectile plunged harmlessly into the grass well clear of Leddravohr, who responded with a courtly wave of his arm.

Still firing the burner, Toller looked up and saw that the rent in the varnished linen of the envelope had run the full length of the panel. The edges of it were pursed, invisibly spewing gas, but the ship had finally gained some upward momentum and was continuing its sluggish climb.

Toller was startled by the sound of hoarse shouting from close by. He spun round and discovered that, while all his attention had been concentrated on Leddravohr, the ship had been drifting directly towards a scattered band of soldiers. The gondola sailed over them with only a few feet to spare and they began to run along behind and below it, leaping in their efforts to grab hold of the ledge.

Their faces were anxious rather than hostile, and it came to Toller that they had only the vaguest idea of what had been happening. Praying he would not have to take action against any of them, he kept on blasting gas into the balloon and was rewarded by an agonisingly slow but steady gain in height.

“Can the ship fly?” Gesalla came to his side, straining to make herself heard above the roar of the burner. “Are we safe?”

“The ship can fly—after a fashion,” Toller said, choosing to ignore her second question. “Why did you do it, Gesalla?”

“Surely you know.”

“No.”

“Love came back to me.” She gave him a peaceful smile. “After that I had no

choice

The fulfilment Toller should have felt was lost in black territories of fear. “But you attacked Leddravohr! And he has no mercy, even for women.”

“I don’t need reminding.” Gesalla looked back at the slow-moving, attendant figure of Leddravohr, and for a moment scorn and hatred robbed her of beauty. “You were right, Toller—we must not simply surrender to the butchers. Leddravohr destroyed the life in me once, and Lain and I compounded the crime by ceasing to love each other, ceasing to love ourselves. We gave too much.”

“Yes, but...” Toller took a deep breath as he strove to accord Gesalla the rights he had always claimed for himself.

“But what?”

“We have to lighten the ship,” he said, passing the burner control lever to her. He went into the compartment vacated by Chakkell and began hurling trunks and boxes over the side.

The pursuing soldiers whooped and cheered until Leddravohr rode in among them, and his gestures showed that he was giving orders for the containers to be carried back to the main landing site. Within a minute the soldiers had turned back with their burdens, leaving Leddravohr to follow the ship alone. The wind speed was about six miles an hour and as a result the bluehorn was able to keep pace in a leisurely trot. Leddravohr was riding slightly beyond the cannons’ effective reach, slouched in the saddle, expending little energy and waiting for the situation to turn to his advantage.

Toller checked the pikon and halvell magazines and found he had sufficient crystals for at least a day of continuous burning—the ships of the royal flight having been more generously provided than the others—but his principal concern was with the ship’s lack of performance. The rip in the balloon was showing no sign of spreading past the upper and lower panel seams, but the amount of gas spilling through it was almost enough to deprive the ship of its buoyancy.

In spite of the continuous firing of the burner the gondola had gained no more than twenty feet, and Toller knew that the slightest adverse change in conditions would force a descent. A sudden gust of wind, for example, could flatten one side of the envelope and expel precious gas, delivering Gesalla and him into the hands of the patiently stalking enemy. Alone he would have been more than prepared to contend with Leddravohr, but now Gesalla’s life also depended on the outcome...

He went to the rail and gripped it with both hands, staring back at Leddravohr and longing for a weapon capable of striking the prince down at a distance. The arrival on Overland had been so different to all his imaginings. Here he was on

the sister planet—*on Overland!*—but the malign presence of Leddravohr, embodiment of all that was rank and evil in Kolcorron, had degraded the experience and made the new world an offshoot of the old. Like the ptertha increasing their lethal powers, Leddravohr had extended his own killing radius to encompass Overland. Toller should have been enthralled by the spectacle of a pristine sky bisected by a zigzag line of fragile ships which stretched down from the zenith, emerging from invisibility as they sank like windborne seeds in search of fertile ground—but there was Leddravohr.

Always there was Leddravohr.

“Are you worried about the hills?” Gesalla said. She had sunk to a kneeling position, out of Leddravohr’s view, and had one hand raised to work the burner’s lever.

“We can lash that down,” Toller said. “You won’t need to keep on holding it.”

“Toller, are you worried about the hills?”

“Yes.” He took a length of twine from a locker and used it to tie down the lever. “If we could get over the hills there’d be a chance of wearing Leddravohr’s bluehorn out—but I don’t know if we can gain enough height.”

“I’m not afraid, you know.” Gesalla touched his hand. “If you would prefer to go down and face him now, it’s all right.”

“No, we’ll stay aloft as long as possible. We have food and drink here and can keep up our strength while Leddravohr is slowly losing his.” He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “Besides, littlenight will be here soon, and that’s to our advantage because the balloon will work better in the cooler air. We may yet be able to set up our own little colony on Overland.”

Littlenight was longer than on Land, and by the time it had passed the gondola was at an altitude of slightly more than two-hundred feet—which was a better gain than Toller had expected. The lower slopes of the nameless hills were sliding by beneath the ship, and none of the ridges he could see ahead seemed quite high enough to claw it out of the sky. He consulted the map he had drawn while still on the skyship.

“There’s a big lake about ten miles beyond the hills,” he said. “If we can fly over it we should be able to...”

“Toller! I think I see a ptertha!” Gesalla caught his arm as she pointed to the south. “Look!”

Toller threw the map down, raised his binoculars and scanned the indicated section of sky. He was about to query Gesalla’s remark when he picked out a hint of sphericity, a near-invisible crescent of sunlight glinting on something transparent.

“I think you’re right,” he said. “And it has no colour. That’s what Lain meant. It has no colour because...” He passed the binoculars to Gesalla. “Can you find any brakka trees?”

“I didn’t realise you can see so much with glasses.” Gesalla, speaking with childish enthusiasm, might have been on a pleasure flight as she studied the hillside. “Most of the trees aren’t like anything I’ve ever seen before, but I think there are brakka among them. Yes, I’m sure. Brakka! How can that be, Toller?”

Guessing she was purposely distracting her mind from what was to come, he said, “Lain wrote that brakka and ptertha go together. Perhaps the brakka discharges are so powerful that they shoot their seeds up into... No, that’s only for pollen, isn’t it? Perhaps brakka grow everywhere—on Farland and every other planet.”

Leaving Gesalla to her observations with the binoculars, Toller leaned on the rail and returned his attention to Leddravohr, the relentless pursuer.

For hours Leddravohr had been slumped in the saddle, giving the impression of being asleep, but now—as though concerned that his quarry could be on the point of eluding him—he was sitting upright. He had no helmet, but was shading his eyes with his hands as he chose the bluehorn’s path through the trees and patches of scrub which dappled the slopes he was climbing. Off to the east the landing site and the line of descending balloons had been lost in blue-hazed distance, and it was as though Gesalla, Toller and Leddravohr had the entire planet to themselves. Overland had become a vast sunlit arena, held in readiness since the beginning of time...

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden flapping sound from the balloon.

The noise was followed by a downward rush of heat from the balloon mouth which told him the ship had blundered into turbulent air flung up from a secondary ridge. The gondola abruptly began to yaw and sway. Toller fixed his gaze on the main crest, which was now only about two-hundred yards away on the line of flight. He knew that if they could scrape over it there might be time for the balloon to recover, but in the instant of looking at the rocky barrier he realised the situation was hopeless. The ship, which had been so reluctant to take flight, was already abandoning the aerial element, sailing determinedly towards the hillside.

“Hold on to something,” Toller shouted. “We’re going down!”

He tore the extension lever free of its lashings and shut the burner off. A few seconds later the gondola began swishing through treetops. The sounds grew louder and the gondola bucked violently as it impacted with increasingly thicker branches and trunks. Above and behind Toller the collapsing balloon tore with a series of groans and snaps as it entangled itself with the trees, applying a brake

to the ship's lateral movement.

The gondola dropped vertically as it took up the slack in its load cables, broke free at two corners and turned on its side, almost hurling its two occupants clear amid a shower of quilts and small objects. Incredibly, after the jolting and dangerous progression from treetop height, Toller found himself able to step down easily on to mossy ground. He turned and lifted Gesalla, who was clinging to a stanchion, and set her down beside him.

"You must get away from here," he said quickly. "Get to the other side of the hill and find a place to hide."

Gesalla threw her arms around him. "I should stay with you. I might be able to help."

"Believe me, you won't be able to help. If our baby is growing in you, you must take this chance for it to live. If Leddravohr kills me he may not go after you—especially if he is wounded."

"But..." Gesalla's eyes widened as the bluehorn snorted a short distance away. "But I won't know what has happened."

"I'll fire one of the cannon if I win." He spun Gesalla around and pushed her away with such force that she was obliged to break into a run to avoid falling. "Only come back if you hear a cannon."

He stood quite still and watched until Gesalla, with several backward glances, had disappeared into the cover of the trees. He had drawn his sword, and was looking about him for a clear space in which to fight, when it came to him that ingrained behaviour patterns were causing him to approach the clash with Leddravohr as though he were entering a formal duel.

How can you think that way when other lives are at stake? he asked himself, dismayed by the extent of his own naivety. *What was honour got to do with the plain task of excising a canker?*

He glanced at the slow-swinging gondola, decided on Leddravohr's most probable line of approach to it, and stepped back into the concealment of three trees which grew so closely that they might have sprung from the same root. The same excitement he had known before—shameful and inexplicably sexual—began to steal over him.

He quieted his breathing, ridding himself of his humanity, and a new thought occurred: *Leddravohr was nearby a minute ago—so why have I not seen him by now?*

Knowing the answer, he turned his head and saw Leddravohr about ten paces away. Leddravohr had already thrown his knife. The speed and distance were such that Toller had no time to duck or move aside. He flung up his left hand and took the knife in the centre of the palm. The full length of the black blade came

through between the bones with so much force that his hand was driven back and the knife-point tore open his face just below the left eye.

A natural instinct would have been to look at the injured hand, but Toller ignored it and whipped his sword into the guard position just in time to deter Leddravohr, who had followed up on the throw with a running attack.

“You have learned a few things, Maraquine,” Leddravohr said, as he too went on guard. “Most men would be dead twice over by this time.”

“The lesson was a simple one,” Toller replied. “Always prepare for reptiles to behave as such.”

“I can’t be goaded—so keep your insults.”

“I haven’t offered any, except to reptiles.”

Leddravohr’s smile twitched into existence, very white in a face made unrecognisable by trceries of dried blood. His hair was matted and his cuirass, which had been blood-stained before the migration flight began, was streaked with dirt and what looked like partially-digested food. Toller moved away from the constriction of the three trees, turning his mind to combat tactics.

Was it possible that Leddravohr was one of those men, fearless in all other respects, who were laid low by acrophobia? Was that why he had been seen so little throughout the flight? If so, Leddravohr could hardly be fit enough to embark on a prolonged struggle.

The Kolcorronian battle sword was a two-edged weapon whose weight precluded its use in formalised duelling. It was limited to basic cutting and thrusting strokes which could generally be blocked or deflected by an opponent with fast reactions and a good eye. All other things being equal, the victor in single combat tended to be the man with the most physical power and endurance. Toller had a natural advantage in that he was more than ten years younger than Leddravohr, but that had been offset by the disablement of his left hand. Now he had reason to suppose that the balance was restored in his favour—and yet Leddravohr, vastly experienced in such matters, had lost none of his arrogance...

“Why so pensive, Maraquine?” Leddravohr was moving with Toller to maintain the line of engagement. “Are you troubled by the ghost of my father?”

Toller shook his head. “By the ghost of my brother. We never settled that issue.” To his surprise, he saw that his words had disturbed Leddravohr’s composure.

“Why do you plague me with this?”

“I believe you are responsible for my brother’s death.”

“I told you the fool was responsible for his own death.” Leddravohr made an angry stabbing movement with his sword and the two blades touched for the first time. “Why should I lie about it, then or now? He broke his mount’s leg and he

refused a seat on mine.”

“Lain wouldn’t have done that.”

“He did! I tell you he could have been at your side at this minute, and I wish he were—so that I could have the pleasure of cleaving both your skulls.”

While Leddravohr was speaking Toller took the opportunity to glance at his wounded hand. There was no great pain as yet, but blood was coursing steadily down the handle of the knife and beading off it to the ground. When he shook his hand the blade remained firmly in place, wedged to the hilt between the bones. The wound, though not a crippling one, would have a progressive effect on his strength and fighting capability. It behoved him to get the duel under way as soon as possible. He forced himself to disregard the lies Leddravohr was uttering about his brother, and to seek a reason for the noteworthy fact that a man whose potency must have been diminished by twelve days of dislocation and illness appeared overweeningly confident of victory.

Was there a significant clue he had overlooked?

He studied his opponent again—tenths of a second passing like minutes in his keyed-up state—and saw only that Leddravohr had sleeved his sword. Soldiers from some parts of the Kolcorronian empire, principally Sorka and Middac, had the practice of covering the base of a blade with leather so that on occasion one hand could be transposed ahead of the hilt and the sword used as a two-handed weapon. Toller had never seen much merit in the idea, but he resolved to be extra wary in the event of an unexpected variation in Leddravohr’s attack.

All at once the preliminaries were over.

Each man had circled to a position which materially was no better than any other, but which satisfied him in some indefinable way as being the most propitious, the most suitable for his purpose. Toller went in first, surprised at being allowed that psychological advantage, starting on the backhand with a series of downward hacks alternating from left to right, and was immediately thrilled with the result. As was inevitable, Leddravohr blocked every stroke with ease, but the blade shocks were not quite what Toller had expected. It was as though Leddravohr’s sword arm had given way a little at each blow, hinting at a serious lack of strength.

A few minutes could decide everything, Toller exulted as he allowed the sequence to come to a natural end, then his survivor’s instinct reasserted itself. Dangerous thinking! Would Leddravohr have pursued me this far—alone—knowing he was unequal to the struggle?

Toller disengaged and shifted his ground, holding his dripping left hand clear of his body. Leddravohr closed in on him with startling speed, creating a low sweep triangle which almost forced Toller to defend his useless arm rather than

his head and body. The flurry ended with a mighty backhand cross from Leddravohr which actually fanned cool air against the underside of Toller's chin. He leapt back, chastened, reminded that the prince in a debilitated condition was a match for an ordinary soldier in his prime.

Had that resurgence of power represented the trap he suspected Leddravohr of preparing for him? If so, it was vital not to allow Leddravohr breathing space and recovery time. Toller renewed his attack on the instant, initiating sequence after sequence with no perceptible interludes, using all his strength but at the same time modifying fury with intelligence, allowing the prince no mental or physical respite.

Leddravohr, breathing hard now, was forced to yield ground. Toller saw that he was backing into a cluster of low thorn bushes and forced himself closer, awaiting the moment when Leddravohr would be distracted, immobilised or caught off balance. But Leddravohr, displaying his genius for combat, appeared to sense the presence of the bushes without having to turn his head.

He saved himself by gathering Toller's blade in a circular counter parry worthy of a smallsword master, stepping inside his defences and turning both their bodies into a new line. For a second the two men were pressed together, chest to chest, their swords locked at the hilts overhead at the apex of the triangle formed by their straining right arms.

Toller felt the heat of Leddravohr's breath and smelled the foulness of vomit from him, then he broke the contact by forcing his sword arm down, making it into an irresistible lever which drove them apart.

Leddravohr aided the separation by jumping backwards and quickly sidestepping to bring the thorn bushes between them. His chest was heaving rapidly, evidence of his growing tiredness, but—strangely—he appeared to have been buoyed up rather than disconcerted by the narrowness of his escape from peril. He was leaning forward slightly in an attitude suggestive of a new eagerness, and his eyes were animated and derisive amid the filigrees of dried blood which covered his face.

Something has happened, Toller thought, his skin crawling with apprehension. *Leddravohr knows something!*

"By the way, Maraquine," Leddravohr said, sounding almost genial, "I heard what you said to your woman."

"Yes?" In spite of his alarm, a part of Toller's consciousness was being taken up by the odd fact that the disgusting odour he had endured while in contact with Leddravohr was still strong in his nostrils. Was it really just the sourness of regurgitated food, or was there another smell there? Something strangely familiar and with a deadly significance?

Leddravohr smiled. “It was a good idea. About firing the cannon, I mean. It will save me the trouble of going looking for her when I have disposed of you.”

Don't waste breath on a reply, Toller urged himself. *Leddravohr is putting on too much of a show. It means he isn't leading you into a trap—it has already been sprung!*

“Well, I don't think I'm going to need this,” Leddravohr said. He gripped the leather sleeve at the base of his sword, slid it off and dropped it to the ground. His eyes were fixed on Toller, amused and enigmatic.

Toller looked closely at the sleeve and saw that it seemed to have been made in two layers, with a thin outer skin which had been ruptured. Around the edges of the split were glistening traces of yellow slime.

Toller looked down at his own sword, belatedly identifying the stench which was emanating from it—the stench of whitefern—and saw more of the slime on the broadest part of the blade, close to the hilt. The black material of the blade was bubbling and vapouring as it dissolved under the attack of the brakka slime, which had been smeared there by Leddravohr's sword when the two were crossed at the hilts.

I accept my death, Toller mused, his thoughts blurring into frenzied battle tempo as he saw Leddravohr darting towards him, *on condition that I don't journey alone.*

He raised his head and lunged at Leddravohr's chest with his sword. Leddravohr struck across it and snapped the blade at the root, sending it tumbling away to one side, and in the same movement swept his sword round into a thrust aimed at Toller's body.

Toller took the thrust, throwing himself on to it as he knew he had to were he to achieve life's last ambition. He gasped as the blade passed all the way through him, allowing him to drive on until he was within reach of Leddravohr. He gripped the throwing knife and, with his left hand still impaled on it, ran the blade upwards into Leddravohr's stomach, circling and seeking with the tip. There was a gushing warmth on the back of his hand.

Leddravohr growled and pushed Toller away from him with desperate force, simultaneously withdrawing his sword. He stared at Toller, open-mouthed, for several seconds, then he dropped the sword and sank to his knees. He pitched forward on to his hands and remained like that, head lowered, staring at the pool of blood gathering below his body.

Toller worked the knife free of the bones clamped around it, mentally remote from the pain he was inflicting on himself, then clutched his side in an effort to stem the sopping pulsations of the sword wound. The edges of his vision were in a ferment; the sunlit hillside was rushing towards him and retreating. He threw

the knife away, approached Leddravohr on buckling legs and picked up the sword. Forcing all that remained of his strength into his right arm, he raised the sword high.

Leddravohr did not look up, but he moved his head a little, showing he was aware of Toller's actions. "I have killed you, haven't I, Maraquine?" he said in a choking, blood-drowning voice. "Give me that one consolation."

"Sorry, but you hardly scratched me," Toller said as he cleaved downwards with the black blade.

"And this is for my brother ... *Prince!*"

He turned away from Leddravohr's corpse and with difficulty steadied his gaze on the square shape of the gondola. Was it swinging in a breeze, or was it the one fixed point in a see-sawing, dissolving universe?

He set out to walk towards it, intrigued by the discovery that it was now very far away ... at a remove much greater than the distance from Land to Overland...

CHAPTER 21

The rear wall of the cave was partially hidden by a mound of large pebbles and rock fragments which over the centuries had washed down through a natural chimney. Toller enjoyed gazing at the mound because he knew the Overlanders lived inside it.

He had not actually seen them, and therefore did not know if they resembled miniature men or animals, but he was keenly aware of their presence—because they used lanterns.

The light from the lanterns shone out through chinks in the rock at intervals which were not attuned to the outside world's rhythm of night and day. Toller liked to think of Overlanders going about their own business in there, secure in their tumble-down fortress, with no concern for anything which might be happening in the universe at large.

It was the nature of his delirium that even in periods when he felt himself to be perfectly lucid one tiny lantern would sometimes continue to gleam from the heart of the pile. At those times he took no pleasure from the experience. Afraid for his sanity, he would stare at the point of light, willing it to vanish because it had no place in the rational world. Sometimes it would obey quickly, but there were occasions when it took hours to dim out of existence, and then he would cling to Gesalla, making her the lifeline which joined him to all that was familiar and normal...

“Well, *I* don't think you're strong enough to travel,” Gesalla said firmly, “so there is no point in carrying on with this discussion.”

“But I'm almost fully recovered,” Toller protested, waving his arms to prove the point.

“Your tongue is the only part of you which has recovered, and even that is getting too much exercise. Just be quiet for a while and allow me to get on with my work.” She turned her back on him and used a twig to stir the pot in which his dressings were being boiled.

After seven days the wounds on his face and left hand needed virtually no attention, but the twin punctures in his side were still discharging. Gesalla cleaned them and changed the dressings every few hours, a regimen which

necessitated re-using the meagre stock of pads and bandages she had been able to make.

Toller had little doubt that he would have died but for her ministrations, but his gratitude was tinged with concern for her safety. He guessed that the initial confusion in the fleet's landing zone must have rivalled that of the departure, but it seemed little short of a miracle to him that he and Gesalla had since remained unmolested for so long. With each passing day, as the fever abated, his sense of urgency increased.

We are leaving here in the morning, my love, he thought. Whether you agree or not.

He leaned back on the bed of folded quilts, trying to curb his impatience, and allowed his gaze to roam the panoramic view which the cave mouth afforded. Grassy slopes, dotted here and there with unfamiliar trees, folded gently down for about a mile to the west, to the edge of a large lake whose water was a pure indigo seeded with sun-jewels. The northern and southern shores were banked forests, receding and narrowing bands of a colour which—as on Land—was a composite of a million speckles ranging from lime green to deep red, representing trees at different stages of their leaf cycles. The lake stretched all the way to a western horizon composed of the ethereal blue triangles of distant mountains, above which a pure sky soared up to encompass the disk of the Old World.

It was a scene which Toller found unutterably beautiful, and in the first days in the cave he had been unable to distinguish it with any certainty from other products of his delirium. His memory of those days was patchy. It had taken him some time to understand that he had not succeeded in firing a cannon, and that Gesalla had made an independent decision to go back for him. She had tried to make little of the matter, claiming that had Leddravohr been victorious he would soon have advertised the fact by coming in search of her. Toller had known otherwise.

Lying in the hushed peace of early morning, watching Gesalla go about the chores she had set for herself, he felt a surge of admiration for her courage and resourcefulness. He would never understand how she had managed to get him into the saddle of Leddravohr's bluehorn, load up with supplies from the gondola, and lead the beast on foot for many miles before finding the cave. It would have been a considerable feat for a man, but for a slightly-built woman facing an unknown planet and all its possible dangers on her own the achievement had been truly exceptional.

Gesalla is a truly exceptional woman, Toller thought. So how long will it be before she realises I have no intention of taking her off into the wilderness?

The sheer impracticability of his original plan had weighed heavily on Toller after his rationality had begun to return. Without a baby to consider it might have been possible for two adults to eke out some kind of fugitive existence in the forests of Overland—but if Gesalla was not already pregnant she would see to it that she became pregnant.

It had taken him some time to appreciate that the core of the problem also contained its solution. With Leddravohr dead Prince Pouche would have become King, and Toller knew him to be a dry, dispassionate man who would abide by Kolcorron's traditional leniency with pregnant women—especially as Leddravohr was the only one who could have testified about Gesalla's use of the cannon against him.

The task ahead, Toller had decided—while doing his best to ignore the gleam of the single, persistent Overlander's lantern in the mound of rubble—was to keep Gesalla alive until she was demonstrably with child. A hundred days seemed a reasonable target, but the very act of setting a term had somehow increased and aggravated his unease about the fleeting passage of time. How was he to strike the proper balance between leaving early and only being able to travel slowly, and leaving late—when the swiftness of a deer might prove insufficient?

"What are you brooding about?" Gesalla said, removing the boiling pot from the heat.

"About you—and about preparing to leave here in the morning."

"I told you, you aren't ready." She knelt beside him to inspect his dressings and the touch of her hands sent a pleasurable shock racing down to his groin.

"I think another part of me is starting to recover," he said.

"That's something else you aren't ready for." She smiled as she dabbed his forehead with a damp cloth. "You can have some stew instead."

"A fine substitute," he grumbled, making an unsuccessful attempt to touch her breasts as she slid away from him. The sudden movement of his arm, slight though it was, produced a sharp pain in his side and made him wonder how he would fare trying to get astride the bluehorn in the morning.

He pushed the worry to the back of his thoughts and watched Gesalla as she prepared a simple breakfast. She had found a flattish, slightly concave stone to use as a hob. By mingling on it tiny pinches of pikon and halvell brought from the ship, she was able to create a smoke-free heat which would not betray their whereabouts to pursuers. When she had finished warming the stew—a thick mixture of grain, pulses and shreds of saltbeef—she passed a dish of it to him and allowed him to feed himself.

Toller had been amused to note—echo of the old Gesalla he thought he had

known—that among the “essentials” she had salvaged from the gondola were dishes and table utensils. There was a poignancy about eating in such conditions, with commonplace domestic items framed in the pervasive strangeness of a virgin world; with the romance which could have suffused the moment abnegated by uncertainties and danger.

Toller was not really hungry, but he ate steadily with a determination to win back his strength as quickly as possible. Apart from occasional snuffles from the tethered bluehorn the only sounds reaching the cave from elsewhere were the rolling reports of brakka pollination discharges. The frequency of the explosions indicated that brakka were plentiful throughout the region, and were a reminder of the question which had first been posed by Gesalla—if the other plant forms of Overland were unknown on Land, why did the two worlds have the brakka in common?

Gesalla had collected handfuls of grass, leaves, flowers and berries for joint scrutiny, and—with the possible exception of the grass, upon which only a botanist could have passed judgment—all had shared the common factor of strangeness. Toller had reiterated his idea that the brakka was a universal form, one which would be found on any planet, but although he was unused to pondering such matters he recognised that the notion had an unsatisfactory philosophical feel to it, one which made him wish he could turn to Lain for guidance.

“There’s another ptertha,” Gesalla exclaimed. “Look! I can see seven or eight of them going towards the water.”

Toller looked in the direction she was indicating and had to change the focus of his eyes several times before he picked out the bubble-glints of the colourless, near-invisible spheres. They were slowly drifting down the hillside on the air flow generated by the night-time cooling of the surface.

“You’re better at spotting those things than I am,” he said ruefully. “That one yesterday was almost in my lap before I saw it.”

The ptertha which had drifted in on them soon after littlenight on the previous day had come to within ten paces of Toller’s bed, and in spite of what he had learned from Lain the nearness of it had inspired much of the dread he would have experienced on Land. Had he been mobile he would probably have been unable to prevent himself from hurling his sword through it. The globe had hovered nearby for a few seconds before sailing away down the hillside in a series of slow ruminative bounds.

“Your face was a picture!” Gesalla paused in her eating to parody an expression of fear.

“I’ve just thought of something,” Toller said. “Have we any writing

materials?”

“No. Why?”

“You and I are the only two people on the whole of Overland who know what Lain wrote about the ptertha. I wish I had thought of telling Chakkell. All those hours together on the ship—and I didn’t even mention it!”

“You weren’t to know there would be brakka trees and ptertha here. You thought you were leaving all that behind.”

Toller was gripped by a new and greater urgency which had nothing to do with his personal aspirations. “Listen, Gesalla, this is the most important thing either of us will ever have the chance to do. You have got to make sure that Pouche and Chakkell hear and understand Lain’s ideas.

“If we leave the brakka trees alone, to live out their time and die naturally, the ptertha here will never become our enemies. Even a modest amount of culling—the way they did it in Chamteth—is probably too much because the ptertha there had turned pink and that’s a sign that...” He stopped speaking as he saw that Gesalla was staring at him, her expression of odd blend of concern and accusation.

“Is there anything the matter?”

“You said *I* had to make sure that Pouche and...” Gesalla set her dish down and came to kneel beside him. “What’s going to happen to us, Toller?”

He forced himself to laugh then exaggerated the effects of the pain it caused, playing for time in which to cover up his blunder. “We’re going to found our own dynasty, that’s what is going to happen to us. Do you think I would let any harm come to you?”

“I know you wouldn’t—and that’s why you frightened me.”

“Gesalla, all I meant was that we must leave a message here ... or somewhere else where it will be found and taken to the King. I’m not able to move around much, so I have to turn the responsibility over to you. I’ll show you how to make charcoal, and then we’ll find something to...”

Gesalla was slowly shaking her head and her eyes were magnified by the first tears he had ever seen there. “It’s all unreal, isn’t it? It’s all just a dream.”

“Flying to Overland was just a dream—once—but now we’re here, and in spite of everything we’re still alive.” He drew her down to lie beside him, her head cushioned on his shoulder. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to us, Gesalla. All I can promise is that ... how did you put it? ... that we are not going to surrender life to the butchers. That has to be enough for us. Now, why don’t you rest and let me watch over you, just for a change?”

“All right, Toller.” Gesalla made herself comfortable, fitting her body to his whilst being careful of his injuries, and in an amazingly short time she was

asleep. Her transition from anxious wakefulness to the tranquillity of sleep was announced by the faintest of snores, and Toller smiled as he stored the event in his memory for use in future bantering. The only home they were likely to know on Overland would be built of such insubstantial timbers.

He tried to stay awake, to watch over her, but the vapours of an insidious weariness were coiling in his head—and the last Overlander's lantern was again glowing in the rock pile.

The only way to escape from it was to close his eyes...

The soldier standing over him was holding a sword.

Toller tried to move to take some defensive action in spite of his weakness and the encumbrance of Gesalla's body draped across his own, then he saw that the sword in the soldier's hand was Leddravohr's, and even in his befuddled state he was able to assess the situation correctly.

It was too late to do anything, anything at all—because his little domain had already been surrounded, conquered and overrun.

Further evidence came from the shifting of the light as other soldiers moved around beyond the immediate area of the cave mouth. There were the sounds of men beginning to talk as they realised that silence was no longer required, and from somewhere nearby came the snorting and slithering of a bluehorn as it made its way down the bill. Toller squeezed Gesalla's shoulder to bring her awake, and although she remained immobile he felt her spasm of alarm.

The soldier with the sword moved away and his place was taken by a slit-eyed major, whose head was in near-silhouette against the sky as he looked down at Toller. "Can you stand up?"

"No—he's too ill," Gesalla said, rising to a kneeling position.

"I can stand." Toller caught her arm. "Help me, Gesalla—I prefer to be on my feet at this time." With her assistance he achieved a standing position and faced the major. He was dully surprised to find that, when he should have been oppressed by failure and prospects of death, he was discomfited by the trivial fact that he was naked.

"Well, major," he said, "what is it you want of me?"

The major's face was professionally impassive. "The King will speak to you now."

He moved aside and Toller saw the paunchy figure of Chakkell approaching. His dress was subdued and plain, suitable for cross-country riding, but suspended from his neck was a huge blue jewel which Toller had seen only once before, when it had been worn by Prad. Chakkell had retrieved Leddravohr's sword from the first soldier and was carrying it with the blade leaning on his

right shoulder, a neutral position which could quickly become one of attack. His swarthy well-padded face and brown scalp were gleaming in the equatorial heat.

He came within two paces of Toller and surveyed him from head to toe. “Well, Maraquine, I promised I would remember you.”

“Majesty, I daresay I have given you and your loved ones good cause to remember me.” Toller was aware of Gesalla drawing closer to him, and for her sake he went on to rid his words of any possible ambiguity. “A fall of a thousand miles would have...”

“Don’t start rhyming at me again,” Chakkell cut in. “And lie down, man, before you fall down!”

He nodded to Gesalla, ordering her to ease Toller down on to the quilts, and signalled for the major and the rest of his escort to withdraw. When they had retreated out of earshot he squatted in the dirt and, unexpectedly, lobbed the black sword over Toller and into the dimness of the cave.

“We are going to have a brief conversation,” he said, “and not a word of it is to be repeated. Is that clear?”

Toller nodded uncertainly, wondering if he dared introduce hope to the confusion of his thoughts and emotions.

“There is a certain amount of ill-feeling towards you among the nobility and among the military who completed the crossing,” Chakkell said comfortably. “After all, not many men have committed regicide twice in the space of three days. It can be dealt with, however. There is a great air of practicality in our new statelet—and the settlers appreciate that loyalty to one living king is more beneficial to the health than a similar regard for two dead kings. Are you wondering about Pouche?”

“Does he live?”

“He lives, but he was quick to see that the subtleties of his kind of statesmanship would be inappropriate to the situation we have here. He is more than happy to relinquish his claims to the throne—if a chair made from old gondola parts can be dignified with that name.”

It came to Toller that he was seeing Chakkell as he had never seen him before—cheerful, loquacious, at ease with his environment. Was it simply that he preferred supremacy for himself and his offspring in a seedling society to preordained secondary role in the long-established and static Kolcorron? Or was it that he possessed an adventurous spirit which had been liberated by the unique circumstances of the great migration? Looking closely at Chakkell, encouraged by his instincts, Toller experienced a sudden upwelling of relief and the purest kind of joy.

Gesalla and I are going to have children, he thought. And it doesn’t matter

that she and I will have to die some day, because our children will have children, and the future stretches out before us ... on and on ... on and on, except that...

One reality dissolved around Toller and he found himself standing on a rocky outcrop to the west of Ro-Atabri. He was gazing through his telescope at the sprawled body of his brother, reading that last communication which had nothing to do with revenge or personal regrets, but which—as befitted Lain’s compassionate intellect—addressed itself to the welfare of millions as yet unborn.

“Prince ... Majesty...” Toller raised himself on one elbow the better to confront Chakkell with the truth which had been placed in his keeping, but the incautious torsion of his body lanced him with an agony which stilled his voice and dropped him back into his bedding.

“Leddravohr came very near to killing you, didn’t he?” Chakkell’s voice had lost all of its lightness.

“That doesn’t matter,” Toller said, smoothing Gesalla’s hair as she bent over the renewed fire of the wounds in his side. “You knew my brother and what he was?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. Forget all about me—my brother lives in my body, and he is speaking to you through my mouth...” Toller went on, battling through riptides of nausea and weakness to paint a word-picture of the tortured triangular relationship involving humankind, the brakka tree and the ptertha. He described the symbiotic partnership between brakka and ptertha, using inspiration and informed imagination where real knowledge failed.

As in all cases of true symbiosis, both parties derived benefit from the association. The ptertha bred in high levels of the atmosphere, nourished—in all probability—by minute traces of pikon and halvell, or miglign gas, or brakka pollen, or by some derivation from the four. In return, the ptertha sought out all organisms who threatened the welfare of the brakka. Employing the blind forces of random mutation, they varied their internal composition until they chanced on an effective toxin, at which point—the path having been signposted—they concentrated and refined and *aimed* it to create a weapon capable of scourging the scourge, of removing from existence all traces of that which did not deserve to exist.

The way ahead for mankind on Overland lay in treating the brakka with the respect it deserved. Only dead trees should be used for their yield of super-hard materials and power crystals, and if the supply seemed insufficient it was incumbent on the immigrants to develop substitutes or to modify their way of

life accordingly.

If they failed to do so, the history of humanity on Land would, inevitably, be repeated on Overland...

"I admit to being impressed," Chakkell said when Toller had finally finished speaking. "There is no real proof that what you say is true, but it is worthy of serious consideration. Luckily for our generation, which has seen its full share of hardships, there is no need to make any hasty decisions. We have enough to worry about in the meantime."

"You must not think that way," Toller urged. "You are the *ruler* ... and you have the unique opportunity ... the unique responsibility..." He sighed and stopped speaking, yielding to a tiredness which seemed to dim the very heavens.

"Save your strength for another time," Chakkell said gently. "I should let you rest now, but before I leave I'd like to know one more thing. Between you and Leddravohr—was it a fair contest?"

"It was almost fair ... until he destroyed my sword with brakka slime."

"But you overcame him just the same."

"It was required of me." Toller was experiencing the mysticism which can come with illness and utter weariness. "I was born to overcome Leddravohr."

"Perhaps he knew that."

Toller forced his gaze to steady on Chakkell's face. "I don't know what you..."

"I wonder if Leddravohr had any heart for all of this, for our brave new beginning," Chakkell said. "I wonder if he pursued you—alone—because he divined that you were his Bright Road?"

"That idea," Toller whispered, "has little appeal for me."

"You need to rest." Chakkell stood up and addressed himself to Gesalla. "Look after this man for my sake as well as your own—I have work for him. I think it would be better not to move him for some days yet, but you seem quite comfortable here. Do you need any supplies?"

"We could use more fresh water, Majesty," Gesalla said. "Apart from that our wants are already satisfied."

"Yes." Chakkell studied her face for a moment. "I'm going to take your bluehorn because we have only seven all told, and the breeding must begin as soon as possible, but I will post guards nearby. Call them when you deem you are ready to leave here. Does that suit you?"

"Yes, Majesty—we are indebted."

"I trust your patient will remember that when his health is recovered." Chakkell turned and strode away towards the waiting soldiers, moving with the energetic assurance peculiar to those who feel themselves to be responding to the

calls of destiny.

Later, when silence had again returned to the hillside, Toller awoke to see that Gesalla was passing the time by sorting and arranging her collection of leaves and flowers. She had spread them on the ground before her, and her lips were moving silently as she thoughtfully placed each specimen in an order of her own devising. Beyond her the vivid purity of Overland sparkled and advanced on the eye.

Toller cautiously raised himself in the bed. He glanced at the mound of rocky fragments in the rear of the cave, then turned his head away quickly, unwilling to risk seeing the tiny lantern gleaming at him. Only when it had ceased to shine altogether would he know for certain that the fever had entirely left his system, and until then he had no wish to be reminded of how close he had come to death and to losing all that Gesalla meant to him.

She looked up from her emergent patterns. "Did you see something back there?"

"There's nothing," he said, mustering a smile. "Nothing at all."

"But I've noticed you staring at those rocks before. What is your secret?" Intrigued, and playing a game for his benefit, Gesalla came to him and knelt to share his line of sight. The movement brought her face very close to his, and he saw her eyes widen in surprise.

"Toller!" Her voice was that of a child, hushed with wonder. "There's something shining in there!"

She rose to her feet with all the speed of which her weightless body was capable, stepped over him and ran into the cave.

Prey to a strange fear, Toller tried to call out a warning, but his throat was dry and the power of speech seemed to have deserted him. And Gesalla was already throwing the outermost stones aside. He watched numbly as she put her hands into the mound, lifted something heavy and bore it out to the brighter light at the entrance to the cave.

She knelt beside him, cradling the find on her thighs. It was a large flake of dark grey rock—but it was unlike any rock Toller had ever seen before. Running across and through it, integral to and yet differing from the stone, was a broad band of material which was white, but more than white, reflecting the sun like the waters of a distant lake at dawn.

"It's beautiful," Gesalla breathed, "but what is it?"

"I don't..." Grimacing with pain, Toller reached for his clothing, found a pocket and brought out the strange memento given to him by his father. He placed it against the gleaming stratum in the stone, confirming what he already

knew—that they were identical in composition.

Gesalla took the nugget from him and ran a fingertip across its polished surface. “Where did you get this?”

“My father ... my real father ... gave it to me in Chamteth just before he died. He told me he found it long ago. Before I was born. In the Redant province.”

“I feel strange.” Gesalla shivered as she looked up at the misty, enigmatic, watchful disk of the Old World. “Was ours not the first migration, Toller? Has it all happened before?”

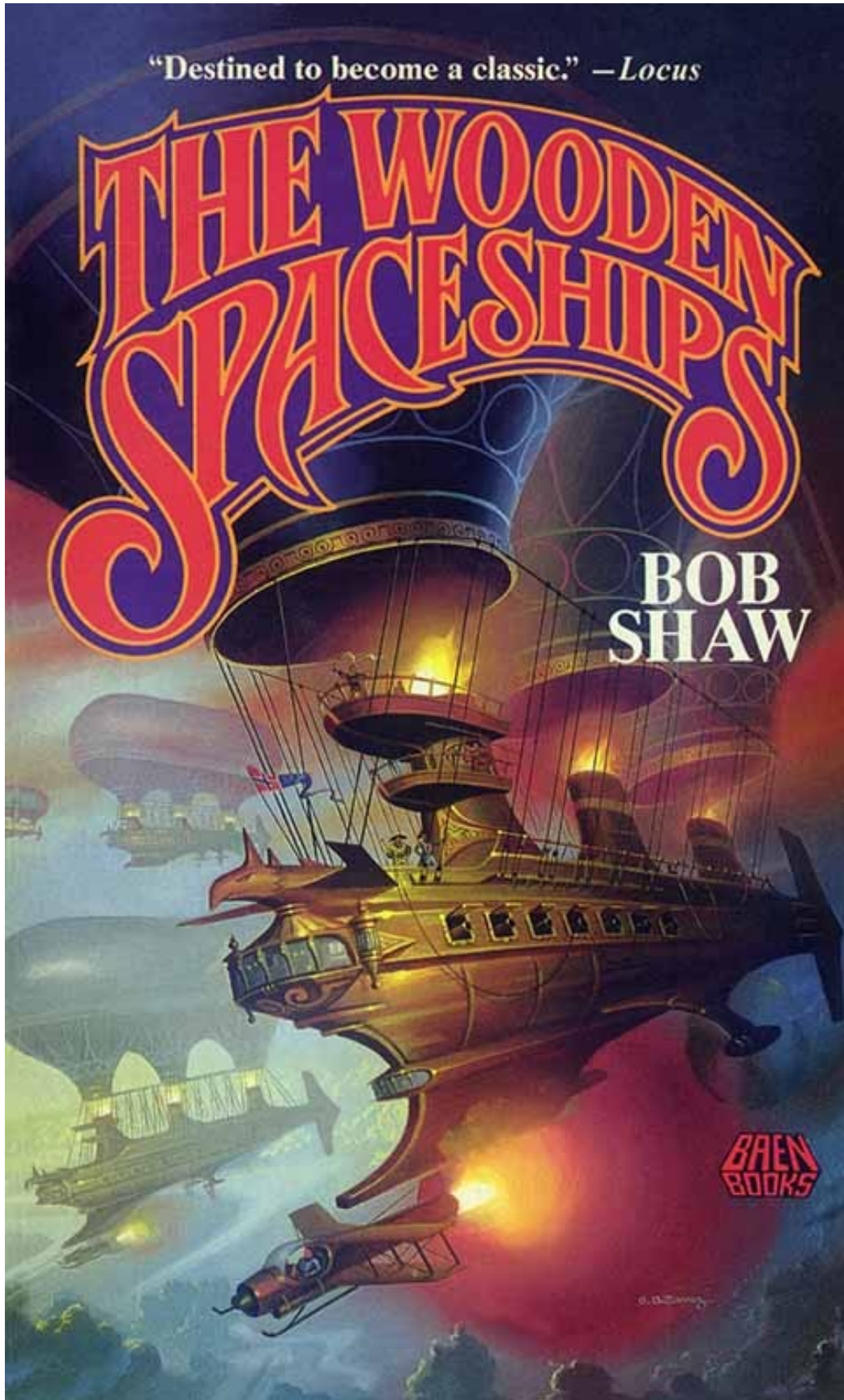
“I think so—perhaps many times—but the important thing for us is to ensure that it never...” His weariness forced Toller to leave the sentence unfinished.

He laid the back of his hand on the lustrous strip within the rock, captivated by its coolness and its strangeness—and by silent intimations that, somehow, he could make the future differ from the past.

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To M.E., with thanks

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PART I
Gathering Shadows

Chapter 1

Lord Toller Maraquine took the bright sword out of the presentation case and held it in such a way that the foreday sun flamed along the blade. As before, he was captivated by its lucent beauty. In contrast to the black weapons traditionally used by his people it seemed to have an ethereal quality, akin to sunlight striking through fine mist, but Toller knew there was nothing unearthly about its powers. Even in its simplest, unmodified form the sword would have been the best killing instrument in history—and he had taken its development a step further.

He pressed a catch which was concealed by the ornamentation of the haft and a curved section sprang open to reveal a tubular cavity. The space was filled by a thin-walled glass vial containing a yellowish fluid. He made sure the vial was intact, then clicked its cover back into place. Reluctant to put the sword away, he tested its feel and balance for a few seconds and impulsively swept it into the first readiness position. At that moment his black-haired solewife, using her uncanny ability to materialise at precisely the wrong time, opened the door and entered the room.

"I beg your pardon—I had presumed you were alone." Gesalla gave him a smile of sweet insincerity and glanced all about her. "Where is your opponent, by the way? Have you cut him into pieces so small that they can't be seen, or was he invisible to begin with?"

Toller sighed and lowered the sword. "Sarcasm doesn't become you."

"And playing warriors doesn't become *you*." Gesalla crossed the floor to him, moving lightly and silently, and put her arms around his neck. "What age are you now, Toller? Fifty-three! When are you going to put notions of fighting and killing behind you?"

"As soon as all men become saints—and that may not be for a year or two yet."

"Who's being sarcastic now?"

"It must be infectious," Toller said, smiling down at Gesalla, deriving a pleasure from merely looking at her which had scarcely diminished in the long course of their marriage. Their twenty-three years on Overland, many of them hard years, had not materially altered her looks or thickened her gracile form.

One of the few discernible changes in Gesalla's appearance was the single strip of silver which might have been applied to her hair by a skilled beautician. She still adopted a long and flowing style of dress in subdued colours, although Overland's burgeoning textiles industry was as yet unable to produce the gauzy materials she had favoured on the old world.

"At what time is your appointment with the King?" Gesalla said, stepping back and examining his clothing with a critical eye. It was sometimes a source of contention between them that, in spite of his elevation to the peerage, he insisted on dressing like a commoner, usually in an open-necked shirt and plain breeches.

"At the ninth hour," he replied. "I should leave soon."

"And you're going in that garb?"

"Why not?"

"It is hardly appropriate for an audience with the King," Gesalla said. "Chakkell may take it as a discourtesy."

"Let him take it any way he pleases." Toller scowled as he laid the sword in its leather case and fastened the lid. "Sometimes I think I've had my fill of royals and all their ways."

He saw the fleeting expression of concern on Gesalla's face and was immediately sorry he had made the remark. Tucking the presentation case under his arm, he smiled again to indicate that he was actually in a cheerful and reasonable mood. He took Gesalla's slim hand in his own and walked with her to the front entrance of the house. It was a single-storey structure, as were most dwellings on Overland, and had few architectural adornments, but the fact that it was stone-built and boasted ten spacious rooms marked it as the home of a nobleman. Masons and carpenters were still at a premium twenty-three years after the Great Migration, and the majority of the population had to make do with comparatively flimsy shelter.

Toller's personal sword was hanging in its belted scabbard in the entrance hall. He reached for the weapon and then, out of consideration for Gesalla, turned away from it with a dismissive gesture and opened the door. The precinct beyond glowed so fiercely in the sun that its walls and pavement seemed to be light sources in their own right.

"I haven't seen Cassyll today," Toller said as heat billowed in past him. "Where is he?"

"He rose early and went straight to the mine."

Toller nodded his approval. "He works hard."

"A trait inherited from me," Gesalla said. "You'll return before littlenight?"

"Yes—I have no wish to prolong my business with Chakkell." Toller went to his bluehorn, which was waiting patiently by a spear-shaped ornamental shrub.

He strapped the leather case across the beast's broad haunches, got into the saddle and waved goodbye to Gesalla. She responded with a single slow nod, her face unexpectedly grave.

"Look, I'm merely going on an errand to the palace," Toller said. "Why must you look so troubled?"

"I don't know—perhaps I have a premonition." Gesalla almost smiled. "Perhaps you have been too quiet for too long."

"But that makes me sound like an overgrown child," Toller protested.

Gesalla opened her mouth to reply, changed her mind and disappeared into the house. Slightly disconcerted, Toller urged the bluehorn forward. At the precinct's wooden gate the well-trained animal nuzzled the lock actuating plate, a device Cassyll had designed, and in a few seconds they were out in the vivid grasslands of the countryside.

The road—a strip of gravel and pebbles confined by twin lines of rocks—ran due east to intersect the highway leading to Prad, Overland's principal city. The full acreage of Toller's estate was being cultivated by tenant farmers and therefore showed different shades of green in strips, but beyond his boundaries the hills had their natural uniformity of colour, a rich verdancy which flowed to the horizon. There were no clouds or haze to soften the sun's rays. The sky was a dome of timeless purity, with only a sprinkling of the brightest stars and an occasional meteor showing up against the overall brilliance. And directly above, gravitationally fixed in place, was the huge disk of the Old World, looming but not threatening—a reminder of the most momentous episode in all of Kolcorron's history.

It was the kind of foreday on which Toller would normally have felt at peace with himself and the rest of the universe, but the uneasiness caused by Gesalla's sombre mood had not yet faded from his mind. Could it be that she had a genuine prescience, intimations of forthcoming upheavals in their lives? Or, as was more likely, did she know him better than he knew himself and was able to interpret signals he was not even aware of giving?

There was no denying that of late he had been in the grip of a strange restlessness. The work he had done for the King in exploring and claiming Overland's single continent had brought him honours and possessions; he was married to the only woman he had ever loved and had a son of whom he was proud—and yet, incredibly, life had begun to seem flat. The prospect of continuing on this pleasant and undemanding course until he silted up with old age and died filled him with a sense of suffocation. Feeling like a betrayer, he had done his utmost to conceal his state of mind from Gesalla, but he had never yet managed to deceive her for long about anything...

Far ahead of him Toller saw a small group of soldiers moving north on the highway. He paid them little heed for several minutes until it came to him that their progress towards Prad was unusually slow for a mounted party. In the mood to welcome any distraction, he took his small telescope out of his pouch and trained it on the distant group. The reason for their tardiness was immediately obvious—four men on bluehorns were escorting a man on foot who was almost certainly their prisoner.

Toller closed the telescope and put it away, frowning as he contemplated the fact that crime was virtually unknown on Overland. There was too much work to be done, few people had anything worth stealing, and the sparseness of the population made it difficult for wrongdoers to hide.

His curiosity now aroused, Toller increased his speed and reached the intersection with the highway shortly ahead of the slow-moving group. He brought his steed to a halt and studied the approaching men. Green gauntlet emblems on the breasts of the riders told him they were private soldiers in the employ of Baron Panvarl. The lightly built man stumbling along at the centre of a square formed by the four bluehorns was about thirty and was dressed like an ordinary farmer. His wrists were bound in front of him and lines of dried blood reaching down from his matted black hair showed that he had been roughly handled.

Toller had already decided that he had no liking for the soldiers when he saw the prisoner's eyes lock on him and widen in recognition, an event which in turn stimulated Toller's memory. He had failed to identify the man right away because of his dishevelled appearance, but now he knew him to be Oaslit Spennel, a fruit farmer whose plot was some four miles to the south. Spennel occasionally supplied berries for the Maraquine household, and his reputation was that of a quiet, industrious man of good character. Toller's initial dislike for the soldiers hardened into straightforward antagonism.

"Good foreday, Oaslit," he called out, advancing his bluehorn to block the road. "It surprises me to find you in such dubious company."

Spennel held out his bound wrists. "I have been placed under false arrest, my..."

"Silence, dung-eater!" The sergeant leading the company made a threatening gesture at Spennel, then turned baleful eyes on Toller. He was a barrel-chested man, somewhat old for his rank, with coarse features and the glowering expression of one who had seen a great deal of life without benefiting from the experience. His gaze zigzagged over Toller, who watched impassively, knowing that the sergeant was trying to relate the plainness of his garb to the fact that he rode a bluehorn which sported the finest quality tack.

"Get out of the way," the sergeant said finally.

Toller shook his head. "I demand to hear the nature of the charges against this man."

"You demand a great deal—" The sergeant glanced at his three companions and they responded with grins. "—for one who ventures abroad unarmed."

"I have no need of weapons in these parts," Toller said. "I am Lord Toller Maraquine—perhaps you have heard of me."

"Everybody has heard of the Kingslayer," the sergeant muttered,, augmenting the disrespect in his tone by delaying the correct form of address. "My lord."

Toller smiled as he memorised the sergeant's face. "What are the charges against your prisoner?"

"The swine is guilty of treason—and will face the executioner today in Prad."

Toller dismounted, moving slowly to give himself time to assimilate the news, and went to Spennel. "What's this I hear, Oaslit?"

"It's all lies, my lord." Spennel spoke quickly in a low, frightened monotone. "I swear to you I am totally without blame. I offered no insult to the baron."

"Do you mean Panvarl? How does he come into this?"

Spennel looked nervously at the soldiers before replying. "My farm adjoins the baron's estate, my lord. The spring which waters my trees drains down on to his land and..." Spennel's voice faded and he shook his head, momentarily unable to continue.

"Go on, man," Toller said. "I can't help you unless I know the whole story."

Spennel swallowed audibly. "The water lies in a basin and makes the land swampy at a place where the baron likes to exercise his bluehorns. Two days ago he came to my house and ordered me to block the spring off with boulders and cement. I told him I needed the water for my livelihood and offered to channel it away from his land. He became angry and told me to begin blocking the spring without further delay. I told him there was little point in doing so, because the water would find another way to the surface ... and it was ... it was then that he accused me of insulting him. He rode off vowing that he would obtain a warrant from the King for my ... for my arrest and execution on a charge of treason."

"All this over a patch of muddy ground!" Toller pinched his lower lip in bafflement. "Panvarl must be losing his reason."

Spennel managed a lop-sided travesty of a smile. "Hardly, my lord. Other farmers have forfeited their land to him."

"So that's the way of it," Toller said in a low hard voice, feeling a return of the disillusionment which at times had almost made him a recluse. There had been a period immediately following the arrival of mankind on Overland when he had genuinely believed that the race had made a new start. Those had been

the heady years of the exploration and settlement of the green continent which girdled the planet, when it had seemed that all men could be equal and that their old wasteful ways would be abandoned. He had clung to his hopes even when the realities of the situation had begun to become obtrusive, but eventually he had reached the point of having to ask himself if the journey between the worlds had been an exercise in futility...

"Have no fear," he said to Spennel. "You're not going to die on account of Panvarl. You have my word on that."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you..." Spennel glanced again at the soldiers and lowered his voice to a whisper. "My lord, is it in your power to free me now?"

Toller had to shake his head. "For me to go against the King's warrant would prejudice your case even further. Besides, it is more in accord with our purpose if you continue to Prad on foot—that way I can be there well ahead of you and will have ample time in which to speak to the King."

"Thank you again, my lord, from the bottom of my..." Spennel paused, looking oddly ashamed of himself, like a merchant pressing for an advantage which even he conceded was unfair. "If anything *should* befall me, my lord, would you be so ... would you inform my wife and daughter, and see to their...?"

"Nothing untoward is going to happen to you," Toller said, almost sharply. "Now be at your ease as far as is possible and leave the rest of this sorry business to me."

He turned, walked casually to his bluehorn and hoisted himself into the saddle, feeling some concern over the fact that Spennel, regardless of the guarantees he had been given, still half-expected to die. It was a sign of the times, an indication that not only was he no longer in favour with the King, but that his fall from favour had been widely noted. Personally he cared little about such things, but it would be serious indeed if he found himself unable to help a man in Spennel's predicament.

He nudged his bluehorn closer to the sergeant and said, "What is your name?"

"What concern is that of yours?" the sergeant countered. "My lord."

To his surprise Toller experienced that flickering of redness at the edges of his vision which had always accompanied the most reckless rages of his youth. He leaned forward, stabbing with his eyes, and saw the challenging expression fade from the other man's face.

"I will ask you but one more time, sergeant," he said. "What is your name?"

The sergeant hesitated only briefly. "Gnapperl."

Toller gave him a broad smile. "Very well, Gnapperl—now we know each

other and can all be good friends together. I am on my way to Prad for a private audience with the King, and the first thing I will do is ensure that Oaslit Spennel receives a full pardon for his imaginary crime. For the present I am placing him under my personal protection, and—I dislike mentioning this now that we have become good friends—if any misfortune were to befall him *you* would soon be overtaken by an even greater misfortune. I trust my meaning is clear..."

The sergeant responded with a malevolent stare, his lips twitching as he debated making a reply. Toller gave him a nod of mock politeness, brought his mount around and put it into a fast canter. It was about four miles to Kolcorron's major city, and he could expect to be there at least an hour ahead of Gnapperl and his squad. Toller glanced up at the vastness of the sister planet, poised directly above him and occupying a large arc of the sky, and knew by the width of its sunlit crescent that he would be in good time for his appointment. Even with Spennel's release to be negotiated he could still complete his mission and reach home again before the sun vanished behind the Old World—provided that the King was in a reasonable frame of mind.

The best approach, he decided, would be to play on Chakkell's antipathy towards the idea of his noblemen extending their territories. When the new state of Kolcorron had been founded, Chakkell—the first non-hereditary ruler in history—had sought to protect his position by severely limiting the size of aristocrats' domains. There had been some resentment, especially among those related to the old royal family, but Chakkell had dealt with it firmly and, in some cases, bloodily. Toller had been too busy to pay much attention.

Those early years now had a dreamlike quality in his memory. He could no longer readily visualise that wavering line of skyships, a stack a hundred miles high, drifting down from the zenith after the interplanetary crossing. Most of the craft had been dismantled soon after the landing, the balloon fabric going to make tents for the settlers, or in some cases being restitched to create envelopes for airships. On a whim of Chakkell's a number of the skyships had been preserved intact to form the basis of museums, but Toller had not viewed any of them in a long time. The inert, mould-encrusted reality of the ships was incompatible with the inspirational dynamism of that high point in his life.

On surmounting a fold in the land he saw the city of Prad in the distance, its centre cradled in the bend of a wide river. The city presented a strange appearance to his eye because, unlike Ro-Atabri where he had grown up, its origins lay in an abstraction, an architectural strategy. A cluster of tall buildings marked the core, oddly circumscribed and highly visible amid the green horizontals of the landscape, while the rest had only an attenuated existence. Patterns of future avenues and plazas were sketched on the terrain, sometimes

with lines of timber dwellings, but for the most part with nothing more than posts and white-painted boulders. Here and there in the suburbs a stone-built official structure brought the plan a step closer to reality, each building suggestive of a lonely outpost under siege from armies of grass and scrub. In many areas nothing moved but the bubble-like ptertha, gently bounding across the open ground or nuzzling their way along fences.

Toller followed the straight highway into the city, a place he rarely visited. He passed increasing numbers of men, women and children who were on foot, and in the central section found a bustling atmosphere reminiscent of a market town on the Old World. The public buildings were in the traditional Kolcorronian style—featuring overlapping diamond patterns in varicoloured masonry and brick—which had been modified to suit local conditions. Deep red sandstone should have been used to dress all corners and edges, but no useful sources had yet been found on Overland and the builders had substituted brown granite. Most of the shops and hostelrys had been deliberately made to resemble their Old World counterparts, and in some areas Toller found it almost possible to imagine himself back in Ro-Atabri.

Nevertheless, the rawness and lack of finish of many structures reinforced his opinion that King Chakkell had tried to do too much too soon. Only twelve thousand people had successfully completed the journey to Overland, and although they were multiplying rapidly the population of the entire planet was less than fifty thousand. Many of those were very young and—as a result of Chakkell's determination to create a world state—were scattered in small communities all around the globe. Even Prad, the so-called capital city, housed less than eight thousand, making it a village uncomfortably glorified with the trappings of government.

As he neared the north side Toller began to catch glimpses of the royal palace on the far bank of the river. It was a rectangular building, architecturally incomplete, waiting for the wings and towers which even the impatient Chakkell had to entrust to future generations. The white and rose-coloured marble with which it was clad gleamed through ranks of immature trees. Within a few minutes Toller was crossing the single ornate bridge which spanned the river. He approached the brakka wood gates of the palace itself, where the chief of the guard recognised him and signalled that he should pass through unimpeded.

In the forecourt of the palace there were about twenty phaetons and as many saddled bluehorns, an indication that this was a busy foreday for the King. It occurred to Toller that he might not get to see Chakkell at his appointed hour, and he felt a sudden stirring of anxiety on Spennel's behalf. The threat he had issued to the sergeant would cease to be effective in the presence of an

executioner and high officials carrying death warrants. Toller dismounted, unstrapped the presentation case and hurried to the arched main entrance. He was admitted by the outer guards quickly enough, but—as he had feared—was stopped at the carved door of the audience chamber by two black-armoured ostiaries.

"I'm sorry, my lord," one of them said. "You are required to wait here until the King bids you enter."

Toller glanced at the other people, some of whom were wearing the sword-and-plume insignia of royal messengers, who were standing about the corridor in groups of two or three. "But my appointment is for the ninth hour."

"Others have been in attendance since the seventh hour, my lord."

Toller's anxiety increased sharply. He paced a circle on the mosaic floor while he came to a decision and then, making a show of seeming relaxed and untroubled, returned to the guards. When he engaged them in Smalltalk they looked gratified, but not unduly so—their control of that particular doorway had enhanced their standing with many petitioners. Toller conversed with them for several minutes and was just beginning to have difficulty in dredging up suitable trivia when footsteps sounded on the far side of the double door.

Each ostiary swung upon a leaf and a small group of men dressed in commissioner's robes emerged, nodding in evident satisfaction at the outcome of their meeting with the King. A white-haired man who looked like a district administrator stepped forward, obviously expecting to be ushered into Chakkell's presence.

"My apologies," Toller murmured, moving ahead of him. The startled ostiaries tried to bar the way, but even in his early fifties Toller retained much of the speed and casual power which had distinguished him as a young soldier, and he thrust the two men aside with ease. A second later he was striding through the high-ceilinged room towards the dais upon which Chakkell was seated. Chakkell raised his head, alerted by the clattering of the ostiaries' armour as they came in pursuit of Toller, and his expression changed to one of anger.

"Maraquine!" he snapped, heaving himself to his feet. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

"It's a matter of life or death, Majesty!" Toller allowed the guards to seize him by the arms, but resisted their attempts to draw him back to the door. "An innocent man's life is at stake, and I beg you to consider the matter without delay. Also, I suggest that you order your doorkeepers to withdraw—they would be of little value were I obliged to separate their hands from their wrists."

His words caused the guards to redouble their efforts to move him, but Chakkell pointed a finger at them and slowly veered it to indicate the door. The

guards released Toller immediately, bowed and backed away. Chakkell remained on his feet, eyes locked with Toller's until they were alone in the large room, then he sat down heavily and clapped a hand to his forehead.

"I can scarcely credit this, Maraquine," he said. "You *still* haven't changed, have you? I had hoped that my depriving you of your Burnor estates would have taught you to curb that damned insolence of yours, but I see I was too optimistic."

"I had no use for..." Toller paused, realising he was taking the wrong road to his objective. He eyed the King soberly as he tried to gauge how much damage he had already done to Spennel's prospects. Chakkell was now sixty-five; his sun-browned scalp was almost devoid of hair and he was burdened with fat, but he had lost none of his mental vigour. He was still a hard, intolerant man—and he had lost little, if any, of the ruthlessness which had eventually gained him the throne.

"Go on!" Chakkell drew his eyebrows together to form a continuous bar. "You had no use for what?"

"It was of little consequence, Majesty," Toller said. "I apologise most sincerely for forcing my way into your presence, but I repeat that this is a matter of an innocent man's life, and there is no time to spare."

"What innocent man? Why do you trouble me with this?" While Toller was describing the events of the foreday Chakkell toyed with the blue jewel he wore on his breast, and at the end of the account he produced a calmly incredulous smile. "How do you *know* that your lowly friend didn't insult Panvarl?"

"He swore it to me."

Chakkell continued to smile. "So it's the word of some miserable farmer against that of a nobleman of this realm?"

"The farmer is personally known to me," Toller said urgently. "I vouch for his honesty."

"But what would induce Panvarl to lie over a matter of such little import?"

"Land." Toller gave the word time to register. "Panvarl is displacing farmers from his borders and absorbing their holdings into his own demesne. His intentions are fairly obvious, and—I would have thought—not to your liking."

Chakkell leaned back in his gilded chair, his smile broadening. "I get your drift, my dear Toller, but if Panvarl is content to proceed by gobbling up smallholdings one by one it will be a thousand years before his descendants can pose any threat to the monarchy of the day. You will forgive me if I continue to address myself to more urgent problems."

"But..." Toller experienced premonitions of failure as he saw what was behind Chakkell's use of his given name and sudden accession of good humour.

He was to be punished for past and present misdeeds—by the death of another man. The notion escalated Toller's uneasiness into a chilly panic.

"Majesty," he said, "I must appeal to your sense of justice. One of your loyal subjects, a man who has no means to defend himself, is being deprived of his property and life."

"But it *is* justice," Chakkell replied comfortably. "He should have given some thought to the consequences before he offered insult to Panvarl, and thus indirectly to me. In my opinion the baron behaved very correctly—he would have been within his rights had he struck the clod down on the spot instead of seeking a warrant."

"That was to give his criminal activities the semblance of legality."

"Be careful, Maraquine!" The genial expression had departed the King's swarthy face. "You are in danger of going too far."

"I apologise, Majesty," Toller said, and in his desperation decided to put the issue on a personal footing. "My only intention is to save an innocent man's life—and to that end may I remind you of a certain favour you owe me."

"Favour? *Favour?*"

Toller nodded. "Yes, Majesty. I refer to the occasion when I preserved not only your own life but those of Queen Daseene and your three children. I have never brought the matter up before, but the time has..."

"Enough!" Chakkell's shout of incredulity echoed in the rafters. "I grant you that, while in the process of saving your own skin, you incidentally delivered my family, but that was more than twenty years ago! And as for never referring to the matter—you have used it over and over again when you wished to pry some concession out of me. Looking back through the years, it seems to have been your sole topic of conversation! No, Maraquine, you have traded on that one for far too long."

"But all the same, Majesty, four royal lives for the price of one ord—"

"Silence! You are to plague me no longer on that point. Why are you here anyway?" Chakkell snatched a handful of papers from a stand beside his chair and riffled through them. "I see. You claim to be bringing me a special gift. What is it?"

Recognising that for the moment it would be unwise to press the King further, Toller opened the leather case and displayed its contents. "A very special gift, Majesty."

"A metal sword." Chakkell gave an exaggerated sigh. "Maraquine, these monomanias of yours become increasingly tiresome. I thought we had settled once and for all that iron is inferior to brakka for weaponry."

"But this blade is made of steel." Toller withdrew the sword and was about to

pass it to the King when a new idea occurred to him. "We have learned that ore smelted in the upper part of a furnace produces a much harder metal, one which can then be tempered to form the perfect blade." Setting the case on the floor, Toller adopted a fighting stance with the sword in the first readiness position.

Chakkell shifted in his chair, looking uneasy. "You know the protocol about carrying weapons in the palace, Maraquine. I have half a mind to summon the guard and let them deal with you."

"That would provide a welcome opportunity for me to demonstrate the value of the gift," Toller said, smiling. "With this in my hand I can defeat the best swordsman in your army."

"Now you're being ridiculous. Go home with your shiny toy and allow me to attend to more important matters."

"I meant what I said." Toller introduced a degree of hardness into his voice. "The best swordsman in your army."

Chakkell responded to Toller's new note of challenge by narrowing his eyes. "The years appear to have weakened your mind as much as your body. You have heard of Karkarand, I presume. Have you any conception of what he could do to a man of your age?"

"He will be powerless against me—as long as I have this sword." Toller lowered the weapon to his side. "So confident am I that I am prepared to wager my sole remaining estate on the outcome of a duel with Karkarand. I know you are partial to a gamble, Majesty, so what say you? My entire estate against the life of one farmer."

"So that's it!" Chakkell shook his head. "I am not disposed to..."

"We can make it to the death if you like."

Chakkell leapt to his feet. "You arrogant *fool*, Maraquine! This time you will receive what you have so assiduously courted since the day we met. It will give me the greatest pleasure to see daylight being let into that thick skull of yours."

"Thank you, Majesty," Toller said drily. "In the meantime ... a stay of execution?"

"That will not be necessary—the issue will be settled forthwith." Chakkell raised a hand and a stoop-shouldered secretary, who must have been watching from a spyhole, scurried into the room through a small doorway.

"Majesty?" he said, bowing so vigorously as to suggest to Toller that he had acquired his posture through years of deference.

"Two things," Chakkell said. "Inform those who wait in the corridor that I am departing on other business, but they may take consolation from the fact that my absence will be brief. *Extremely* brief! Secondly, tell the house commander that I require Karkarand to be on the parade ground three minutes from now. He is to

be armed and prepared to carry out a dissection."

"Yes, Majesty." The secretary bowed again and, after casting one lingering and speculative look at Toller, loped away towards the double door. He was moving with the eager gait of one for whom a dull day had suddenly shown promise of memorable entertainment. Toller watched him depart and, having been granted time for thought, began to wonder if he had overstepped the bounds of reason in his championing of Spennel.

"What's this, Maraquine?" Chakkell said, his former joviality returning. "Second thoughts?" Without waiting for a reply he crooked his finger and led the way out of the audience chamber by means of a curtained private exit.

As he walked along a panelled corridor in the King's wake Toller suddenly glimpsed a mind-picture of Gesalla at the moment of their parting, her grey eyes deeply troubled, and his misgivings increased. Had some intuitive power enabled her to *know* that he was setting out to court danger? The meeting with Spennel and his captors had been pure coincidence, of course, but Toller lived in a society where violent death was not uncommon, and in previous years he had been unperturbed by reports of summary and unjust executions. Could it be that, in his mood of destructive discontent, he would have sought out a way—even without the chance encounter on the road to Prad—to place himself in a position of peril?

If he had been unconsciously trying to put himself in danger he had been spectacularly successful. He had never set eyes on Karkarand, but he knew the man to be a rare phenomenon—a gifted sword fighter, unhampered by any trace of morality or regard for human life, with a physique so powerful that he was rumoured to have dispatched a bluehorn with a single blow of his fist. For a middle-aged man, regardless of how well he was armed, to pit himself against such a killing machine was an act of recklessness bordering on the suicidal. And, as the ultimate flourish of idiocy, he had wagered the estate which supported his family on the outcome of the duel!

Forgive me, Gesalla, Toller thought, mentally cringing from his solewife's level gaze. *If I survive this episode I'll be the model of prudence until the day I die. I promise to be what you want me to be.*

King Chakkell reached a door which led to the outside and, in a complete reversal of protocol, pulled it open and gestured for Toller to precede him into the parade ground beyond. Some remnant of a sense of propriety caused Toller to hesitate, then he noticed Chakkell's smile and understood the symbolism of his action—he was happy to suspend the normal rules of conduct for the privilege of ushering an old adversary out of the world of the living.

"What ails you, Toller?" he said, jovial once more. "At this point any other

man would be having second thoughts—are you, perhaps, having first thoughts? And regrets?"

"On the contrary," Toller replied, returning the smile, "I'm looking forward to some gentle exercise."

He set the presentation case down on the gravelled surface of enclosed ground and took out the sword. There was comfort to be gained from the balanced weight of it, the sheer *rightness* of the way it took to his hand, and his anxiety began to abate. He glanced up at the vast disk of the Old World and saw that the ninth hour was just beginning, which meant he could still reach home before littlenight.

"Is that a blood channel?" Chakkell said, looking closely at the steel sword for the first time and noticing the groove which extended down from the haft. "You don't go in to the hilt with a blade that long, do you?"

"New materials, new designs." Toller, who had no wish for the weapon's secret to be revealed prematurely, turned away and scanned the line of low military quarters and stores which bounded the parade ground. "Where is this swordsman of yours, Majesty? I trust he moves with greater alacrity when in combat."

"That you will soon discover," Chakkell said comfortably.

At that moment a door opened in the farthest wall and a man in line soldier's uniform emerged. Other soldiers appeared behind him and spread out sideways to merge with the thin line of spectators who were noiselessly materialising on the ground's perimeter. The word had spread quickly, Toller realised, attracting those who anticipated seeing a dash of crimson added to the dull monochrome of the palatial day. He returned his attention to the soldier who had come out first and was now walking towards him and the King.

Karkarand was not quite as tall as Toller had expected, but he had a tremendous breadth of torso and columnar legs of such power that he progressed with a springy gait in spite of the massiveness of his build. His arms were so packed with muscle that, unable to hang vertically at his side, they projected laterally at an angle, adding a touch of monstrousness to his already intimidating appearance. Karkarand's face was very broad, yet narrower than the trunk of his neck, its features blurred by a reddish stubble. His eyes, which were fixed on Toller, were so pale and bright that they seemed to fluoresce in the shadow of his brakka helmet.

Toller immediately understood that he had made a serious mistake in issuing his challenge to the King. Before him was a creature, less a human being than an engine of war, who had no real need of artificial weapons to supplement the destructive forces nature had built into his grotesque frame. Even if successfully

disarmed by an opponent he would be capable of pressing the engagement through to a lethal conclusion. Toller instinctively tightened his grip on his sword and, choosing to wait no longer, depressed a stud on its haft. He felt the glass vial within shatter and release its charge of yellow fluid.

"Majesty," Karkarand said in a surprisingly melodious voice as he approached and saluted the King.

"Good foreday, Karkarand." Chakkell's tone was equally light, almost conversational. "Lord Toller Maraquine—of whom you will doubtless have heard—appears to have become enamoured with death. Be a good fellow and cater to his wishes at once."

"Yes, Majesty." Karkarand saluted again and in a continuation of the movement drew his battle sword. In place of standard regimental markings the blackness of the brakka wood blade was relieved by crimson enamel inlays in the shape of blood droplets—a sign that its owner was a personal favourite of the King. Karkarand unhurriedly turned to face Toller, his expression one of calmness and mild curiosity, and raised his sword. Chakkell moved several paces back.

Toller's heart began to pound as he made himself ready, speculating as to what form Karkarand's attack would take. He had half-expected a sudden onslaught which would have been designed to end the duel in a second or so, but his opponent was playing a different game. Moving slowly forward, Karkarand lifted his sword high and brought it down in the kind of simple direct stroke that might have been used by a small child at play. Surprised by the other man's lack of finesse, Toller automatically parried the blow—and nearly gasped aloud as the incredible shock of it raced back through his blade, twisting and loosening the haft in his fingers, causing a geysering of pain in his hand.

The sword had almost been struck from his grasp by Karkarand's first blow!

He tightened numb fingers on the still-reverberating haft just in time to counter an exact repetition of the first stroke. This time he was better prepared for the devastating power of it and his sword remained secure in his grip, but the pain was more intense than before, surging back into his wrist. Karkarand kept moving forward at his deliberate pace, repeating the downward blow without any variation, and now Toller understood his opponent's strategy. This was to be death by contempt. Karkarand had indeed heard of Lord Toller Maraquine, and he was determined to enhance his own reputation by simply walking through the Kingslayer like an automaton, annihilating him in a demonstration of sheer strength. *No special skill was required*, was to be the message to the onlookers and the rest of the world. *The great Toller Maraquine was easy meat for the first real warrior he ever encountered.*

Toller leapt back well clear of Karkarand to gain some respite from the punishing contacts with the black sword and to give himself time in which to think. He could see now that Karkarand's weapon was thicker and heavier than an ordinary battle sword—more suitable for formal executions than prolonged combat—and only one possessed of superhuman strength could use it effectively in a duel. The heart of the problem, however, lay in the odd fighting style which had been adopted by Karkarand. An unrelenting series of vertical strokes was probably the best technique, albeit chosen unwittingly, for countering the secret additional power of Toller's steel sword. If he wanted to survive—and thereby prove his point—he would have to force a radical change in the style of combat.

Hardening his resolve, Toller waited until Karkarand's sword was again raised above his head, then he went in fast and blocked the coming downstroke by locking the two blades together at the hilt. The move took Karkarand by surprise because it could only have been completed successfully by an opponent of greater physical strength—and such was manifestly not the case. Karkarand blinked, and then with a snort of gratification bore downwards with all the power of his massive right arm. Toller was able to resist for only a few seconds before being obliged to yield, and as his opponent's drive gained momentum he was actually forced into an undignified backwards scramble which almost ended in a fall.

The onlookers, who had advanced to form a circle, raised some ironic applause—a sound in which Toller detected a note of anticipation. He played up to it by bowing towards Chakkell, who responded with an impatient signal to continue with the duel. Toller wheeled quickly on his opponent, now feeling satisfied and relieved, knowing that the upper sections of the two blades had been in contact long enough for Karkarand's weapon to have been liberally smeared with yellow fluid.

"Enough of this play-acting, Kingslayer," Karkarand growled as he drove forward with yet another of the swishing, murderous vertical strokes.

Instead of fending it off to the right, Toller—using smallsword technique—swept his blade over and around the blow, and concluded the movement by striking across the line of it. Karkarand's sword snapped just below the hilt and the black blade tumbled away across the gravel. Running a few paces towards the ruined weapon, Karkarand emitted a cry of anguished surprise which was amplified by the stillness which had descended over the crowd.

"What have you done, Maraquine?" King Chakkell bellowed, his paunch surging as he strode forward. "What trickery is this?"

"No trickery! See for yourself, Majesty," Toller called out, his attention only partially centred on the King. The duel would have been ended or suspended had

the normal Kolcorronian rules been in force, but he had assessed Karkarand as a man to whom behavioural codes meant nothing, who would always go for the kill using any means at his disposal. Toller faced the King for only an instant, judging the time available to him, then spun with his sword held level in a glittering horizontal sweep. Karkarand, who had been running at him with the organic club of his fist upraised, slid to a halt with the point of Toller's sword in his midriff. A crimson stain spread quickly in the coarse grey weave of his tunic, but he held his ground, breathing heavily, and even seemed to be pressing forward regardless of the metal which was penetrating his flesh.

"Make your choice, ogre," Toller said gently. "Life or death."

Karkarand stared at him wordlessly, still without backing off, eyes reduced to pale venomous slits in the vertically compressed face, and Toller found himself making ready for an action which had become foreign to his nature.

"Use your brains, Karkarand," Chakkell said, reaching the scene of the confrontation. "You would be of little use to me with a severed spine. Return to your duties immediately—this matter may be concluded another day."

"Majesty." Karkarand stepped backwards and saluted the King without once allowing his gaze to stray from Toller's face. He turned and marched away towards his quarters, the ring of spectators hastily parting to let him through. Chakkell, who had been happy to indulge his subjects as long as he had believed Toller would be slain, made a dismissive gesture and the crowd rapidly dispersed. Within seconds Toller and Chakkell were alone in a sunlit arena.

"Now, Maraquine!" Chakkell extended his hand. "The weapon!"

"Of course, Majesty." Toller opened the compartment in the haft, revealing the shattered vial bathed in yellow ooze, and a pungent smell—reminiscent of the stench of whitefern—permeated the warm air. Holding the sword by the lower part of the blade, Toller passed it over to Chakkell for inspection.

Chakkell wrinkled his nose in distaste. "This is brakka slime!"

"A refinement of it. In this form it is easier to remove from one's skin."

"The form is of no account." Chakkell looked down and nudged the discarded handle of Karkarand's sword with his foot. The black wood of the blade stump was visibly seething and frothing under the action of the destructive fluid. "I still say you resorted to trickery."

"And I maintain there was no trickery," Toller countered. "When a superior new weapon becomes available only a fool stubbornly clings to the old—that has always been a precept in military logic. And from this day forward weapons fashioned from brakka wood are obsolete." He paused to glance up at the looming convexity of the Old World. "They belong up there—with the past."

Chakkell returned the steel sword and broodily paced a circle before again

locking eyes with Toller. "I don't understand you, Maraquine. Why have you gone to such lengths? Why have you taken such pains?"

"The felling of brakka trees has to stop—and the sooner the better."

"The same old tune! And what if I suppress all details of your new toy?"

"It's already too late for that," Toller said, turning a thumb towards the line of military quarters. "Many soldiers saw the steel sword survive the worst shocks that Karkarand could inflict, and they also saw what happened to his blade. It is beyond the power of any ruler to restrict that kind of knowledge. Soldiers will always talk, Majesty. They will feel uneasy, and resentful, if required to go into battle armed with weapons they know to be inferior. If in future there were to be an insurrection—perish the thought!—the traitor leading it would ensure that his soldiers were equipped with steel swords of this new pattern. That being the case, a hundred of his men could rout a thous—"

"Stop!" Chakkell clapped his hands to his temples and stood that way for a moment, breathing noisily. "Deliver twelve examples of your damned sword to Gagon of the Military Council. I will speak to him in the meantime."

"Thank you, Majesty," Toller said, taking care to sound gratified rather than triumphant. "And now, about the reprieve for the farmer?"

There was a stirring in the brown depths of Chakkell's eyes. "You can't have everything, Maraquine. You overcame Karkarand by deceit—so your wager is lost. You should be grateful that I am not claiming the stipulated payment."

"But I made my terms clear," Toller said, appalled by the new development. "I said I could defeat the best swordsman in your army as long as I held *this sword* in my hand."

"Now you're beginning to sound like a cheap Kailian lawyer," Chakkell said, his smile stealing back by degrees. "Remember you're supposed to be a man of honour."

"There is only one here whose honour is in question."

The words he had spoken—his own sentence of death—quickly leached away into the surrounding stillness, and yet it seemed to Toller that he could hear them still being chanted, slow-fading in the passageways of his mind. *I must have planned to die*, he told himself. *But why did my body proceed with the scheme on its own? Why did it make the fatal move so quickly? Did it know my mind to be an irresolute and untrustworthy accomplice? Does every suicide recriminate with himself as he contemplates the empty poison bottle?*

Bemused and numb—stone-faced because the last thing he could do was to show any sign of regret—Toller waited for the King's inevitable reaction. There was no point in trying to apologise or make amends—in Kolcorronian society death was the mandatory punishment for insulting the ruler—and there was

nothing Toller could do now but try to shut out visions of Gesalla's face as she heard how he had engineered his own demise...

"In a way, it has always been something of a game between us," Chakkell said, looking reproachful rather than angry. "Time after time I have allowed you to get away with things for which I would have had any other man flayed; and even on this foreday—had your bout with Karkarand taken its natural course—I believe I would have stayed his sword at the end rather than see you die. And it was all because of our private little jest, Toller. Our secret game. Do you understand that?"

Toller shook his head. "It is entirely too deep for the likes of me."

"You know exactly what I'm saying. And you know also that the game ended a moment ago when you broke all the rules. You have left me with no alternative but to..."

Chakkell's words were lost to Toller as, looking over the King's shoulder, he saw an army officer come running from a doorway in the north wall of the palace. Chakkell must have given a secret signal, Toller decided, his heart lurching as he tightened his grip on the steel sword. For one pounding instant he considered making the King his hostage and bargaining his way to the open countryside and freedom, but the obdurate side of his nature came to the fore. He had no relish for the idea of being hunted down and trapped like a bedraggled animal—and, besides, the act of threatening Chakkell would rebound on his own family. It would be better by far to accept that he had entered the last hour of his life, and to depart it with what remained of his dignity and honour.

Toller stepped clear of Chakkell and was raising his sword when it came to him that the orange-crested captain was hardly behaving like an arresting officer. He was not accompanied by any of the palace guard, his face was agitated and he was carrying binoculars in place of a drawn sword. Far behind him other soldiers and court officials were reappearing at the edges of the parade ground, their faces turned to the southern sky.

"...if you make no attempt to resist," Chakkell was saying. "Otherwise, I will have no recourse but to..." He broke off, alerted by the sound of approaching footsteps, and wheeled to face the running officer.

"Majesty!" the captain called out. "I bear a sunwriter message from Airmarshal Yeapard. It is of the utmost urgency." The captain slid to a halt, saluted and waited for permission to continue.

"Get on with it," Chakkell said irritably.

"A skyship has been sighted south of the city, Majesty."

"Skyship? Skyship?" Chakkell scowled at the captain. "What is Yeapard talking about?"

"I have no more information, Majesty," the captain replied, nervously proffering the leather-bound binoculars. "The airmarshal said you might wish to use these."

Chakkell snatched the glasses and aimed them at the sky. Toller dropped his sword and reached into his pouch for his telescope, narrowing his eyes as he picked out an object shining in the south, about midway between the horizon and the disk of the sister world. With practised speed he trained the telescope, centring the object in a circle of blue brilliance. The magnified image produced in him a rush of emotion powerful enough to displace all thoughts of his imminent death.

He saw the pear-shaped balloon—impressively huge even at a distance of miles—and the rectangular gondola slung beneath it. He saw the jet exhaust cone projecting downwards from the gondola, and even discerned the near-invisible lines of the acceleration struts which linked the upper and lower components of the airborne craft. And it was the sight of the struts—unique to the ships designed more than twenty years earlier for the Migration—which confirmed what he had intuitively known from the start, adding to his inner turmoil.

"I can't find anything," Chakkell grumbled, slewing the binoculars too rapidly. "How can there be a skyship anyway? I haven't authorised any rebuilding."

"I think that is the point of the airmarshal's message," Toller said, keeping his voice level. "We have visitors from the Old World."

Chapter 2

The thirty-plus wagons of the First Birthright expedition had travelled too far.

Their timbers were warped and shredded, little remained of the original paintwork, and breakdowns had become so frequent that progress was rarely as much as ten miles a day. In spite of adequate grazing along the route, the bluehorns which provided the expedition's motive power were slouched and scrawny, weakened by water-borne diseases and parasitical attacks.

Bartan Drumme, pathfinder for the venture, was at the reins of the leading wagon as the train straggled up to the crest of a low ridge. Ahead of him had unfolded a vista of strangely coloured marshland—off-whites and sickly lime greens predominating—which was dotted with drooping, asymmetrical trees and twisted spires of black rock. The sight would have been unappealing to the average traveller, but for one who was supposed to be leading a group of hopefuls to an agricultural paradise it was deeply depressing.

Bartan groaned aloud as he weighed various factors in his mind and concluded that it would take at least five days for the party to reach the horizontal band of blue-green hills which marked the far edge of the swampy basin. Jop Trinchil, who had conceived and organised the expedition, had been growing more and more disillusioned with him of late, and this new misfortune was not going to improve the relationship. Now that Bartan thought of it, he realised he would be lucky if any of the other farmers in the group continued to have dealings with him. As it was, they only spoke to him when necessary, and he had an uneasy feeling that even the loyalty of his betrothed, Sondeweere, was becoming strained by his lack of success.

Deciding it would be best to face the communal anger squarely, he brought his wagon to a halt, applied the brake and leapt down on to the grass. He was a tall, black-haired man in his mid-twenties, slim-built and agile, with a round boyish face. It was that face—smooth, humorous, clever-looking—which had led to some of his previous difficulties with the farmers, most of whom were inclined to distrust men not cast in their own mould. Aware that he already had enough problems to cope with in the next few minutes, Bartan did his utmost to look competent and unruffled while he signalled for the train to halt.

As he had anticipated, there was no need for him to call a meeting—within

seconds of glimpsing the dismal terrain ahead, the farmers and their families had quit their wagons and were converging on him. Each of them appeared to be shouting something different, creating a confusion of sound, but Bartan guessed that their scorn was about equally divided between his ability as a pathfinder and this latest in a series of infertile, unworkable tracts of land. Even small children were staring at him with open contempt.

"Well now, Drumme—what fanciful tale have you for us this time?" demanded Jop Trinchil, arms folded across the pudgy billows of his chest. He was grey-haired and plump, but he carried his excess weight with ease and had hands which looked like natural farming implements. In a straight fight it was likely that he would be able to dispose of Bartan without even getting out of breath.

"Tale? Tale?" Bartan, playing for time, chose to sound indignant. "I don't trade in tales."

"No? What was it when you told me you were familiar with this territory?"

"I told you I had flown over the region several times with my father, but that was a long time ago—and there is a limit to what one can see and remember." The final word of the sentence was out before Bartan could check it, and he cursed himself for having given the older man another opportunity to use his favourite so-called witticism.

"I'm surprised you even remember," Trinchil said heavily, glancing about him to solicit laughs, "to point your spout away from yourself when you piss."

And I'm surprised you even remember where your spout is, Bartan thought, keeping the riposte to himself with difficulty as those around him, especially the children, burst into immoderate laughter. Jop Trinchil was Sondeweere's legal guardian, with the power to forbid her to marry, and reacted so badly each time he was bested in a verbal duel that she had made Bartan vow never to score over him again.

"I see no profit in going any farther west," a blond young farmer called Raderan put in. "I vote we turn north."

Another said, "I agree—if the bluehorns last long enough we're going to end up arriving back where we started, but from the other direction."

Bartan shook his head. "If we go north we'll only drive into New Kail, which is already well settled, and you will be obliged to split up and take inferior plots. I thought the whole purpose of the expedition was to claim prime land for yourselves and your families, and to live as a community."

"That *was* the purpose, but we made the mistake of not hiring a professional guide," Trinchil said. "We made the mistake of hiring *you*."

The truth contained in the accusation had a greater effect on Bartan than the

vehement manner in which it was delivered. Having met and fallen in love with Sondeweere he had been devastated to learn that she was leaving the Ro-Amass vicinity with the expedition, and in his determination to be accepted by Trinchil and the others he had exaggerated his knowledge of this part of the continent. In his ardour he had half-convinced himself that he could recall the broad geographical features of a vast area, but as the wagons had groped their way west the inadequacies of his memory and handful of sketch maps had become more and more apparent.

Now he was reaping the reward for his manipulation of himself and others, and something in Trinchil's manner was making him fear that the reward might contain an element of physical pain. Alarmed, Bartan shaded his eyes from the sun and studied the shimmering marshland again, hoping to pick out some feature which would have a stimulative effect on his memory. Almost at once he noticed a kink in the horizontal line which was the area's far boundary, a kink which might indicate a narrow extension of the marsh in a riverbed. How would that look from the air? A thin white finger pointing west? Was he deceiving himself again or was there just such an image buried in some recess of his mind? And was it linked to an even fainter vision of lush, rolling grasslands traversed by clear streams?

Deciding to take the final gamble, Bartan produced a loud peal of laughter, using all his vocal skills to make it sound totally natural and unforced. Trinchil's silver-stubbed jaw sagged in surprise and the discontented babble from the rest of the group abruptly ceased.

"I see nothing amusing in our situation," Trinchil said. "And even less in yours," he added ominously.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Bartan giggled and knuckled his eyes, the picture of a man fighting to control genuine merriment. "It was cruel of me, but you know I can't resist my little jokes—and I just *had* to see your face when you thought the whole venture had come to naught. I do apologise, most sincerely."

"Have you lost your reason?" Trinchil said, hands clenching into huge leathery clubs. "Explain yourself at once."

"Gladly." Bartan made a theatrical gesture which took in the whole of the marshy basin. "You will all be delighted to hear that yonder dish of mildewed porridge is the very landmark for which I have been aiming since the outset. At the other side of it, just beyond those hills, you will find an abundance of the finest agricultural land you have ever seen, stretching for league upon league in every direction, as far as the eye can see. My friends, we are almost at journey's end. Soon our days of toil and tribulation will be over, and we will be able to lay claim to the..."

"That's enough of your wind," Trinchil shouted, raising his hands to damp the rising note of excitement among some of the onlookers. "We have suffered this kind of rhetoric from you too many times in the past—why should we believe you this time?"

"I still say we should turn north," Raderan said, stepping forward. "And if we're going to do that it would be best to do it from here rather than waste time circling that swamp on the say-so of a fool."

"Fool is too kindly a word for him," said Raderan's hulking gradewife, Firenda. After a moment's thought she suggested what she considered a more appropriate description, bringing a gasp from several of the other women, and an even more ecstatic howl of laughter from the children.

"It is well that you are protected by your skirts, madam," Bartan protested, privately doubting his ability to stand up to the giantess for more than a few seconds, and to his dismay she immediately began to fumble with the knot of her waistcord.

"If it is only my shift that deters you," she grated, "we can soon..."

"Leave this to me, woman!" Trinchil had drawn himself up to his full height and was conspicuously asserting his authority. "We are all reasonable people here, and it behoves us to settle our disputes through the exercise of reason. You would agree with that, wouldn't you, Mister Drumme?"

"Wholeheartedly," Bartan said, his relief tempered by a suspicion that Trinchil's intentions towards him had not suddenly become charitable. Beyond the circle of people he saw the yellow-haired figure of Sondeweere part the canopy of a wagon and begin to descend to the ground. He guessed she had hung back, knowing he was in fresh trouble and not wishing to increase his discomfiture with her presence. She was wearing a sleeveless green blouse and close-fitting trews of a darker shade. The garments were quite standard for young women in farming communities, but it was evident to Bartan that she wore them with a special flair which distinguished her from all the others, and which signified equally rare qualities of mind. Even with his present difficult situation to occupy his thoughts, he was able to take a keen pleasure in the graceful, languorous movement of her hips as she climbed down the side of the wagon.

"That being the case, *Mister Drumme*," Trinchil said, moving towards Bartan's wagon, "I think the time has come to rouse your sleeping passenger and make her start paying her way."

This was the moment Bartan had been hoping to avert since the beginning of the expedition. "Ah... It would occasion a lot of hard work."

"Not as much hard work as crossing those hills and perhaps finding a swamp

or desert on the other side."

"Yes, but..."

"But what?" Trinchil tugged at the wagon's stained canvas cover. "You *have* got an airship in here, and you *can* fly it, can't you? If it transpired that you had turned my niece's head with a pack of lies I would be very angry. More angry than you have ever seen me. More angry than you can even *imagine*."

Bartan glanced at Sondeweere, who was just reaching the edge of the group, and was taken aback to see that she was gazing at him with an expression which was frankly questioning, not to say doubtful. "Of course, my airship is in there," he said hurriedly. "Well, it's more of an *airboat* than an airship, but I can assure you that I am an excellent pilot."

"Ship, boat or coracle—we're listening to no more of your excuses." Trinchil began unfastening the cover and other men willingly went forward to help him.

Not daring to object, Bartan watched the operation in a mood of increasing gloom. The airboat was the only object of any value he had inherited from his father, a man whose passion for flying had gradually impoverished and eventually killed him. Its airworthiness was extremely dubious, but Bartan had concealed that fact when presenting the case for his being allowed to join the expedition. An aerial scout could be of great value to the commune, he had argued, and Trinchil had reluctantly assigned wagon-space to the craft. There had been several occasions during the journey when reconnaissance from the air would indeed have been worth the trouble of sending the boat aloft, and each time Bartan had tested his ingenuity to the limit by devising plausible reasons for remaining on the ground. Now, however, it looked as though the day of reckoning had finally arrived.

"See how eagerly they scrabble," he said, taking up a position beside Sondeweere. "It's like a sport to them! Anyone would think they doubted my ability as a pilot."

"That will be soon put to the test." Sondeweere spoke with less warmth than Bartan would have liked. "I only hope you're better as a pilot than as a guide."

"Sondy!"

"Well," she said unrepentantly, "you must admit you've made a fine pig's arse of everything so far."

Bartan gazed down at her in wounded bafflement. Sondeweere's face was possibly the most beautiful he had ever seen—with large, wide-spaced blue eyes, perfect nose and well-delineated voluptuous lips—and his every instinct informed him she had an inner loveliness to match. But now and then she would make an utterance which, taken at its face value, indicated that she was quite as coarse as some of the slovens with whom circumstances of birth had forced her

to associate. Was this a matter of deliberate policy on her part? Was she, in her own way, warning him that the agricultural life he was about to embrace was not for milksops? His thoughts were abruptly diverted to more practical matters by the sight of a farmer aboard the wagon picking up a green-painted box and preparing to drop it to the ground.

"Careful!" Bartan shouted, darting forward. "You have crystals in there!"

The farmer shrugged, unimpressed, and lowered the box into Bartan's hands.

"Let me have the purple one too," Bartan said. When he had received the second box he tucked one under each arm and carried them to a safe resting place on a flat-topped boulder. The green pikon and purple halvell crystals—both extracted from the soil by the root systems of brakka trees—were not really dangerous unless allowed to mingle inside a sealed container. But they were expensive and difficult to obtain outside the largest communities, and Bartan was very solicitous with the small quantities remaining to him. Accepting that he was now virtually committed to making a flight in spite of the hazards involved, he began to supervise the unpacking and assembly of the airboat.

Although the little gondola was extremely light he had no worries about its strength, and the jet engine—being made of brakka wood—was practically indestructible. Bartan's main concern was with the gasbag. The varnished linen of the envelope had been in doubtful condition when he had packed it, and the long period of stowage in the back of the wagon was likely to have caused further deterioration. He inspected the material and the stitching of the panels and load tapes as the gasbag was being rolled out to its full length on the ground, and what he found added to his misgivings about the proposed flight. The linen had a papery feel to it and there were numerous loose ends of thread wavering on the tapes.

This is madness, Bartan thought. I'm not going to get myself killed for anybody.

He was choosing between the alternatives of facing up to Trinchil and simply refusing to fly, or of surreptitiously disabling the boat by putting a hole in the envelope, when he noticed that a change was coming over the other members of the group. The men were asking questions about the construction and operation of the craft, and were listening to his replies with interest. Even the unruliest children had become more respectful in their manner. It slowly dawned on Bartan that the settlers and their families had never been close to a flying machine before, and a sense of wonder was stirring to life inside them. The boat and its strange mechanisms, seen for the first time, were proof that he really was a flier. Within minutes his status had improved from that of mistrusted novice farmer, a liability to the commune, to that of a man possessing arcane

knowledge, rare skills and a godlike ability to walk the clouds. His new eminence was very gratifying—and it was a pity it was destined to be so brief.

"How long would it take to reach the hills with a device like this?" Trinchil said, with no trace of his usual condescension.

"Thirty minutes or so."

Trinchil whistled. "It is truly wondrous. Are you not afraid?"

"Not in the least," Bartan said, regretting that he could no longer delay making his position clear. "You see, I have absolutely no intention of trying to fly this..."

"Bartan!" Sondeweere arrived at his side in a swirling of yellow tresses and put an arm around his waist. "I'm so *proud* of you."

He did his best to smile. "There's something I ought..."

"I want to whisper." She drew his head down, at the same time applying her body to his in such a way that he felt the warm pressure of her breasts against his ribs and her pubis nuzzling into his thigh. "I'm sorry I was rude to you," she breathed in his ear. "I was worried about us, you see, and Uncle Jop was getting into such a dark mood. I couldn't *bear* it if anything got in the way of our marriage, but now everything is all right again. Show them all how wonderful you are, Bartan—just for me."

"I..." Bartan's voice faded as he became aware that Trinchil was staring at him with an inquisitive expression.

"You were about to say something." There seemed to be a rekindling of the old animosity in Trinchil's eyes. "Something about not flying."

"Not flying?" Bartan felt Sondeweere's hand slide down his back and come to rest on his buttocks. "No, no, *no*! I was going to say I'd be in no danger because I have no intention of trying to fly too fast, or of performing any injudicious aerobatics. Aviation is a business with me, you know. Strictly a business."

"I'm glad to hear it," Trinchil said. "I'd be the last man in the world to tell another how to conduct his business, but may I offer you a pertinent piece of advice?"

"Please do," Bartan replied, wondering why he found the older man's grin less than reassuring.

Trinchil clamped an enormous hand on each of Bartan's shoulders and gave him a mock-playful shake. "If, by any chance, you *fail* to find good land beyond those hills—keep on flying in a straight line and be sure to put as many leagues as you can between the two of us."

The boat was handling well and—had he not been fearful of a sudden and catastrophic failure of the gasbag—the experience of being airborne again might

have produced an equivalent lift in Bartan's spirits.

Enigmatic though it had seemed to the farmers, the engine designed and built by his father had only three basic controls. A throttle fed pikon and halvell into a combustion chamber, and the hot miglign gas thus generated was exhausted through an aft-facing jet pipe to propel the boat. The pipe could be swivelled laterally by means of a tiller to give some directional control; and when required another lever diverted gas upwards into the envelope to create and maintain buoyancy. As miglign was lighter than air, even when cool, the assemblage was compact and efficient.

Bartan took the boat to a height of fifty feet and sailed it in a circle around the wagons, partly to please Sondeweere, mainly to check that the extra strain of turning would not be too much for the attachment gussets. Relieved at finding the craft still airworthy for the time being at least, he gave a stately wave to the watching farmers and set a course to the west. It was just past noon, with the sun very close to the zenith, so he was riding in the protective shadow of the gasbag and could view his surroundings with unusual clarity. The marshlands stretched out ahead of him like pastel-tinted snow, in contrast to which the distant hills seemed almost black. Apart from the occasional flash of an extra-bright meteor there was little to be seen in the sky. Its brilliance was overpainting all but the brightest stars, and even the Tree—the most important constellation in the southern heavens—was barely visible to his left.

After a few minutes of uneventful flight Bartan began to cease worrying about his safety. The intermittent sound of his jet was fading quickly in the pervasive stillness, and he had little to do but hold his course, now and then pumping the pneumatic reservoir which force-fed crystals to the engine. He might have been able to enjoy the sortie had it not been for Jop Trinchil's parting words, and once again he found himself regretting that he had never been able to persuade Sondeweere to leave the Birthright group.

He had been only two years old at the time of the Migration and had no real memories of the event, but his father had told him much about it and had given him a good understanding of the historical background. When the ptertha plague had forced King Prad to build an evacuation fleet capable of flying to Overland from the sister world, Land, there had been strong opposition from the Church. The basic tenet of the Alternist religion had been that after death the soul flew to Overland, was reincarnated as a baby, lived out another life and returned to Land in the same way, part of an eternal and immutable process of exchange. The proposal to have a thousand ships physically undertake the voyage to Overland had been an affront to the Lord Prelate of the day, and the riots he led had threatened the whole enterprise, but the Migration had been accomplished

despite adverse conditions.

When Overland was found to have no human inhabitants, no counterpart to Land's civilisation, religious conviction had largely ceased to exist among the colonists. The fact that it had not disappeared entirely was, according to Bartan's father, a triumph of stubborn irrationality. *All right, we were mistaken*, was the argument advanced by the remnants of the devout. *But that was only because our minds were too puny to appreciate the grandeur of the plan devised by the Great Permanence. We know that after death the soul migrates to another world, and so inadequate was our vision that we presumed that other world to be Overland. We now realise that the departing soul's actual destination is Farland. The High Path is much longer than we realised, brethren.*

Farland was roughly twice as distant from the sun as the Land-Overland pair. It would be many centuries before ships from Overland would be able to undertake that kind of journey, Vlodern Drumme had concluded—passing his natural cynicism to his son—so the high priests had made a good choice. Their jobs were safe for a long time to come...

He had been wrong on that point, as it had transpired. In designing Overland's infant society, King Chakkell—an old enemy of the Church—had made certain it contained no vestiges of a state religion. Satisfied with having abolished the clergy as a profession, the King had occupied himself with other matters, careless of the fact that his edicts had created a vacuum to be filled by a new kind of preacher, of whom Jop Trinchil was a good example.

Trinchil had embraced religion late in life. At the age of forty he had willingly taken part in the interworld migration, with no qualms about desecrating the High Path, and for the most part his life on Overland had been one of unremitting hard work on a smallholding in the Ro-Amass region. On nearing his sixties Trinchil had become disillusioned with the normal pattern of agricultural life and had decided to be a lay preacher. Unlettered, uncouth in word and manner, inclined to violence, he nevertheless had a raw force of personality which he was soon exerting over a small congregation, whose donations handsomely supplemented the rewards of his own physical toil.

Finally, he had conceived the idea of leading a flock of the faithful to a part of Overland where they could practise their religion without interference—especially from busybodies who might report Trinchil's illegal activities to the prefect in Ro-Amass.

It was during the preparations for the Birthright Expedition that Trinchil's and Bartan Drumme's paths had intersected. Bartan had been earning a reasonable, if irregular, income by selling cheap jewelry of his own design and manufacture. Normally his commercial judgment was sound, but for a brief period he had

allowed himself to become infatuated with the appearance of the newly discovered soft metals, gold and silver. As a result he had been left with a batch of trinkets he found almost impossible to sell in his normal markets, where there was a conservative preference for traditional materials such as glass, ceramics, soapstone and brakka. Refusing to be discouraged, he had started touring the rural areas around Ro-Amass in search of less discerning customers, and had met Sondeweere Trinchil.

Her yellow hair had bedazzled him more than gold had done, and within minutes he was hopelessly in love and dreaming of taking Sondeweere back to the city as his solewife. She had responded favourably to his overtures, obviously pleased by the prospect of marrying a man whose appearance and manner contrasted so sharply with those of the average young farmer. There had been, however, two major obstacles to Bartan's plans. Sondeweere's desire for novelty stopped short of any interest in changing her way of life—she was adamant that she would never live anywhere but on a farm. Bartan's reaction had been to discover within himself a hitherto dormant passion for agriculture and an ambition to work his own plot of land, but the second problem had been far less amenable to a quick solution.

Jop Trinchil and he had taken an immediate dislike to each other. There had been no need for a conflict of interests, or even for a word to be spoken—the mutual antagonism had sprung into existence, deep-rooted and permanent, on the very instant of their first meeting. Trinchil had decided at once that Bartan would be an abject failure as husband and father; and Bartan had known, without having to be told, that Trinchil's only interest in religion was as a means of lining his pocket.

Bartan had to admit that Trinchil was genuinely fond of his niece, and although he seized every opportunity to complain about Bartan's shortcomings he had not forbidden the marriage. That had been the situation up to the present, but Bartan had a feeling that his future was in the balance, and his state of mind had not been improved by Sondeweere's behaviour at the impromptu meeting. She had acted as though her love was beginning to waver, as though she could turn away from him if he failed to make good his latest promise.

The thought caused Bartan to concentrate his gaze on the irregularity at the far edge of the swampy basin. Now that he was closer and higher he was almost certain that it indeed represented an extension of the marsh into an arroyo, in which case the chances that he actually was recalling an aerial view were somewhat improved. Wishing his memory was more trustworthy, he fed several bursts of hot miglign into the gasbag which swayed above him, and slowly he gained the height he would need for crossing the hills. The spires of rock rearing

up from the pale surface shrank to the semblance of black candles.

In a short time the boat was scudding over the marsh's ill-defined boundary and Bartan was able to confirm that a narrow finger of it ran due west for about two miles. With increasing confidence and excitement he followed the course of the ancient waterway. As grassy contours rose up beneath the boat he saw groups of deer-like animals, disturbed by the sound of the jet, make swerving runs, with white hindquarters beaoning their alarm. Frightened birds occasionally erupted from trees like wind-borne swirls of petals.

Bartan kept his eyes on the slopes ahead. They seemed to form a barrier which was being raised higher and higher to block his view, then he was crossing a ridge and with dramatic suddenness the horizon receded, fleeing into the distance before him. The intervening space was revealed as a complex vista of savannahs, gentle hills, lakes and occasional strips of woodland.

Bartan gave a whoop of glee as he saw that the territory, spilling out in front of him like a rich man's hoard, was a homesteader's dream translated into reality. His first impulse was to turn the airboat and head back to Trinchil and the others with the good news, but the hillside was shelving away beneath him now in a silent invitation to fly onwards. He decided it would do no harm to spend a few extra minutes in getting a closer and more detailed view of the nearer tracts, and perhaps to locate a stream which would afford a good preliminary stopping place. It would help impress on the farmers that he was a competent and practical man.

Allowing the boat to lose altitude naturally through the cooling of the gasbag, Bartan continued sailing west, sometimes laughing aloud with sheer pleasure, sometimes sighing in relief over the nearness of his escape from humiliation and expulsion. The clarity of the air defeated perspective, stacking geographical features on top of each other as in a meticulously executed drawing, allowing him to pick out details of rock formations and vegetation at ranges he would normally have considered impossible. Thus it was that—although he was a good five miles from the white speck on the hillside when he first noticed it—identification was immediate.

He was looking at a farmhouse!

His pang of disappointment seemed to darken the sky and chill the air, drawing an involuntary moan of protest from his lips. Bartan knew that King Chakkell's first major decision on ascending the throne had been to establish Kolcorron as a single world state. To that end, a fleet of large airships had been employed to disperse the newly arrived migrants around the globe. Those seedling communities had served as nodal points for vigorous expansion, but it had been Bartan's understanding that this southerly part of the continent was as

yet untouched. To help maintain the impetus of growth, farmers moving into new territories were entitled to claim much larger plots than were granted in comparatively settled areas—a consideration which had motivated Jop Trinchil—and now it seemed that the selfsame factor could thwart Trinchil's ambitions. Bartan's own plans could be similarly affected unless it transpired that settlement of the region had only just begun, in which case there might be ample land for new families. Definite information had to be obtained before he returned to the expedition.

Encouraged by the flickering of hope, Bartan altered his course slightly to north of west, aiming directly for the minuscule white rectangle of the farmhouse. In a short time he was within a mile of the house and could discern drably coloured sheds around it. He was preparing to shed buoyancy for a landing when he began to notice something wrong with the general aspect of the place. There were no people, animals or vehicles in sight, and the ground slipping beneath the prow of his boat did not look well tended. Faint variations in coloration showed that crops had once been planted in the familiar six-strip pattern, but the edges of the sections were blurred and there seemed to have been an invasion of native grasses which showed as an overall green haze.

The realisation that the farm had been abandoned took Bartan by surprise. It was possible that there had been some kind of epidemic, or that the owners had been tyros who had become discouraged and had returned to urban life—but surely someone else would have been glad to take over a unit in which all the gruelling basic work had already been done.

His curiosity aroused, Bartan shut off the jet and floated his craft down on to the level ground which surrounded the house and its outbuildings. The slightness of the breeze enabled him to make an accurate landing within yards of a patch of wryberry vines. As soon as he stepped out of the boat the craft as a whole became lighter than air and tried to drift away, but he held it down by one of the skids until he had thrown a tether around the nearest vine. The boat gently rose to the full extent of the rope and came to rest, wallowing a little in weak air currents.

Bartan walked towards the farm buildings, becoming further intrigued with the mystery of the place as he noticed a dust-covered plough lying on its side. Other smaller implements could be seen here and there. They were made of brakka, but some had rivets of iron, a metal which was becoming generally available, and from the degree of rusting he guessed the tools had been lying around untouched for at least a year. He frowned as he estimated the practical value of the abandoned equipment. It was as though the owners of the farm had simply walked away from their livelihood—or had been spirited away by some

unknown means.

The notion was a strange one to come to Bartan while he was standing in the full flood of the aft day sun, especially as he had never had anything but scorn for credulous people who heeded stories of the supernatural. Suddenly, however, he was uneasily conscious of the fact that his kind had been on Overland for only twenty-four years, and that much on the planet remained unknown to them. In the past the knowledge that he was a newcomer on a largely unexplored world had always exhilarated Bartan, but now he felt strangely chastened by it.

Don't start acting like a child, he told himself. What is there to be afraid of?

He turned towards the farmhouse itself. It was well constructed of sawn timbers caulked with oakum, and the whitewashing showed that somebody had taken pride in it. Bartan frowned again as he saw that yellow curtains still hung in the windows, glowing in the shade of the wide eaves. It would have been the work of only a moment to snatch them down, something he would have expected any home-lover to do, no matter how hasty the departure.

Is it possible they haven't departed? Could a whole family still be in there? Dead of some disease? Or ... or murdered?

"Neighbours would have been around before now," he said aloud to block the flow of questions. "Even in a place as remote as this, neighbours would have been around before now. And they would have taken all the tools—farmers don't let much go to waste." Comforted by the simple logic, he walked quickly to the single-storey farmhouse, unlatched the green front door and pushed it open.

His eyes were attuned to the fierce sunlight, therefore it was several seconds before they adapted to the shade of the eaves and the comparative dimness within the house, several seconds before he clearly saw the nameless beast which was waiting for him to enter.

He sobbed, leapt backwards and fell, mind's eye brimming with the dreadful vision ... the dark, slow-heaving pyramid of the body, upright and tall as a man ... the sagging, dissolving face, with wounds in place of eyes ... the single slim tentacle, gently groping forward...

Bartan jarred down onto his backside and hands, rolled over in the dust and was in the act of surging up and away from the house in a fear-boosted sprint when the picture behind his eyes shifted and changed. Instead of a nightmarish monster he saw miscellaneous items of old clothing suspended from a hook on a wall. There was a dark cloak, a torn jacket, a hat, and a stained apron with one string being wafted by the abrupt opening of the door.

He slowly got to his feet and brushed the dust from his body, all the while staring at the dark rectangle of the doorway. It was obvious what had caused the momentary illusion, and he felt a tingle of shame over his reaction, but in spite

of that he was now oddly reluctant to enter the house.

What made me want to go in there in the first place? he thought. *It's somebody else's property. Nothing to do with me...*

He turned and had taken one pace towards his boat when a new thought obtruded. What he was actually doing was running away from the farmhouse because he had become unaccountably fearful, and if he allowed that to happen he would be even less of a man than Trinchil had supposed. Muttering unhappily to himself, Bartan spun on his heel and marched into the house.

A quick inspection of the musty rooms established that the worst of his fears had been groundless—there were no human remains. All the major items of furniture had been removed, but he found extra evidence that the occupants had departed in great haste. Mats had been left in two of the rooms and there was a ceramic jar full of salt in a niche in the stone fireplace. Farming people simply did not abandon items like that in normal circumstances, Bartan knew, and he was unable to rid himself of a suspicion that something sinister had occurred on the lonely farm in the not-too-distant past.

Relieved at having no further cause to remain in the uneasy atmosphere, he went outside—brushing past the slow-stirring garments hanging by the door—and walked straight to the airboat. It had lost some buoyancy as the gasbag cooled and now was resting lightly on its skids. Bartan unfastened the tether, seated himself in the gondola and took the boat aloft. It was still only a short time past noon and after a moment's thought he decided to continue flying west, following the line of a faint track into the lush green landscape. Much of the terrain consisted of drumlins—small hog-backed hills, oval in plan because of ancient glaciation—so regularly arranged that they reminded him of giant eggs in a basket. *There's the natural name for this fertile region,* he thought. *The Basket of Eggs!*

Within a short time he saw another farm agreeably positioned on the slopes of one of the rounded hills. He banked and flew towards it, and this time—in his state of alertness—he was quicker to realise that the place was not being worked. On arriving overhead he circled the farm once at low altitude to confirm his findings. No tools or equipment were visible and the farmhouse appeared to have been completely stripped, evidence that the evacuation had been more leisurely and ordered, but why had it taken place at all?

Deeply puzzled, Bartan continued with the flight, changing to a zigzag search pattern which slowed his progress to the west. In the hour that followed he discovered eight more farms, all in ideal agricultural land, all totally deserted. The sections in the region were far too large to be worked by single families, and the people who claimed them did so with the intention of laying down fortunes

for their descendants. As the population of Overland increased the pioneers would be able to sell or sublet land to later generations. It was a prize not to be yielded lightly—and yet *something* had induced many hard-headed farmers to pack up their belongings and move on.

Eventually Bartan began to pick out the glint of sunlight on a sizable river and decided on it as a natural limit to the day's sortie. At the northern end of one of his sweeps he detected a hazy column of smoke arising from a point which seemed to be close to the river. It was the first sign of human habitation he had seen in more than ten days, and was made even more intriguing by the prospect of getting information about the empty land he had been crossing. He set a course for the smoke trace, flying as fast as he dared in view of the gasbag's untrustworthy condition, and soon began to realise that what he was approaching was not another farm, but a small township.

It was situated on a Y-shaped fork created by a tributary joining the main river. As the airboat brought him closer, Bartan saw that it consisted of about forty buildings, some of which were large enough to be warehouses. White squares and triangles of sails indicated the river was navigable to the southern ocean. The place was obviously a trading centre, with the potential to become important and prosperous, and its presence made the enigma of the abandoned farms all the more baffling.

Long before Bartan had reached the edge of the township the roar of his jet had attracted attention on the ground. Two men came galloping out on bluehorns to meet him, waving vigorously, and then kept pace with the boat as he guided it down into an open patch near a bridge which spanned the lesser river. Men and women were issuing from the surrounding buildings to form a ring of spectators. Several youths, needing no appeal, willingly grabbed the skids and held the craft until Bartan had tethered it to a convenient sapling.

A red-faced man with prematurely white hair approached Bartan, obviously in the role of spokesman. In spite of being slightly below average height he had an air of assurance and, unusually in such a community, was wearing a smallsword.

"I am Majin Karrodall, reeve of the township of New Minnett," he said in friendly tones. "We don't see many aircraft in these parts."

"I'm scouting for a party of claimants," Bartan replied to the unspoken question. "My name is Bartan Drumme, and I would be grateful for some water to drink. I have flown much farther than I intended today and it is thirsty work."

"You're welcome to all the water you want, but if you would prefer it you can have good brown ale. What do you say?"

"I say good brown ale." Bartan, who had not tasted an alcoholic beverage

since joining the expedition, grinned to show his appreciation of the offer. There was a murmur of approval from those watching and the men began a general movement towards an open-fronted barn-like building which appeared to double as a meeting place and tavern. In a short time Bartan was seated at a long table in the company of Karrodall and about ten other men, most of whom had been introduced to him as storekeepers or riverboat crew. From the tone of the amiable banter going on around him Bartan guessed that impromptu gatherings like this were not infrequent events, and that his arrival had been seized on as a convenient excuse. A substantial two-handled jar was placed before him and when he sipped from it he found the ale to be cool, strong and not too sweet for his taste. Comforted by the welcome and the unexpected hospitality, he proceeded to quench his thirst and to answer questions about himself, the airboat and the objectives of Trinchil's expedition.

"I fear this is not the kind of news you wish to hear," Karrodall said, "but I think you will be obliged to turn north. The lands to the west of here are curtailed by the mountains, and to the south by the ocean—and the prime tracts have all been claimed and registered. It isn't much better if you head north into New Kail, I admit, but I have heard that there are one or two quiet little valleys still untouched on the other side of the Barrier range."

"I've seen those valleys," a plump man called Otler put in. "The only way you can stand upright is by growing one leg longer than the other."

The remark occasioned some laughter, and Bartan waited until it had subsided. "I have just flown over some excellent farming land to the east of the river. I realise, of course, that we are too late to claim it—but why are the farms not being worked?"

"It'll *never* be too late to claim that cursed place," Otler muttered, staring down into his drink.

Bartan was immediately intrigued. "What do you...?"

"Pay him no heed," Karrodall said quickly. "It was the ale talking."

Otler sat up straight, with an offended expression on his round face. "I'm not drunk! Are you suggesting that I'm drunk? I'm not drunk!"

"He's drunk," Karrodall assured Bartan.

"Nevertheless, I'd like to know what he meant." Bartan knew he was displeasing the reeve by pursuing the point, but Otler's strange comment was reverberating in his mind. "This is a matter of considerable importance to me."

"You might as well tell what he wants to know, Majin," another man said. "He'll be able to find out for himself."

Karrodall sighed and shot Otler a venomous glance, and when he spoke his voice had lost its former briskness. "The land to which you refer is known to us

as the Haunt. And while it is true that all claims to it have been allowed to lapse, that information is of no value to you. Your people will never settle there."

"Why not?"

"Why do you think we call it the Haunt? It is a place of evil, my friend. All who go there are ... troubled."

"By ghosts? By wraiths?" Bartan made no attempt to hide his incredulity and joy. "Are you saying that there are only hobgoblins to dispute the ownership of that land?"

Karrodall's face was solemn, the eyes intent. "I'm saying that you would be ill-advised to try settling there."

"Thank you for the advice." Bartan drained his ale, set the jar down with a flourish and stood up. "And thank you for the hospitality, gentlemen—I will repay it soon."

He left the table and went out into the aftday sunshine, eager to get aloft and return to the expedition with his good news.

Chapter 3

The skyship was being borne eastwards on the lightest of breezes, but the ground over which it was drifting was uneven and covered with scrub, which meant that the mounted soldiers had some difficulty in keeping pace with their alien quarry.

Colonel Mandle Gartasian, riding at the head of the column, kept his gaze firmly fixed on the ship and for the most part trusted his bluehorn to find its way around obstacles. The sight of the vast balloon and its room-sized gondola was activating bleak memories, causing a degree of pain he had not experienced since his first years on Overland, and yet he was unable to look elsewhere.

He was a tall man, with the powerful build typical of the Kolcorronian military caste, and showed few signs of his fifty years. Apart from a dusting of grey in his cropped black hair and a deepening of the lines on his square face, he looked much as he had done at the time of the hasty evacuation of Ro-Atabri. He had been an idealistic young lieutenant then, and had unhesitatingly taken his place on one of the first military ships to depart the doomed city. Thousands of times since that day he had cursed the naive trust in his senior officers which had led him to take off ahead of his wife and infant son.

Ronoda and the boy had been assigned places on a civilian ship, and he had left them in the belief that the army was in full control of the situation, that the embarkation schedules would be maintained, and that the separation would last just for the duration of the flight. Only when his binoculars revealed the growing chaos far below had he felt the first pangs of fear, and by then it had been much too late...

"Look, sir!" The words came from Lieutenant Keero, who was riding at Gartasian's side. "I think they're preparing to land!"

Gartasian nodded. "I believe you're right. Now, remember to keep your men from crowding in on the ship after it touches down. Nobody is to go closer than two hundred paces, even if the ship appears to have landing difficulties. We don't know what the crew's intentions are—and they may have powerful weaponry."

"I understand, sir. I can hardly believe this is happening. Can they really have flown all the way from Land?" Keero was infringing field discipline by making inessential remarks, but it was explained by the excitement on his pink-cheeked

face. Gartasian, normally strict on such points, decided the lapse was excusable in the unique circumstances.

"There can be no doubt that they have come from the Old World," he said. "The first question we have to ask is ... *why*? Why after all these years? And *who*? Are we dealing with a small group who managed to survive the ptertha attacks, and finally succeeded in making an escape? Or...?" Gartasian left the question unspoken. The idea that the pterthacosis plague might have abated—sparing enough of the population to rebuild an organised society—was too far-fetched for words. It certainly was not the kind of fanciful speculation to be voiced before a junior officer, especially as concealed within it were the seeds of a far wilder notion. Was there the remotest possibility that Ronoda and Hallie were still alive? And had all his years of guilt and remorse been a self-indulgent waste? With sufficient vision, enterprise and courage could he have instigated a return flight to Land?

The torrent of questions, a distillation of fantastic wish-fulfilment dreams, was the last thing Gartasian needed if he were to function well as the commander of a military operation. He gave himself a mental shake and forced his mind to concentrate on the palpable realities of the situation. It had been more than a minute since he had heard the hollow, echoing roar of the skyship's burner as it discharged hot gas into the balloon—an indication that the crew had selected a suitable landing site. The gondola was now a mere twenty feet above the ground, and at its sides he could see the silhouettes of several men who appeared to be working with rail-mounted cannon. He was beginning to wonder if two hundred paces was a good enough margin of safety for his own force when the cannon fired in a downwards direction. Four harpoon-like anchors speared into the ground, each trailing a line, and at once crewmen began hauling the lines in, thereby drawing the gondola into a controlled touchdown. The balloon above it remained inflated, swaying ponderously.

"We have learned one thing," Gartasian said to his lieutenant. "Our visitors never had any intention of staying for long—otherwise they would have vented their balloon."

His only answer was a hurried salute as Keero wheeled away with a sergeant beside him to deploy the soldiers in a circle around the skyship. Gartasian took a pair of binoculars out of his saddle pouch and trained them on the gondola.

He could see the heads of the four crewmen as they went about the work of securing the ship, but something else in the magnified image attracted his attention. The gondola was of basically the same design as those used in the Migration, and yet had no anti-ptertha cannon on the sides. In spite of the weight penalty imposed by such weapons, they had been deemed necessary for the

passage through Land's lower atmosphere, and Gartasian found their absence intriguing. Could it really be a sign that the ptertha—the airborne globes whose poison had all but annihilated Kolcorron—had ceased their onslaught on humanity? Gartasian's heart lurched as he again considered the possibilities. A civilisation which embraced two worlds ... a mass return to Land for those who were discontent on Overland ... miraculous reunions with loved ones who were believed to be long-dead...

"You fool!" Gartasian made the whispered accusation as he put the binoculars away. "What new folly is this? Are you so excellent a commander that you can afford to handicap yourself with winedreams?"

As he made ready to ride forward he reminded himself of two pertinent facts—his advancement in the army had been hindered by the ambivalence springing from his guilt; and fate had now given him an unparalleled opportunity to compensate by placing him close to the landing site of the enigmatic skyship. The sunwriter message from Prad had said that King Chakkell was on his way with all possible speed, and that in the meantime Colonel Gartasian was empowered to deal with the situation and take any steps he considered necessary. A good showing on this occasion could yield incalculable benefits in the future.

"Remain here," he said to Lieutenant Keero, who was just returning to his starting point. He nudged his bluehorn into a walk which he deliberately kept slow, demonstrating to the visitors that his intentions were not hostile. As he neared the ship he was uneasily aware that his cuirass, moulded from boiled leather, would provide little protection if he were to be fired upon, but he remained upright in the saddle, presenting the appearance of one who was satisfied with his ability to deal with the situation.

Those aboard the ship, observing his approach, ceased their activities and came to stand at the near side of the gondola. Gartasian looked for an identifiable commander, but the crew all seemed to be of an age—not much more than twenty—and were wearing identical brown shirts and jerkins. The only visible insignia were small circles of different colours sewn to the lapels of the jerkins, but the variations had no significance for Gartasian.

He was surprised to note that the men were sufficiently alike to have been mistaken for brothers—each with a narrow forehead, close-set eyes and narrow jutting jaw. As he entered the shadow of the balloon he saw, with a sudden sense of disquiet, that the four had dark jaundiced complexions and a peculiar metallic sheen to their skins. It was an appearance which would have suggested a recent brush with some cruel disease, except that the men also exuded that unconscious arrogance which can arise from being superbly fit. They regarded Gartasian with

expressions which to him seemed both amused and contemptuous.

"I am Colonel Gartasian," he said, halting his bluehorn a few yards from the gondola. "On behalf of King Chakkell, the planetary ruler, I welcome you to Overland. We were greatly surprised by the sight of your ship, and many questions clamour in our minds."

"Keep your questions and your welcome to yourself." The man on the right, tallest of the four, spoke in oddly accented Kolcorronian. "My name is Orracolde, and I am the commander here, but I also have the honour of being a royal courier. I come to this world with a message from King Rassamarden."

Gartasian was shocked by the speaker's immediate and overt hostility, but he decided to control his temper. "I have never heard of a King Rassamarden."

"That is hardly surprising under the circumstances," Orracolde said, smiling disdainfully. "Now, I expected that Prad would be dead by this time, but how did Chakkell become King? What of Prad's son, Leddravohr? And Pouche?"

"They too are dead," Gartasian said stiffly, realising that the deliberate challenge in Orracolde's manner would have to be taken up for the sake of honour. "And for your further enlightenment, I intend that this meeting will henceforth be conducted along different lines. I will provide the questions, and you the answers."

"And what if I decide otherwise, *old* warrior?"

"My men have your ship surrounded."

"That fact had not escaped my attention," Orracolde said. "But unless their flea-infested mounts can soar like eagles they pose my ship no threat. We can be airborne in an instant." He turned away from the rail and a second later the skyship's burner discharged a burst of hot gas into the balloon which loomed overhead, maintaining its buoyancy. Gartasian's bluehorn, startled by the echoing blast, half-reared and he had to act quickly to bring it under control, much to the amusement of the four onlookers. It came to him that for the present the visitors were in a greatly superior position, and that unless he devised a better method of dealing with them he could be humiliated. He glanced at the sparse circle of mounted soldiers, now seeming so distant, and chose new tactics.

"Neither of us has anything to gain by quarrelling," he said reasonably. "The message you spoke of can be relayed to the King through me, or—if you would prefer it—you can wait until his Majesty arrives in person."

Orracolde tilted his head. "How long will that take?"

"The King is already on his way and could be here within the hour."

"Giving you ample time in which to draw up long-range cannon!" Orracolde scanned the brush-covered terrain as though expecting to find evidence of troop movements.

"But we have no reason to bear you ill will," Gartasian protested, dismayed by the other man's irrationality. What kind of envoy was this? And what kind of a ruler would entrust such a man with diplomatic responsibility?

"Do not take me for a fool, *old* warrior—I will deliver King Rassamarden's message without delay." Orracolde stooped, momentarily disappearing behind the gondola's side, and when he came into view again he was removing a yellowish scroll from a leather tube.

Gartasian had time in which to find his thoughts seizing on a triviality. Orracolde derogated him with every sentence he spoke, but he uttered the word "old" with a particular venom, as though it was one of the most insulting in his vocabulary. It was a minor mystery compared to the other puzzling aspects of what was happening, even though Gartasian had never considered himself as being old, and he resolutely pushed it aside as he saw Orracolde unroll a square sheet of heavy paper.

"I am an instrument of King Rassamarden, and the following message must be regarded as issuing directly from his lips," Orracolde said.

"I, King Rassamarden, am the rightful sovereign of all men and women born on the planet of Land, and of all their offspring, wherever they may be. In consequence, all new territories on the planet of Overland are considered to have been occupied on my behalf. I therefore proclaim myself sole ruler of Land and Overland. Be it known that I intend to exact all tributes which are rightfully mine."

Orracolde lowered the paper and stared solemnly at Gartasian, awaiting his response.

Gartasian gaped at him for a few seconds, then began to laugh. The sheer preposterousness of what he had heard, combined with the pompous style of the delivery, had abruptly translated the entire scene into farce. Release of the tension which had been growing inside him fuelled his mirth, and he had genuine difficulty in bringing his breathing back under control.

"Have you lost your reason, *old* man?" Orracolde leaned over the rail, bronzed face thrust forward, like a snake spitting venom. "I see nothing to laugh at."

"Only because you can't see yourself," Gartasian said. "I don't know which was the greater fool—Rassamarden for issuing that ridiculous message; or you for undertaking such a long and hazardous journey to deliver it."

"Your punishment for insulting the King will be death."

"I tremble."

Orracolde's mouth twitched. "I will remember you, Gartasian, but for now I have more important concerns. Littlenight will soon be upon us. When darkness

falls I will take my ship aloft—rather than give you the chance to launch a sneak attack—but I will pause at a height of one thousand feet and wait for aftday. Chakkell will no doubt be with you by that time, and you will communicate his response to me by sunwriter."

"Response?"

"Yes. Either Chakkell bows the knee to King Rassamarden willingly—or he will be compelled to do so."

"You truly *are* mad—a madman speaking for a madman." Gartasian held his bluehorn steady while one of the crewmen fired another burst of gas into the balloon. "Are you talking of war between our two worlds?"

"Most certainly."

Struggling with his growing incredulity, Gartasian said, "And how would such a war be prosecuted?"

"A fleet of skyships is already under construction."

"How many?"

Orracolde produced a thin smile. "Enough."

"There could never be enough," Gartasian said calmly. "Our soldiers would be waiting for each ship as it landed."

"You don't really expect me to swallow that, *old* warrior," Orracolde said, his smile widening. "I know how thinly your population must be scattered. With informed use of wind cells we can put down almost anywhere on this planet. We could land under cover of darkness, but there will be little need for stealth, because we have weapons the like of which you have never imagined."

"And on top of everything else—" Orracolde paused to glance at his three companions, who gave approving nods as though knowing what he was about to say—"there is the natural and undeniable superiority of the New Men."

"Men are men," Gartasian said, unimpressed. "How can there be *new* men?"

"Nature saw to that. Nature and the ptertha. We have been created with total immunity to the ptertha plague."

"So that's it!" Gartasian ran his gaze over the four narrow faces which, with their inhuman metallic sheen, could almost have belonged to four statues cast from the same mould, and understanding began to flicker in his mind. "I thought that ... perhaps ... the ptertha might have ceased their attacks."

"The attacks continue unabated, but now they are futile."

"And what about ... my kind? Are there any survivors?"

"None," Orracolde said, smugly triumphant. "The old have all been swept away."

Gartasian was silent for a moment, saying a final goodbye to his wife and son, then his thoughts were drawn back to the problems of the present and the

need to learn all he could about the interplanetary visitors. Implicit in the few words Orracolde had already spoken was a dreadful scenario, a vision of a civilisation in its death throes. The drifting globes of the ptertha had swarmed in the skies of Land, hunting down their human quarries without mercy, driving them closer and closer to extinction, until their numbers were so...

My stomach is on fire!

The burning sensation was so severe that Gartasian almost doubled over. Within seconds the heat centre beneath his chest had spread tendrils into the rest of his torso, and at the same time the air about him seemed to cool a little. Unwilling to show any sign of discomfort, he sat perfectly still in the saddle and waited for the spasm to come to an end. It continued unabated and he realised he would have to try disregarding it while he gathered precious information.

"All swept away?" he said. "All? But that means your entire population has been born since the Migration."

"Since the Flight. We refer to that act of cowardice and betrayal as the Flight."

"But how could the babes have survived? Without parents it would have been..."

"We were born of those who had partial immunity," Orracolde cut in. "Many of them lived long enough."

Gartasian shook his head, pursuing the thought in spite of the spreading fire at the core of his being. "But many must have perished! What is your total population?"

"Do you think me a fool?" Orracolde said, a sneer appearing on his dark countenance. "I came here to learn about this world—not to throw away knowledge about my own. I have seen as much as I need to see, and as littlenight is almost here..."

"Your reluctance to answer my question is answer enough! Your numbers must be small indeed—perhaps even less than ours." Gartasian gave a violent shudder as, in contrast to the heat within his body, the air seemed to press in on him with a clammy coldness. He touched his brow, found it slick with perspiration, and a shocking idea was born deep in his mind, coiling like a worm. He had not seen a case of pterthacosis since his youth on Land, but nobody of his generation could ever forget the symptoms—the burning sensation in the stomach, the copious sweating, the chest pains and the bloating of the spleen...

"You grow pale, *old* warrior," Orracolde said. "What ails you?"

Gartasian held his voice steady. "Nothing ails me."

"But you sweat and shiver and..." Orracolde leaned forward across the rail,

his gaze hunting over Gartasian's face, and his eyes widened. There was a moment of near-telepathic communion, then Orracolde drew back and gave a whispered order to his crew. One of them stooped out of sight and the ship's burner began a continuous roar while the other two men hurriedly began releasing the anchor lines from the downward-pointing cannon.

Gartasian had a pure, clear understanding of what he had read in the other man's eyes, and in the instant of accepting his own death sentence his mind had vaulted far beyond the circumscribed present. Earlier Orracolde had boasted of weapons outside the Overlanders' imaginings, but even he had been taken by surprise, had not sensed the dreadful truth foreshadowed by his own words. He and his crew were weapons in themselves—carriers of the ptertha plague in a form so virulent that an unprotected person had only to go near them to be smitten!

Their King, though apparently insane by Gartasian's standards, had been prudent enough to send a scout ship to gauge the opposition an invading force would meet. If he received word that there could be very little effective resistance, that Overland's defenders would be annihilated by pterthacosis, his territorial ambitions would be even further inflamed.

The skyship must not be allowed to depart!

The thought spurred Gartasian into action. His men were too far away to be of any assistance, and the ship was already straining upwards, making him solely responsible for preventing the take-off. The only course open to him was to rupture the fabric of the huge balloon by hurling his sword at it. He drew the weapon, twisted in the saddle to make the throw and gasped aloud as pain erupted through his chest cavity, paralysing his upraised arm. He lowered the sword into a position from which he could try an underarm lob, suddenly aware that Orracolde was bringing an oddly shaped musket to bear on him.

Counting on the delay which always occurred while power crystals were combining in a gun's combustion chamber, Gartasian began the upward swing. The musket emitted a strangely flat *crack*. Something punched into Gartasian's left shoulder, slewing him around and causing his sword—weakly thrown—to tumble wide of its mark. He jumped down from the startled bluehorn and went for the fallen blade, but the agony in his shoulder and chest turned what should have been a highspeed dash into a series of stumbles and lurches. By the time he had retrieved the sword the gondola was a good thirty feet above ground, and the balloon carrying it was far beyond his reach.

He stood and watched helplessly, his personal catastrophe eclipsed for the moment, as the skyship rapidly gained height. Although it was centred on the misty blue disk of Land, the ship was hard to see because the sun was almost in

the same line of sight, already silvering the sister world's eastern rim. Gartasian gave up trying to penetrate the dazzling rays and spokes and oily needles of light. He lowered his head and stared down at the grass, musing on the fact that the last action of his career and life had ended in abject failure, and it was only the sound of an approaching bluehorn which brought him out of the dark reverie. There were duties yet to be discharged.

"Stay back," he shouted at Lieutenant Keero. "Don't come near me!"

"Sir?" Keero slowed his mount to a walk, but kept it moving forward.

Gartasian pointed at him with his sword. "This is an order, lieutenant. Do *not* come any closer! I have the plague."

Keero halted. "Plague?"

"Pterthacosis. You've heard of it, I trust."

The upper half of Keero's face was masked by the shade of his visor, but Gartasian saw his mouth distort with shock. A moment later the sunlit hills of the western horizon blinked with prismatic colour, then abruptly dimmed as the shadow of Land came rushing over the countryside at orbital speed. As its edge swept across the scene, initiating the brief penumbral phase of littlenight, the darkening sky was seen to be spanned by a huge spiral of misty radiance, its arms sparkling with brilliant stars of white, blue and yellow. The knowledge that it was the last time the spectacle of the night sky would be unfurled for him filled Gartasian with a yearning to ponder it in detail, to memorise the patterns of lesser whirlpools and comets so that he would have light to take with him into the place where there was no light. Pushing the notion aside, he addressed himself to the lieutenant, who was waiting about twenty yards away.

"Listen to me carefully, Keero," he called out. "I will be dead before littlenight is over, and you must..." The fire in his lungs, aggravated by the effect of shouting, forced him to abandon the plan to transmit his precious new knowledge verbally.

"I am going to write a message for the King, and I charge you with the responsibility of ensuring that he receives it. Now, take out your dispatch book, make sure the pencil is not broken, and leave the book on the ground for me. When you have done that, rejoin your men and wait with them for the King to arrive. Tell him all that has happened here—and remind him that nobody is to approach my body for at least five days."

Drained of strength by the painfully prolonged speech, Gartasian forced himself to remain upright and militarily correct while Keero dismounted and placed his dispatch book on the ground.

The lieutenant got back into the saddle and hesitated for a moment. "Sir, I'm sorry..."

"It's all right," Gartasian told him, grateful for the fleeting human contact. "Do not concern yourself about me. Just go, and take my bluehorn with you—I have no more need of him."

Keero gave an awkward salute, collected the redundant animal and rode away into the twilight. Gartasian walked to where the book lay, his legs buckling further with each step, and allowed himself to sag to the ground beside it. He had barely finished removing the pencil from its leather sleeve when the last coin-clip of the sun slid behind the curvature of Land. In spite of the reduced level of illumination he was still able to see well enough to write, thanks to Land's halo and the extravagant spangling of the rest of the heavens with fierce stars, some of them in tightly packed circular clusters.

He attempted to lean on his left arm, but jerked upright again as pain flared in the wounded shoulder. Exploring the injury with his fingers, he found that the brakka slug from the musket had spent much of its energy in gouging through the rolled leather at the edge of his cuirass. It had lodged in his flesh, but had not broken the bone. Reminding himself to include a note on how the weapon had fired without the normal delay, he sat with the book in his lap and began to write a detailed report for the benefit of those who would soon have to repel a deadly invader.

The mental discipline involved in the work helped him avoid dwelling on his fate, but his body interposed frequent reminders of the losing battle it was fighting against the ptertha poison. His stomach and lungs seemed to be filling with hot coals, agonising cramps encircled his chest and occasional bouts of shivering made his writing almost illegible in places. So rapid was the progress of the symptoms that on reaching the end of his report he was dully surprised to find himself still conscious, still with some dregs of strength.

If I move away from here, he thought, the book can be picked up without delay, and with no risk to any man's life.

He set the book down and marked its position by weighting it with his red-crested helmet. The effort of raising himself to his feet was much greater than he had anticipated. He was unable to prevent himself from swaying in vertiginous circles as he scanned his surroundings, which seemed to be a scene painted on slowly undulating cloth. Keero had brought all his men together and a fire had been lit to guide King Chakkell to the spot. The soldiers and their mounts formed a stationary, amorphous mass in the dimness, and there was little movement anywhere but for the near-continuous flickering of meteors against the dense fields of stars.

Gartasian guessed the men's eyes were fixed on him. He turned and walked away from them, staggering grotesquely, blood beading into the grass from the

fingers of his left hand. After some twenty paces his feet were snared by bracken and he pitched forward, to lie with his face buried in rough-haired fronds.

There was no point in trying to get up again.

No point in trying to cling on to consciousness any longer.

I'm coming back to you, Ronoda and little Hallie, he thought, closing his eyes on the universe. *I'll soon be with...*

Chapter 4

When Toller Maraquine heard the bolt of his cell door being drawn his principal emotion was one of relief. He had been allowed writing materials, and all through the hours of littlenight he had sat with the pad on his knees, trying to compose a letter to Gesalla and Cassyll. His intention had been to explain and apologise, but explanation had proved impossible—how was he to find any shred of reason in what he had done?—and all he had written was one bald sentence.

I am sorry.

The three words struck him as being an apt but dismal epitaph for a life that had been thrown away, and now he had a profound desire to get the last minutes of futility over and done with.

He stood up and faced the opening door, fully expecting to see an executioner accompanied by a squad of jailers. Instead, the widening rectangle revealed the paunchy form of King Chakkell, flanked by stone-faced members of his personal guard.

"Should I feel honoured?" Toller said. "Am I to be seen off by the King in person?"

Chakkell raised a leather-bound dispatch book of the type used by the Kolcorronian army. "Your astonishing good luck continues, Maraquine. Our game is on again. Come with me—I have need of you." He grasped Toller's arm with as much force as the executioner would have used and marched him into the passageway, where recently extinguished wicks still smoked and fumed in their sconces.

"You have *need* of me? Does this mean...?" Paradoxically, in the moment he began to entertain hope Toller was unmanned by a pang of death-fear which cooled his brow and stilled his voice.

"It means I'm prepared to forget about your stupidity of the foreday."

"Majesty, I'm grateful ... truly grateful," Toller managed to say. Inwardly he promised: *I'll never fail you again, Gesalla.*

"And so you should be!" Chakkell led the way out of the cell block, through a gateway whose guards sprang to attention, and into the parade ground in which, seemingly an aeon ago, Toller had faced Karkarand.

"This must concern the skyship we saw," Toller said. "Was it really from Land?"

"We will talk in private."

Toller and Chakkell, still accompanied by guards, entered the rear of the palace and went through corridors to an undistinguished doorway. Walking behind the King, Toller had detected the soupy smell of bluehorn sweat from his clothing, and the indication of hard riding intensified his interest. Chakkell dismissed his men with a wave and brought Toller into a modestly proportioned apartment in which the only furnishings were a round table and six plain chairs.

"Read that." Chakkell handed Toller the dispatch book, took a seat at the table and stared down at his clenched fists. His deeply tanned scalp was glistening with perspiration and it was obvious that he was highly agitated. Deciding it would be unwise to ask any preliminary questions, Toller sat down at the opposite side of the table and opened the book. The reading difficulties he had known as a young man had faded over the years, and it took him only a few minutes to go through the pages of pencilled script, even though the characters were wildly distorted in places. When he had finished he closed the book and set it down, suddenly aware of blood stains on the cover.

Head still lowered, Chakkell looked up from under his brows, eyes showing white crescents. "Well?"

"Is Colonel Gartasian dead?"

"Of course he's dead—and from what is written there he could be the first of many," Chakkell said. "The question is, what can be done? What can we do about these diseased upstarts?"

"Do you think this Rassamarden really intends to invade? It seems an unreasonable course for one who has an empty world at his disposal."

Chakkell pointed at the book. "You saw what Gartasian said. We are not dealing with reasonable people, Maraquine. It was Gartasian's opinion that they are all unhinged to some extent, and their ruler could be the worst of the lot."

Toller nodded. "It is often the way."

"Don't take too many liberties," Chakkell warned. "You have more skyship experience than any other man in Kolcorron, and I want your views about how we can defend ourselves."

"Well..." For a few seconds Toller was distracted by an upsurge of something like joy, immediately followed by feelings of shame and remorse. What kind of a man was he? He had barely finished vowing never again to set anything above the blessed peace of a contented domestic existence, and now his heart was quickening at the thought of participating in an entirely new kind of warfare. Could it be some kind of reaction to the discovery that he was not about to be

executed, that life would continue—or was he a fatally flawed human being in the pattern of the long-dead Prince Leddravohr? The latter possibility was almost too much to contemplate.

"I am waiting," Chakkell said impatiently. "Don't tell me that the crisis is of so great a magnitude as to still *your* tongue."

Toller took a deep breath and exhaled it in a sigh. "Majesty, assuming that a contest does take place, fate has dictated the terms. We cannot carry the battle to the enemy, and for obvious reasons these so-called New Men must never be permitted to set foot on our world. That leaves us but one course of action."

"Which is?"

"Exclusion! A barrier! We must wait for the ships in the weightless zone—midway between the two worlds—and destroy them as they labour up from Land. It is the only way."

Chakkell studied Toller's face, appraising his sincerity. "From what I remember of the mid-passage the air was too cold and thin to support life for any length of time."

"We need ships of a different design. The gondolas need to be larger, and totally enclosed. And sealed to retain air and heat. Perhaps we will even use firesalt to thicken the air. All that and more will be necessary if we are to remain in the weightless zone for long periods."

"Can it be done?" Chakkell said. "You seem to be talking about veritable fortresses suspended in the sky. The weight..."

"On the old skyships we were able to lift twenty passengers, plus essential supplies. That is a considerable weight, and we may be able to attach two balloons to one lengthened gondola so as to double the carrying capacity."

"It's worth thinking about." Chakkell stood up and paced around the table, frowning at Toller all the while. "I believe I'm going to create a new post, especially for you," he finally said, it shall be ... Sky Marshal ... with complete responsibility for the aerial defence of Overland. You will be answerable to none but me, and will have the power to draw on any resource you need—human or material—for the successful prosecution of your task."

Toller was uplifted by the prospect of having purpose and direction restored to his life, but to his own surprise he felt reluctant to let himself be borne away on the tide of Chakkell's ideas. If he could be marked down for execution in one minute and raised to an exalted office in the next, then he was nothing more than a creature of the King, a puppet without dignity or a true identity of his own.

"If I decide to accept your commission," he said, "there are certain..."

"If you decide to accept! *If!* " Chakkell kicked his vacated chair aside, slammed his hands down on the table and leaned across it. "What's the matter

with you, Maraquine? Would you be disloyal to your own King?"

"Only this foreday my own King sentenced me to death."

"You know I wouldn't have permitted things to go that far."

"Do I?" Toller did not hide his scepticism. "And you refused me the single favour for which I begged."

Chakkell looked genuinely baffled. "What are you talking about?"

"The life of the farmer, Spennel."

"Oh, *that*!" Chakkell briefly turned his gaze towards the ceiling, showing his exasperation. "Here's what I will do, Maraquine. The execution may well have been delayed because of all the commotion in the city. I'll send a messenger with all speed, and if your esteemed friend is still alive his life will be spared. Does that satisfy you? I hope it satisfies you, because there is nothing more I can do."

Toller nodded uncertainly, wondering if the voice of his conscience could be silenced so easily. "The messenger must leave at once."

"Done!" Chakkell turned and nodded towards a panelled wall in which Toller could discern no apertures, then dropped into a chair beside the one he had overturned. "Now we must draw up our plans. Are you able to sketch a design for the sky fortresses?"

"I think so, but I want Zavotle with me," Toller said, naming the man who had flown with him in the days of the old Skyship Experimental Squadron, and who had later been one of the four royal pilots in the Migration. "I believe he flies one of your courier ships, Majesty, so locating him should be a simple matter."

"Zavotle? Isn't that the one with the peculiar ears? Why do you choose him?"

"He is very clever, and we work well together," Toller said. "I need him."

Still in his mid-forties, liven Zavotle looked too young to have been in command of a royal skyship at the time of the mass flight from Land. His body had thickened only a little with the passage of the years, his hair remained dark and was still cropped, emphasising the protrusion of his tiny, in-folding ears. He had joined Toller and Chakkell within ten minutes of being summoned from the adjacent airfield, and his yellow aircaptain's uniform showed signs of having been hastily removed from a closet.

He listened intently while the threat posed by the New Men was explained to him, now and then—as had always been his habit—making notes in neat, crowded script. His manner was just as Toller had remembered it—precise and meticulous, a reassurance that there was no difficulty which could not be overcome by the orderly application of reason.

"There you have it," Chakkell said to Zavotle. "What do you think of this

notion of establishing permanently manned fortresses in the weightless zone?" He had disliked the idea of having to consult a lowly captain, but had acquiesced to Toller's request and had even—an indication of how seriously he regarded the situation—invited Zavotle to be seated at the table with him. Now he was eyeing the newcomer critically, with something of the air of a schoolmaster eager to fault a pupil's performance.

Zavotle sat very straight, aware that he was on trial, and spoke firmly. "It can be done, Majesty. In fact, it *must* be done—we have no other recourse."

"I see. And what about attaching two balloons to one long gondola?"

"With respect to Lord Toller, I don't like it, Majesty," Zavotle said, glancing at Toller. "The gondola would have to be very long to accommodate two balloons, and I think there would be serious control problems."

"So you would advocate using one monstrous balloon?"

"No, Majesty—that would introduce an entirely new set of difficulties. No doubt they could be overcome in time, but we have no time to spare."

Chakkell looked impatient. "What then? Have you something in mind, captain, or do you content yourself with deciding what *cannot* be done?"

"I believe we should continue to use the size of balloon with which we are experienced," Zavotle said, not losing his composure. "The sky fortresses should be built in sections, taken aloft in sections—and assembled in the weightless zone."

Chakkell stared hard at Zavotle, his expression slowly changing to one of mingled astonishment and respect. "Of course! Of *course*! There is no other way to proceed."

Toller felt a pang of vicarious pride as the new concept flooded his mind, bringing with it a series of giddy images. "Good man, liven," he breathed. "I knew we had need of you—though my gut freezes when I think about the kind of labour involved. Even with the knowledge that he was well tethered a man would be powerfully distracted by the sight of thousands of miles of thin air below him."

"Many would be quite unable to concentrate their minds," Zavotle said, nodding, "but the work would be kept to the absolute minimum. I envisage circular sections held together by simple clamps and sealed with mastic. A fortress might be constructed of three such sections."

"Before we concern ourselves with details, I must know how many of these sky fortresses will be needed," Chakkell said. "The more I think about it the more doubts plague me about the feasibility of the entire scheme. If one neglects volume and treats the weightless zone as a flat disk midway between the worlds, there are millions of square miles to defend—and I fail to see how it can be

done. Even if I had the resources of old Kolcorron at my disposal I would be unable to construct the number of fortresses required. A thousand, would you say? Five thousand?"

Zavotle looked at Toller, giving him the opportunity to reply, and Toller responded with a slight shake of his head. The objection expressed by the King seemed to him a valid one, and although he could tell by Zavotle's unperturbed expression that an answer existed he was for the moment unable to deduce it by himself.

"Majesty, we are not required to defend the entire area of the zone," Zavotle said. "The two worlds have a common atmosphere, but it is shaped like an hourglass, with a slender waist. Skyships have to remain close to the centre of that waist—in a narrow bridge of air, so to speak—and that is where we will wait for the Landers. I do not know how determined they will be to press ahead with their invasion, but when we destroy the first of their ships the others may try to pass us by at a safe distance. To do that they would need to venture so far outside the air bridge that their crews would lose consciousness and then they would asphyxiate."

"I begin to form an affection for you, Zavotle," Chakkell said, half-smiling. "So, how many fortresses would you say?"

"Not many, Majesty. Perhaps as few as ten or twelve in the initial phase, while we have the advantage of surprise; perhaps a hundred later on, if the Landers begin to introduce effective counter-measures." Zavotle again glanced at Toller, obviously trying to draw him back into the discussion. "I cannot be more precise at this stage. Much depends on the distance at which we can spot an ascending ship, but—as Lord Toller will testify—the eye becomes abnormally keen in the high air. Much will also depend on the effective range of our weaponry, but my expertise in that field is minuscule compared to Lord Toller's. Perhaps he should say..."

"Continue without me for the present," Toller said comfortably, appreciating Zavotle's motives. "I find your discourse both interesting and instructive."

"Your Lord Toller," Chakkell whispered to Zavotle, "is so sure of himself that he has no fear of gifted and promising subordinates. Now, I have another and more prosaic difficulty for your consideration—one I fear you will not be able to magic away so quickly."

"Majesty?"

"It is many years since I controlled the production of the Migration fleet, but I recall very clearly that the only material light enough and strong enough for the manufacture of skyship envelopes is linen." Chakkell paused and frowned, dispelling the trace of levity which had crept into the proceedings.

"You may not be aware of this, but the flax seeds we brought from Land have not taken well in the soil of Overland. Only a few acres here and there produce a useful crop, and much of the yield has already gone into airships which are currently in service. In your considered opinion, could the material of those airship envelopes be cut up and restitched to form skyship balloons?"

"No!" Toller and Zavotle spoke simultaneously, but once again Toller—whose reply had been a reflex—was at a loss for a constructive answer. He was reminded of the fact that Chakkell was not King because of an accident of birth, that he had a phenomenally detailed knowledge of those aspects of agriculture, manufacture and trade which were the true foundation of a nation's power. And again he chose to remain silent, transferring all responsibility to Zavotle. He was both surprised and impressed when Zavotle responded with a calm smile.

"The balloons must be made from new, perfect material, Majesty," he said, "but not many will be required. The ambush strategy devised by Lord Toller is a good one, and it is fortunate for us that, in the circumstances envisaged, balloons would be an encumbrance, a serious handicap."

Chakkell's frown deepened. "We seem to be parting company, Zavotle. What are you saying?"

"Majesty, we are talking about a new kind of warfare, but some ancient principles must prevail. It is essential for us to remain out of sight of the enemy for as long as possible, until he has blundered into our trap. That being the case, balloons—which are so huge that they can be seen for many miles in the purity of a weightless zone—would become a liability. The fortresses would function more efficiently without them."

Toller began to comprehend the scheme Zavotle was proposing, and for a moment he seemed to feel the coldness of the high air seeping into his body. "You want to detach the balloons, and ... and..."

"And return them to the ground, where they will be used to carry other fortress sections aloft," Zavotle said, nodding. "I see no reason why an individual balloon should not make the return journey many times."

"That is not the issue I was going to raise," Toller said. "You're talking about leaving men up there. Stranded! With no means to check a ship's fall!"

Zavotle's face became more serene, and somehow less human. "We are discussing the weightless zone, my lord. As you yourself once said to me – how can an object fall if it has no weight?"

"I know, but..." Toller retreated from the use of logic. "I don't like it."

"But I do!" Chakkell half-shouted, beaming at Zavotle in a manner which suggested that his burgeoning affection had quickly reached full flower. "I like it a lot!"

"Yes, Majesty," Toller said drily, "but you won't be up there."

"Nor will you, Maraquine," Chakkell countered. "I am appointing you my Sky Marshal because of your extensive knowledge of skyships—not because of your redundant and fading physical prowess. You will remain firmly on the ground and direct operations from here."

Toller shook his head. "That is not my way. I lead from the front. If men are required to entrust their lives to ... to wingless birds, I would prefer to be among the first of them."

Chakkell looked exasperated, then he glanced at Zavotle and his expression became enigmatic. "Have it your own way," he said to Toller. "I am investing you with the authority to take any man in my kingdom into your service—may I assume that your friend Zavotle will be given an important advisory post?"

"That was my intention from the beginning."

"Good! I expect you both to remain at the palace until we have discussed every major aspect of the defence plan, and as that will take a considerable time it will be..." Chakkell broke off as his stoop-shouldered secretary entered the room, bowing vigorously, and approached the table. "Why do you interrupt me, Pelso?"

"Apologies, Majesty," Pelso replied in a quavering voice. "My information was that you were to be informed without delay. About the execution, that is."

"Execution? Exe...? Oh, yes! Go on, man."

"Majesty, I sent for the holder of the warrant."

"There was no need for that. I simply wanted to know if the chore had been completed. Oh, all right—where is your man?"

"He waits in the east corridor. Majesty."

"What good is he to me in the corridor? Bring him here, you old fool!"

Chakkell drummed on the table with his fingers as Pelso, still bowing, backed away to the door.

Toller, although he had no wish to be diverted from the discussion in hand, stared towards the doorway as the thick-chested figure of Gnapperl appeared. The sergeant, carrying his helmet under his left arm, showed no sign of nervousness over what was undoubtedly his first audience with the King. He marched to Chakkell and saluted very correctly, awaiting permission to speak, but his eyes had already met Toller's and they were malignly triumphant, beaconing their message ahead of the spoken word. Self-recrimination and sadness caused Toller to lower his gaze as he thought about the hapless farmer he had met on the road to Prad that foreday. Could it really have been such a short time ago? He had promised Spennel help, and had failed him, and adding to the poignancy of his regrets was the knowledge that Spennel had expected

him to fail. How was he to defend an entire world when it had proved beyond his powers to rescue one man from...?

"Majesty, the execution of the traitor Spennel was carried out in accordance with the lawful warrant," Gnapperl said in answer to Chakkell's signal.

Chakkell shrugged and turned to Toller. "I did what I could. Are you satisfied?"

"I have one or two questions for this man." Toller raised his head and locked eyes with Gnapperl. "I was hoping that the execution would have been delayed. Did the sight of the skyship occasion no disturbances in the city?"

"There were many disturbances, my lord—but I could not allow them to divert me from the course of duty." Gnapperl spoke with ingenuous pride, a way of covertly baiting Toller. "Even the executioner had gone off with the crowds to follow the skyship, and I was forced to ride hard for several miles to find him and bring him back to the city."

He was the first executioner you encountered today, Toller thought. *I am the second.* "That is most commendable, sergeant," he said aloud. "You appear to be the kind of soldier who puts his duty above all else."

"That I am, my lord."

"What is going on here, Maraquine?" Chakkell put in. "Don't tell me you have descended to feuding with common soldiers."

Toller smiled at him. "On the contrary, I hold the sergeant in such esteem that I intend to recruit him into my own service. That is permissible, isn't it?"

"I told you you can have anyone you want," Chakkell said impatiently.

"I wished the sergeant to hear it from your own lips." Toller addressed himself directly to Gnapperl who—belatedly realising he had misread the situation—was beginning to look alarmed. "There will be many dangerous tasks to perform when it comes to testing our new skyships which hang in the high air without the support of balloons, and I will have need of men who put their duty above all else. Send those who are with you back to Panvarl, with my compliments, then report to the house commander. Go!"

Gnapperl, now pale and thoughtful, saluted and left the room, followed by the bowed form of the secretary.

"You told him enough about our deliberations," Chakkell grumbled.

"The sooner the word is put about the better," Toller said. "Besides, I wanted the sergeant to have some idea of what is in store for him."

Chakkell shook his head and sighed. "If you intend to have that one killed, do it quickly. I won't have you wasting your valuable time on trivia."

"Majesty, there is something in this account I fail to understand," Zavotle said, abstractedly rubbing his stomach. Throughout the exchange with the

sergeant his narrow head had been bent over Colonel Gartasian's dispatch book, ears protruding like tiny clenched fists, and now he was looking puzzled.

"Does it concern the musket?"

"No, Majesty—it's to do with the Landers themselves. If these odd-looking New Men are simply the offspring of men and women who were partially immune to pterthacosis, should there not have been a sprinkling of them among our own newborn?"

"Perhaps a few were born," Chakkell said, not showing much interest. "The parents would probably have disposed of them quickly without saying much about it. Or perhaps the condition is latent. It may not manifest itself until the brats are exposed to the toxins—and the ptertha on Overland are not poisonous."

"Not yet," Toller reminded him, "but if we go on destroying brakka trees the globes will surely change."

"Something for future generations to worry about," Chakkell said, pounding the table with the gavel of his fist. "Before us is a problem which must be solved in days, instead of centuries. Do you hear me? *Days!*"

I hear you, Toller thought, and already in his mind he was ascending towards the weightless zone, that realm of thin, cold and meteor-streaked air which he had entered but twice in his lifetime and had never expected to see again.

Chapter 5

The dream had returned many times during the night, taking Bartan Drumme back to the day of his airboat flight.

He had just tethered the boat and was walking towards the whitewashed farmhouse. An inner voice was shrieking at him, warning him not to enter the house, but although he was afraid he was unable to turn back. He unlatched the green door and pushed it open—and the creature was waiting inside, gently reaching for him with its single tentacle. As had happened in reality, he sprang backwards and fell, and when he looked again the monster had been transformed into a conglomerate of old clothes hanging on a wallhook. Where the dream differed from the reality was that the apron continued to beckon him, languorously, in a manner which could not have been caused by transient air currents, and somehow that struck more fear into him than the confrontation with the monster itself...

At that point Bartan had always awakened with a moan of alarm, relieved to find himself back in the normal night-time world, but each time he had recaptured sleep the dream had begun again. Consequently, he had welcomed the return of daylight, even though he had risen with a lingering tiredness in his system. He had claimed an entire section on his own behalf, as Jop Trinchil had wanted him to do, and was working himself to exhaustion every day in an effort to get the place ready for Sondeweere's arrival.

Now, as he drove his refurbished wagon towards the Phoratore section, the contrast between the sunlit ambience of the morning and the terrors of darkness was invigorating him, dispelling all traces of weariness from his limbs.

There had been rain during the night and as a result the air was soft, thick and sweet. The mere act of breathing it was subtly thrilling and evocative as though it were wafting around him from out of those years in which he had been a dreamy-eyed child who perceived the future as little more than a shifting aureate glow. And what added a psychic sparkle to the surroundings was the realisation that the instinctive optimism of his boyhood had been fully justified.

Life was *good*!

Keeping the bluehorn moving at a leisurely pace, Bartan reviewed the various circumstances which were conspiring to make this a special day in a special

time. There had been the news from the reeve, Majin Karrodall, that all the expedition's claims had been registered and approved in the provincial capital. The farmers, who had been happy to take over ready-made buildings and cleared land, now regarded Bartan as a benefactor. Jop Trinchil had set a date, only twenty days away, for Sondeweere's wedding. And, finally, there was the prospect of the festive gathering—to celebrate the ratification of the claims—at which there would be many kinds of food and drink, and dancing far into the night.

The revel was not due to begin at a set time, but would gradually accrete during the day as family groups made their way in from outlying sections. Bartan was going exceptionally early in the hope that Sondeweere would do the same, thus giving him some extra hours in her company. He had not seen her for at least twelve days, and he was hungry for the sight of her face, the sound of her voice and the dizzying feel of her body against his own.

The thought that she might already be at the Phoraterre farm prompted him to urge the bluehorn to a faster pace. He soon reached the top of a shallow dome, from which he was able to see many miles ahead, and the pastoral serenity of the view accorded with his mood. The night's rain had deepened the blue of the sky, as was evidenced by the fact that he could discern several whirlpools of light in addition to a generous sprinkling of daytime stars. Below the horizon were sweeps and swathes of grassland in which the only perceptible movements were occasional reflections from near-invisible ptertha drifting on the breeze. In the middle distance, fringed by striated fields, were the buildings of the Phorateres' farm, visible as tiny rectangles of white and grey. Harro and Ennda Phoraterre had volunteered the use of their place because it was one of the most central.

Bartan began to whistle as the wagon rolled more easily on the downward slope, following the parallel ruts of the track. When he neared the main farmhouse he saw that several wagons were standing by the stable, but Trinchil's—in which Sondeweere would have travelled—was not among them. It was likely that those which had arrived so early belonged to families whose female members were helping with the preparations for the party. A long table had been set up and a number of men and women were standing near it, apparently deep in discussion. Children of various ages were at play in the vicinity, producing a cheerful hubbub of laughs and screams, but as Bartan halted near the stable he received the impression that something was troubling the adults.

"Hello, Bartan—you are early." Only one of the farmers—a ruddy-cheeked young man with spiky straw-like hair—had left the group to greet Bartan.

"Hello ... Crain." Bartan named the man with some difficulty because the Phorateres were a large family, with several cousins of similar age and

appearance. "Am I *too* early? Should I depart and return later?"

"No, it's all right. It's just that ... something has happened. It has taken the wind out of our sails a bit."

"Something serious?"

Crain looked embarrassed. "Please go into the house. Harro needs to see you. We were on the point of sending a rider to fetch you when we saw your wagon coming over the rise." He turned and walked away before Bartan could question him any further.

Bartan walked to the farmhouse's front entrance with growing curiosity. Harro Phoratore was the head of the family—a reserved and taciturn forty-year-old who had not warmed to Bartan as much as the other members of the community. The fact that he had invited Bartan into his home was unusual in itself, a hint that something extraordinary had occurred. Bartan tapped the planked door and went inside, to find himself in a large square kitchen. Harro was standing by an inner door which probably led to a bedroom. He had a cloth pressed to his right cheek and his face was devoid of the high colouring which was a family characteristic.

"There you are, Bartan," he said in a subdued voice. "I'm glad you came early—I'm sorely in need of your help. I know I haven't shown you much cordiality in the past, but..."

"Put that out of your mind," Bartan said, starting forward. "Only tell me what I can do for you."

"Speak quietly!" Harro said, putting a finger vertically to his lips. "Those wondrously fine little tools that you showed us ... the ones you use for repairing jewellery ... have you brought them today?"

Bartan's puzzlement increased. "Yes, I always keep some by me. They are in my wagon."

"Could you unlock this door? Even with the key still in the lock on the other side?"

Bartan examined the door. It was unusually well crafted to be in a farm dwelling, and its having a lock instead of a latch was an indication that the original builder of the house had had gentlemanly aspirations. The shape of the keyhole, however, indicated that the lock itself was of the simplest and cheapest warded pattern.

"An easy enough task," Bartan whispered. "Is your wife in that room? I hope she isn't ill."

"Ennda is in there, all right, and I fear she has gone mad. That's why I didn't break the door down. She screams when I so much as touch the handle."

Bartan remembered Ennda Phoratore as a handsome, well-made woman in

her late thirties, better educated and more articulate than the other farmers' wives. She was eminently practical, with a good sense of humour, and probably the last person in the community he would have expected to fall prey to fevers of the mind.

"Why do you think she is mad?" he said.

"It started during the night. I woke up and found Ennda pressing herself against me, working herself against me. Intimately, you understand. Moaning she was, and insistent—so I obliged. To tell you the truth, I had little choice in the matter." Harro paused and gave Bartan a hard look. "This is between *us*, you understand."

"Of course," Bartan said. He had noticed before that, while being fond of using vulgar sexual references in everyday speech, the farming people tended to be reticent about their own personal relationships.

Harro nodded. "Well, at the height of it all she ... bit me."

"But..." Bartan hesitated, wondering how much difference there could be between the urban and the rural experience of passion. "It's not uncommon for lovers to..."

"Like this?" Harro said, removing the cloth from his cheek.

Bartan flinched as he saw the wound on the other man's face. There were two curving incisions in the shape of an open mouth, their ends so close that it was obvious that a substantial piece of flesh had almost been torn out of Harro's cheek. The edges of the incisions had been drawn together with a cross-stitching of black thread, but blood was still oozing in places despite a generous dusting of powdered pepperbloom, a traditional Kolcorronian coagulant. The skin surrounding the wound was darkly bruised, and it was evident that Harro would be scarred for life.

"I'm sorry," Bartan mumbled. "I had no idea."

Harro covered his cheek again. "Next thing Ennda was attacking me, beating me about the head with her fists, screaming at me to get out of the room. I was so confounded that I was out of the room before I knew what was happening. Ennda locked the door. For a while she kept screaming something ... it sounded like, 'Not a dream, not a dream' ... then she fell silent and has been that way for hours. Except when anyone tries the lock, that is—then she starts it again. I'm worried about her, Bartan. I must reach her in case she does some mischief to herself. She sounded so ... so..."

"Wait here!" Bartan went to the front entrance and, ignoring the questioning glances of the group by the long table, walked quickly to his wagon. He opened its toolbox and was withdrawing the roll of jeweller's instruments when Crain Phoratore arrived at his side.

"Can you do it?" Crain said. "Can you manage the door?"

"I believe so."

"Good man, Bartan! When the screaming started we ran here from the sidehouses and found him naked and covered with blood. We put some clothes on him and stitched the wound, then he cleared the house. He refuses to speak to anyone—ashamed, perhaps—and we don't know whether to let the revel continue or not. Perhaps it would be unseemly."

"We'll see how she is when we get into the bedroom," Bartan said, hurrying back to the house. "Stay close by and I'll call you if we need assistance."

"Good man, Bartan!" Crain said fervently.

In the house Bartan found Harro still waiting by the bedroom door. Bartan knelt beside him and examined the keyhole closely, satisfying himself that the lock could be successfully manipulated. He selected the instrument best suited for his purpose and looked up at Harro.

"I have to do this quickly in case she guesses what is happening," he said. "Please be ready to go in immediately."

Harro nodded. Bartan turned the key with a single twist and moved aside as Harro brushed by him and into the room beyond. In the half-light from the doorway and the shuttered window he saw Ennda Phoratere standing in the far corner, back pressed to the wall. Her black hair was in wild disarray around a face that was dehumanised by the white-corona'd eyes and the blood caked on her chin. Brownish stains dappled the upper part of her nightdress.

"Who are you?" she shrilled at Harro. "Stay away! Don't come near me!"

"Ennda!" Harro darted forward and seized his wife despite the flailings of her arms as she tried to fight him off. "Don't you know me? I only want to help you. *Please*, Ennda."

"You can't be Harro! You..." She broke off, staring into his face, and pressed a hand to her mouth. "Harro? Harro?"

"You had a nightmare, but it's over. It's all over, dear one." Harro drew his wife towards the bed and made her sit down, at the same time nodding meaningfully towards the window for Bartan to take heed. Bartan went forward and opened the shutters, expanding a central sliver of brilliance into a wash of sunlight. Ennda looked all around the room, mistrustfully, before turning to her husband.

"But your *face*! Look what I did to your poor face!" She gave the most anguished sob Bartan had ever heard, lowered her head and—on seeing the bloodstains on her nightdress—began to tear at the thin cotton material.

"I'll fetch some water," Bartan said hastily, leaving the room. He saw Crain Phoratere standing just beyond the front entrance and made a pushing gesture

against the air to warn him to remain outside for the time being. His glance around the kitchen located a green glass ewer and basin on a sideboard. He poured some water into the basin, gathered up a washcloth, soap and towel, taking as much time as possible over the operation, and returned to the bedroom door. Ennda's nightdress was lying on the floor and she was swaddled in a sheet taken from the bed.

"It's all right, lad," Harro said. "Come in."

Bartan entered the room and held the basin while Harro cleaned and dried blood from his wife's face. With the disappearance of the scaly disfigurement Harro showed an uplift in his spirits, reminding Bartan that some nursing procedures were as much for the benefit of the caring as the cared for. He too began to feel a sense of relief, though with a twinge of conscience over his own selfishness—his special day had been threatened, but the threat was lifting. Ennda Phoratere had had a very bad dream, with unfortunate consequences, but life was now settling back into its pleasant routine and soon he would be dancing with Sondeweere, belly to belly, thigh to thigh...

"That's better," Harro said, dabbing his wife's face with the towel. "It was only a nightmare, and now we can forget all about it and..."

"It wasn't a nightmare!" Her voice had a thin, wailing quality which somehow checked Bartan's rising tide of optimism. "It was *real*!"

"It can't have been real," Harro said reasonably.

"What about your face?" Ennda began to rock gently backwards and forwards. "It wasn't *like* a dream. It seemed real, and it seemed to go on for ever ... for ever and ever..."

Harro tried being jocular. "It can't have been worse than some of the dreams I have had, especially after a supper of your suet cakes."

"I was eating your face." Ennda gave her husband a calm, dreadful smile. "I didn't just bite your cheek, Harro—I ate up all of your face, and it took hours. I bit off your lips and chewed them up. I pulled your nostrils off with my teeth and chewed them up. I gnawed the front off your eyeballs and sucked the fluid out of them. When I had finished with you, you had no face left ... nothing at all ... not even ears..."

"There was just a red skull with some hair on top. That's what I was doing to you during the night, Harro, my beloved—so do not try to tell me about your nightmares."

"It's all over now," Harro said uneasily.

"Is that what you think?" Ennda began to rock more vigorously, as though driven by an invisible engine. "There was more, you know. I haven't told you about the dark tunnel ... crawling under the ground in the dark tunnel ... with all

the flat, scaly bodies pressing on me..."

"I think it would be better if I left," Bartan said, turning towards the door with the basin.

"No, don't go, lad." Harro raised a hand to detain Bartan. "She's better with company."

"...they had many legs—and I was the same... I had many legs ... and a trunk ... a tentacle ... growing out of my throat..." Ennda suddenly ceased rocking, tucked her right shoulder under her chin and extended her arm forwards. It made a gentle, boneless rippling movement which was mimicked by something in the deeps of Bartan's consciousness, making him unaccountably afraid.

"Well, I'll just put the basin away," he said, feeling like a traitor, knowing that he intended to get out of the house and leave the two unfortunates to deal with their own problems, none of which had anything to do with him. He evaded Harro's hand, walked briskly into the kitchen and set the slopping basin down on the sideboard. He turned and was on his way to the bright sanity of the front entrance when he was snared by Ennda's psychic web. She had risen to her feet, unmindful that the sheet was slipping down her torso, and could have been performing a strange new dance, her arm snaking and wafting before her.

"It began oddly," she murmured. "Very oddly indeed, and it's wrong to call it a beginning because I kept going back to the house. It was an ordinary farmhouse ... whitewashed, green door ... but I was afraid to go in ... and yet I *had* to go in..."

"When I opened the green door there was nothing there but some old clothes hanging on a hook on the wall ... an old hat, an old cloak, an old apron ... I knew I should have run away at that stage, while I was still safe, but something made me go in..."

Bartan halted at the bedroom door, chilled.

Ennda looked straight at him, through him. "You see, I was wrong. There weren't any old clothes. It was one of *them* ... that tentacle reaching towards me ... ever so gently..."

Harro closed with his wife and gripped her shoulders. "Stop this, Ennda. Stop it!"

"But you don't understand." She smiled again, her arm coiling around his neck as the sheet dropped to the floor. "I wasn't being attacked, dear one ... it was an invitation ... an invitation to love ... and I *wanted* it. I went into the house and I embraced the horror ... and I was happy when I felt its pale grey penis entering me..."

Ennda surged against Harro, her naked buttocks pumping and contracting.

With one imploring glance towards Bartan, Harro used his weight and size to force his wife down on to the bed. Bartan stepped into the room, slammed the door behind him and threw himself down against the couple, helping to imprison Ennda's threshing limbs. Her teeth clicked as she bit the air and her pelvis drove upwards again and again, but now with diminishing power. Her eyelids were drooping wearily, peace was returning to her body. Bartan took the initiative and covered her, using the sheet that had fallen to the floor, but his mind was elsewhere, wandering in a strange continuum of doubt and confusion.

Could coincidence ever be stretched far enough to explain two people dreaming the same thing at the same time? Perhaps, if the subject were a very commonplace one, but not when ... *And at first mine was not a dream!* Bartan's brow prickled coldly as he remembered that he had been to the house and had walked through the green door in actuality. But in reality his monster had been a delusion, and in Ennda's delusion her monster had been a reality. *The universe does not work this way*, Bartan told himself. *Something has gone wrong with the universe...*

"She looks better now," Harro whispered, stroking his wife's brow. "Perhaps a couple of hours of proper sleep is all she needs. In fact, I *know* that is what she needs."

Bartan stood up, trying to anchor his thoughts in the solid present. "What of the celebration? Are you going to send everybody away?"

"I want them all to remain here. It will be best if Ennda has her friends around her when she awakes." Harro got to his feet and faced Bartan across the bed. "There's no need to talk too much about all this, is there, lad? I don't want people to think she has gone mad—especially Jop."

"I won't say anything."

"I'm grateful to you," Harro said, leaning forwards to shake Bartan's hand. "Jop has no time for all this talk of dreams and nightmares that we've had of late. He says that if people worked as hard as they ought they would be too tired to dream at night."

Bartan forced a smile. Were other members of the community having bad dreams? Was this what Reeve Karrodall had foretold? Could this be only the beginning, the beginning of something terrible, something which could drive the new wave of settlers away—as had happened to their predecessors?

"When I lay my head down at the end of the day," he said ruefully, pushing aside his memories of the night's disturbing dream, "I experience a small death. There is *nothing* until daybreak."

"Anybody who tried to start off a whole section on his own is entitled to be exhausted, more so somebody who wasn't brought up to this work."

"I get some help from the neighbours," Bartan said, eager to talk of commonplace things while he strove to come to terms with his new internal picture of the world. "And after I'm married there will be..."

"I must put a bandage on my war wound," Harro interrupted, gingerly prodding his cheek. "You go outside and say I want to know why they are all standing around with both arms the same length instead of preparing for the festivities. Tell them this is to be a day to remember."

News had come that Jop Trinchil and his family would not be arriving until near the middle of the day, so Bartan passed the time by joining in where he could with the various preparations going on around the farm. His efforts were received with good humour, but the women soon made it clear to him that he was hindering rather than helping, especially as he was abstracted and prone to error. He withdrew to a bench facing the kitchen orchard, where several men were already sunning themselves and sharing a jug of green wine.

"That's right, lad," Corad Furcher said companionably, handing Bartan a full cup. "Leave the women to get on with it by themselves." He was a middle-aged man whose yellowish hair betokened a blood relationship with the Phorateres.

"Thanks." Bartan sipped the sweet liquid. "It's all confused back there, and I did seem to be getting in the way a little."

"There's the source of the trouble, up there." Furcher made a gesture which took in the clear blue dome of the sky. "The onset of littlenight was the obvious time to begin a revel when we lived on the Old World, but here the sun goes on shining and shining and shining, and you can't regulate yourself properly. It isn't natural, you know, this living on the outside. I'm as loyal as the next man, but I still say King Chakkell was interfering with the right way of things when he scattered us all around the globe. Look at that sky! Empty! It makes me feel I'm being watched all the time."

The men farther along the bench nodded in agreement and began a discussion about the disadvantages of being on the hemisphere of Overland which was permanently turned away from the sister planet. Some of the theories they put forward about the effects of the uninterrupted day on crop growth and animal behaviour sounded highly dubious to Bartan. He found himself longing for Sondeweere's company more than ever, and in between times wrestling with the problem posed by Ennda Phorateres's terrible nightmare. Coincidence had to be ruled out, but perhaps the key to the mystery lay in the very nature of dreams. Was it possible, as some claimed, that the mind roved out from the body during the hours of sleep? If it were, then perhaps two discarnate personalities could meet by chance and commune briefly in the darkness, influencing each other's

dreams.

Bartan was reluctant to abandon his vision of a perfectly happy future, and the new idea seemed to offer its salvation. As the strong wine began to do its work he began to see the episode as rare and unpleasant but perfectly explicable, a manifestation of some of nature's complexities and subtleties. The resurgence of his optimism was aided by the sight of Ennda emerging from the main house and taking part in the seemingly endless preparations for the forthcoming party. She was a little sheepish at first, but soon she was laughing with those around her, and the message for Bartan was that the black humours of the night were dispersed and forgotten. The day would be all the more joyful in comparison.

He was unaccustomed to drinking wine, and by the time the Trinchil wagon appeared in the distance he had reached a state of lightheaded euphoria, an enhancement of the one he had known in the early part of the day. His first impulse was to go out and meet Sondeweere, but it was superseded by a playful desire to surprise her with a sudden appearance. He went to where the other farmers had parked, stationed himself between two of the tall vehicles and waited until the new arrivals had rolled to a halt close by. There were more than a dozen of the Trinchil family on the wagon, and the noise level in the area increased sharply as they spilled over its sides, the children vying with the adults in the calling out of greetings to friends. In spite of his bulk, Jop Trinchil was first to reach the ground. He strode off immediately towards the laden tables, obviously in a boisterous mood, leaving the women to supervise the unloading of infants and some small hampers.

Bartan was enchanted to see Sondeweere wearing her best dress, a pale green tailored garment with an olive filigree pattern, which complemented her fair coloration and reaffirmed his impression of her as being in a class apart from all the other women of the community. She was the last to quit the wagon, languorously rising to her feet in a kind of voluptuous slow-motion shimmy which set Bartan's heart racing.

He was about to go forward when he saw that one of Jop's sons—a precociously muscular seventeen-year-old named Glave—was waiting by the wagon with arms upraised to help Sondeweere descend. She smiled down at him and swung her legs over the side, permitting him to encircle her waist with his large hands. He took her weight easily and lowered her to the ground in a deliberate manner which brought their bodies close together. Sondeweere gave no sign of being offended. She allowed the intimate contact to continue for several seconds, all the while gazing into Glave's eyes, then shook her head slightly. Glave released her immediately, said something Bartan was unable to hear and loped away in the wake of the rest of his family.

Annoyed, Bartan left his place of concealment and approached Sondeweere. "Welcome to the party," he said, quite certain in his mind that she would be disconcerted to learn that she had been under observation.

"Bartan!" Smiling brilliantly, she ran to him, threw her arms around his waist and nuzzled against his chest. "It seems *years* since I've seen you."

"Does it?" he said, refusing to return the embrace. "Haven't you found a way to make the time pass quickly? And pleasantly at that?"

"Of course not!" Becoming aware of the rigidity of his body, she stepped back to look at him. "Bartan! What are you saying?"

"I saw you with Glave."

Sondeweere's jaw sagged for a moment before she began to laugh. "Bartan, Glave is just a boy! And he's my cousin."

"Full cousin? By blood?"

"That doesn't come into it—you have no reason to be jealous." Sondeweere raised her left hand and tapped the brakka ring on the sixth finger. "I wear this at all times, my love."

"That doesn't prove..." Bartan's throat closed painfully, preventing him from finishing the sentence.

"Why are we behaving like strangers?" Sondeweere fixed Bartan with a soft but purposeful stare and embraced him again, this time putting her arms around his neck and drawing his face down to meet hers. He had never been to bed with her, but before the kiss was over he had a fair idea of what the experience would be like and all thoughts of rivalry, or indeed of anything, had flown from his mind. He responded hungrily until she had broken away from him.

"Labouring in the field is making you very strong," she whispered. "I see I will have to be careful with you and grow a plentiful crop of maidenfriend."

Flattered and uplifted, he said, "Don't you want to have children?"

"Lots of them, but not too soon—we have much work to do first."

"We'll have no talk of work for the remainder of the day." Bartan linked arms with Sondeweere and drew her away from the farm buildings towards the sunlit peacefulness of the open land, where crops in different stages of maturation glowed in strips which narrowed into the distance. They walked together for a good hour, enjoying each other's presence, passing the time with lovers' Smalltalk and counting the meteors which occasionally scribed silver lines across the sky. Bartan would have liked to keep Sondeweere to himself until nightfall, but he gave in with good grace when she decided to return to the others for the start of the dancing.

By the time they had reached the main farmhouse Bartan was thirsty. Feeling it would be prudent not to have more wine, he joined the men clustered around

the ale barrels in search of a less heady brew. He fended off the expected ribaldry about what he had been doing while absent with Sondeweere, and emerged from the group with a heavy pot of ale in his hand. Three fiddlers had begun to play in the shade of the barn and several young women—Sondeweere among them—had joined hands and were opening the first of the set dances.

Bartan looked on in a mood of utter contentment, taking small but regular sips of his drink, as some male farmers overcame their self-consciousness and gradually swelled the ranks of the dancers. He finished his ale, set the pot on a nearby table, and had taken one step towards Sondeweere when his attention was caught by a group of small children at play on a grassy patch near the kitchen orchard. All were aged about three or four and were moving in a circle, silently absorbed, performing a dance of their own to a slower rhythm than that of the adults' music. Their chins were tucked down into hunched right shoulders, and their right arms were extended in front, gently wafting and undulating like so many snakes.

The movements were strangely inhuman, strangely unappealing—and exactly simulated those with which Ennda Phoraterre had acted out the obscene horrors of her nightmare.

Bartan turned away from the children, frowning, suddenly feeling isolated from the merriment and innocence of his neighbours.

PART II
The Cold Arena

Chapter 6

As they walked to the palace's principal entrance Gesalla Maraquine talked continuously about domestic trivia—a tactic which Toller found more baffling and infuriating than if she had chosen to maintain a cold silence.

He had not been able to return home in the twelve days which had elapsed since the visitation by the skyship from Land, and consequently had been pleased when Gesalla had ridden up from the estate to spend the night with him. But her stay had provided none of the comforts for which he had hoped. She had arrived in a strange mood, enigmatic and slightly distant, and on learning that he had insisted on going aloft with the first fortress had become positively acidic. Later, in bed, she had responded to his advances with a dull compliance which was more hurtful than outright rejection and which had caused him to abandon all thoughts of lovemaking. He had lain apart from her all night, physically and mentally frustrated, and when he had lapsed into sleep there had been dreams of falling—not just of ordinary falling, but of the day-long drop from the weightless zone...

"Cassyll is waiting for you," Toller cut in forcibly. "It's good that you'll have his company on the ride home."

Gesalla nodded. "It's *very* good—after all, you might have decided to take him into the sky with you."

"What are you saying? The boy has no interest in flying."

"He had no interest in guns, either—until you put him to work on those cursed muskets. Now I see almost as little of him as I do of you."

"Is *that* what this is all about?" Toller stopped his wife in the busy, high-ceilinged corridor, waited until a group of officials had moved out of earshot, and said, "Why didn't you come out with it last night?"

"Would you have changed your plans?"

"No."

Gesalla looked exasperated. "Then what would have been the point in my speaking out?"

"What was the point in coming to the palace in the first place?" Toller said. "Was it to cause me pain?"

"Did you say *pain*?" Gesalla gave an incredulous laugh. "I heard about your

plunge into insanity with that beast of a swordsman, Karkarand, or whatever his name is."

Toller blinked at her, thrown by the apparent change of subject. "It was the only way..."

"Now you're going *up there* when there is absolutely no need for it. Toller, how do you think I feel, knowing that my husband would rather court death than go on living with me?"

Toller strove for a suitable answer, gaining time through the fact that two clerks carrying ledgers were passing close by and giving him inquisitive looks. This was the sort of situation in which Gesalla could strike a near-superstitious fear into him. Her oval face was hard, pale and beautiful, and behind those grey eyes was a mind that could far outpace his own, making it impossible for him to best her in an argument, especially an important one.

"I know there is little evidence of it thus far, but this is a time of crisis," he said slowly. "I am only doing what is required of me, and I hate it as much as..." He allowed the sentence to tail off as he saw that Gesalla was shaking her head emphatically.

"Don't lie to me, Toller. Don't lie to *yourself*. You are enjoying all this."

"Nonsense!"

"Answer just one question for me—do you ever think of Leddravohr?"

Again disconcerted, Toller conjured up then drove from his mind a vision of the military prince, the man whose hatred had altered his entire life and with whom he had fought a duel to the death on the day their ships had touched down on Overland all those years ago.

"Leddravohr?" he said. "Why should I think of him?"

Gesalla produced the sweet, sweet smile which often preceded her deadliest thrusts. "Because you were a pair of sixes, you and he." She turned and walked away quickly, her straight-backed figure slipping through barriers of people with an ease he could not emulate.

Nobody can say that to me, he thought in dismay, trailing in Gesalla's wake. In spite of his efforts to overtake, she had passed through the arched entrance and was in the sunlight of the forecourt before he reached her side, and Cassyll was already bringing two bluehorns forward.

Cassyll Maraquine was as tall as his father, but the maternal component of his build was evident. His physique was of the lean and long-muscled type, giving him the capability—as Toller had learned through a number of failed challenges—of running for two or three hours at a stretch with virtually no diminution of speed. He bore a strong resemblance to his mother, with a fine-featured oval face and thoughtful grey eyes beneath a widow's peak of black hair.

"Good foreday, mother, father," he said and immediately gave all his attention to Toller. "I brought samples of the new batch of pressure spheres. Not one of them has failed or even distorted under test, so we can start producing reliable muskets right away. I have them in my saddle bag—do you want to see?"

Toller glanced at Gesalla's set countenance. "Not now, son. Not today. I'm leaving it to you and Wroble to take care of the production planning—I have other work in hand."

"Oh!" Cassyll raised his eyebrows and gazed at his father in open admiration. "So it's really true! You're going aloft with the first of the fortresses!"

"It has to be done," Toller said, wishing that Cassyll had reacted differently. He had been away from home on the King's business during much of his son's upbringing and had always considered himself blessed in that, far from showing resentment, the boy had regarded him as a glamorous adventurer and a father of whom to be proud. There had been no sense of competition with Gesalla for their son's mind, even after the boy had developed a strong interest in the new science of metallurgy, but now the triangular relationship was changing and presenting difficulties—just when Toller was least able to deal with them. The first two sky fortresses had been constructed in only a few days, far too short a time for a thorough study of the problem areas, and the forthcoming ascent was looming so large in his thoughts that all else seemed slightly unreal to him. In his heart he was already soaring up into the dangerous blue reaches of the sky, and he had become impatient with earthly matters.

"I'll speak to Wroble before nightfall," Cassyll said. "How long will you be away?"

"Perhaps seven days on this first ascent. Much depends on how smoothly the operation proceeds."

"Good luck, father." Cassyll shook Toller's hand, then held one of the bluehorns steady for Gesalla to mount it. She swung herself up into the saddle with practised grace, her divided riding skirt giving her full freedom of movement, and looked down at Toller with an expression which seemed to indicate an odd mixture of anger and sadness. The silver streak in her hair shone like a military emblem.

"Aren't you going to wish me good luck also?" he said.

"Why should I? You assured me the ascent would be perfectly safe."

"Yes, but..."

"Goodbye, Toller." Gesalla wheeled the bluehorn away and rode off towards the palace gates.

Cassyll gazed after her in perplexity for a moment. "Is anything wrong,

father?"

"Nothing we are unable to put right, son. Take good care of your mother." Toller watched Cassyll mount and ride after Gesalla, then turned and walked back into the palace, moving like a blind man opposed by currents of humanity. He had taken only a few paces when he heard a woman's footsteps hurrying behind him. The idea that it might be Gesalla coming back to put things right between them was irrational, but nevertheless he felt the beginnings of a surge of gladness as he halted and turned to face the person who was overtaking him. The emotion subsided in disappointment as he saw a petite, black-haired woman in her mid-twenties who was wearing the saffron uniform of an air-captain. Blue patches stitched to the shoulders of the thickly embroidered jupon showed that she had been seconded to the hastily formed Sky Service. Her face was firm-jawed and full-lipped, with unfashionably full eyebrows which seemed poised to frown.

"Lord Toller," she said, "may I have a word with you? I am Skycaptain Berise Narrinder, and I've been trying to see you for days."

"I'm sorry, captain," Toller said. "You have chosen the most inopportune time."

"My lord, this will take but a moment—and it is a matter of some importance."

The fact that the woman had not been deterred by his refusal caused him to look more closely at her, and far back in his mind there flickered the thought that she would have been highly attractive but for the anomaly of being in uniform. He was immediately angry with himself, and again wished that Queen Daseene did not have so much influence over her husband. It had been on Daseene's insistence that women had been admitted to the Air Service, and she had prevailed on Chakkell to permit female volunteers to join skyship and fortress crews.

"All right, captain," Toller said, "what is this matter of some importance?"

"I was told that it was your personal decision that no woman would take part in the first twelve ascents to the weightless zone. Is that true?"

"Yes, it's true. What of it?"

Berise's eyebrows now formed a continuous line above intent green eyes. "With the greatest respect, my lord, I wish to claim the right of protest granted to me under the Terms of Service."

"There are no Terms in wartime." Toller blinked down at her. "Leaving that aside, what have you to protest about?"

"I volunteered for flight duty and was rejected—simply because I'm a woman."

"You're in error, captain. If you were a woman with experience of piloting a ship to the weightless zone and carrying out the inversion manoeuvre you would have been accepted, or at least considered. If you were a woman with gunnery experience or with the strength to move fortress sections you would have been accepted, or at least considered. The reason that you were rejected is that you are unqualified for the work. And now may I suggest that we both resume our duties?"

Toller turned quickly and was beginning to walk away when the look of frustration he had seen in Berise's eyes struck a responsive chord within him. How many times in his youth had he too frowned and chafed when thwarted by regulations? He had an instinctive distaste for the idea of sending a woman into the front line of battle, but if he had learned one thing from Gesalla it was that courage was not an exclusively male attribute.

"Before we part, captain," he said, checking his stride, "why are you so anxious to climb to the midpoint?"

"There will never be another opportunity, my lord—and I have as much right as any man."

"How long have you been flying airships?"

"Three years, my lord." Berise was carefully observing the formalities of address, but her stern expression and heightened colour made it clear that she was angry at him, and he liked her for it. He had a natural sense of kinship with people who were unable to disguise their feelings.

"My ruling about the assembly flights is unchanged," he said, deciding to show her that the years had not robbed him of his humanity, that he could still sympathise with youth's ambitions. "But when the fortresses are in place there will be frequent supply flights, and the fortress crews themselves will be rotated on a regular basis. If you can curb your impatience, albeit briefly, you will have ample opportunity to prove your worth in the central blue."

"You are very kind, my lord." Berise's bow seemed deeper than was necessary, and her smile could have suggested amusement as much as gratitude.

Did I sound pompous? he thought, watching her walk away. *Is that young woman laughing at me?*

He considered the questions for a moment, then clicked his tongue in annoyance as it came to him how trivial was the subject which had diverted him from his major responsibilities.

The parade ground at the rear of the palace had been chosen as the launch site, partly because it was fully enclosed, partly because it made it easy for King Chakkell to keep a close eye on every aspect of the sky fortress project.

The fortresses were wooden cylinders—twelve yards in length and circumference and four in diameter—each of which had been built in three sections. Two prototypes had been produced in the initial war effort and the sections comprising them were lying on their sides at the western edge of the ground, looking like giant drums. The huge balloons which were to carry them into the weightless zone had already been attached and were lying on the baked clay, their mouths held open by ground crew, and hand-cranked fans were being used to inflate them with unheated air. It was a technique which had been devised at the time of the Migration to lessen the risk of damage to the linen envelopes when hot gas was fired into them from the burners.

"I still say it's madness for you to go aloft at this stage," liven Zavotle said as he crossed the parade ground with Toller. "And even now it isn't too late for you to appoint a deputy."

Toller shook his head and placed a hand on Zavotle's shoulder. "I appreciate your concern, liven, but you know it can't be done that way. The crews are terrified as it is, and if they thought I was afraid to go up there with them they would be completely useless."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"You and I have been in the weightless zone before, and we know how to deal with it."

"The circumstances were different," Zavotle said gloomily. "Especially for our second visit."

Toller gave him a reassuring shake. "Your system will work—I'll stake my life on that."

"Spare me the jests." Zavotle parted from Toller and went to confer with a group of his technicians who were waiting to observe the take-off. He had proved himself so valuable to the sky fortress project that soon after their first meeting Chakkell had appointed him Chief Engineer, thus making Toller redundant to a large degree and freeing him for the first ascent. As a result, Zavotle felt responsible for thrusting his friend into dangers whose extent could hardly be guessed, and he had been increasingly morose over the past few days.

Toller glanced up at the sky, to where the great disk of Land was poised at the zenith, and once again it came to him that he might die up there, midway between the two worlds. On analysing his reaction to the thought, the disturbing thing was that he felt no real fear. There was a determination to avoid being killed and to guide the mission through to a successful conclusion, but there was little of the normal human sense of dread at the possibility of having his life snuffed out. Was that because he could not envisage Toller Maraquine, the man at the centre of creation, meeting the same fate as all ordinary mortals—or had

Gesalla been right about him? Was he really a war-lover, as the long-dead Prince Leddravohr had been—and did that explain the malaise which had begun to affect him in recent years?

The thought was a disquieting and depressing one, and he pushed it aside to concentrate on his immediate duties. All day there had been intense activity around the six fortress sections as supplies were loaded and secured, and last-minute adjustments were made to engines and equipment. Now the area was comparatively empty, with only the launch teams and the flight crews standing by their odd-looking ships. Some of the latter exchanged words and glances as they saw Toller approaching and knew that the 2,500-mile ascent was about to begin. The pilots were all mature men, selected because of their flying experience during the Migration; but most of the others were youngsters who had been chosen for their physical fitness, and they tended to be highly apprehensive about what was to follow. Understanding their worries, Toller put on a show of being relaxed and cheerful as he reached the row of slow-stirring balloons.

"The wind conditions are perfect, so I will not detain you," he told them, raising his voice against the clattering and whirring of the inflation fans. "I have only one thing to say. It is something you have heard many times before, but it is so important that it is worth repeating here. You must remain tethered to your ships at all times, and wear your parachutes at all times. Remember those basic rules and you will be as safe in the sky as you are on the ground.

"And now let us be about the work with which the King has entrusted us."

His closing words were far from being as inspirational as he would have liked, but a traditional speech delivered in high Kolcorronian would have seemed incongruous in the context of the strangest war in human history. In past conflicts the common man had always been emotionally involved—largely through fear of what an invading horde would do to his loved ones—but in this case most of the general populace were quite unaware of any threat. In a way it was an unreal war, a contest between rulers, where a few gladiators were thrown into the ring like tumbling dice to bring about an arbitrary decision, largely influenced by their ability to endure pain and deprivation, on the viability of a political idea. How was he to explain, justify and glorify that to a handful of hapless individuals who had been lured into the King's service, originally, by the prospect of steady pay and a soft life?

Toller went to his own ship, giving the signal for the five other pilots to do likewise. He had chosen to fly a fortress midsection because it looked less airworthy than the closed endsections and its crew needed an extra boost to their confidence. A temporary floor had been installed a short distance below one rim,

and on that were the crew stations and lockers containing various supplies.

The centrally mounted burner was one which had served in the Migration and had been lying in Chakkell's stores for more than twenty years. Its main component was the trunk of a very young brakka tree which had been used in its entirety. On one side of the bulbous base was a small hopper filled with pikon, plus a valve which admitted the crystals to the combustion chamber under pneumatic pressure. On the other side a similar mechanism controlled the flow of halvell, and both valves were operated by a common lever. The passageways in the latter valve were slightly enlarged, automatically supplying the greater proportion of halvell which had proved best for sustained thrust.

Because the section was lying on its side the floor was vertical and Toller had to lie on his back in his chair to operate the burner's controls. His sword, which he had not thought to discard, made the attitude all the more awkward. He pumped up the pneumatic reservoir, then signalled to the inflation supervisor that he was ready to begin burning. The fan crew ceased cranking and pulled their cumbersome machine and its nozzle aside.

Toller advanced the control lever for about a second. There was a hissing roar as the power crystals combined, firing a burst of hot miglign gas into the balloon's gaping mouth. Satisfied with the burner's performance, he instigated a series of blasts—keeping them short to reduce the risk of heat damage to the balloon fabric—and the great envelope began to distend further and lift clear of the ground. The inflation crew raised it further by means of the four acceleration struts, which constituted the principal difference between the skyship and a craft designed for normal atmospheric flight. Now three-quarters full, the balloon sagged among the struts, the varnished linen skin pulsing and rippling like a giant lung.

As it gradually rose to the vertical position the crew holding the balloon's crown lines came walking in and attached them to the section's load points, while others gently rotated the section until its axis was perpendicular. All at once the section was ready to take to the air, held down only by the pull of the men holding its trailing ropes. The remainder of the flight crew scaled its sides on projecting rungs and took their places.

Toller nodded in satisfaction as he glanced along the line of craft and saw that the other crews had gone aboard in unison with his own. It was a departure from established Kolcorronian practice for a group of ships to take off simultaneously, but successful assembly of the fortresses in the weightless zone was going to depend on precision flying in close formation. Zavotle had decided that a mass take-off would help the pilots familiarise themselves with the technique, and also give an early indication of where problems could lie. There had been no time for

trial ascents, and the crews would have to learn new skills under the tutelage of the severest and most unforgiving taskmaster of all.

Having assured himself that the other five pilots were ready to fly, Toller waved to them and fired a prolonged burst to initiate the climb. The roar of the burner was magnified in the vast echo chamber of the balloon which now blotted out most of the sky, and at the end of the blast the handlers released their lines on command from the launch supervisor. As the ship began to drift vertically upwards, with no breeze to impart a lateral component to its motion, Toller stood up and looked over the rim of the section into the slowly receding parade ground. He picked out the compact form of liven Zavotle, easily distinguishable because of his prematurely white hair, and waved to him. Zavotle did not respond, but Toller knew he had been seen and that Zavotle was wishing he could exchange places rather than have another man put his ideas to the test.

"Bring in the struts, sir?" The speaker was the rigger, Tipp Gotlon, a lanky gap-toothed youngster who was one of the few volunteers on the flight.

Toller nodded and Gotlon began working his way around the circular deck, drawing in the free-hanging acceleration struts by their tethers and securing them to the rim. Mechanic Millyat Essedell, a competent-looking, bow-legged man with several years of Air Service experience, was not required to do anything at this stage of the flight, but he was crouched at his equipment locker, busily sorting and checking the tools. The midsection ships had three-man crews—as compared with five in the endsections—because they were burdened with the extra weight of the armaments the fortresses would use against invaders.

Satisfied that his companions were reliable, Toller directed all his attention into finding a burn ratio which would give a climb speed in the region of twenty-four miles an hour. He settled on a rhythm of four seconds on and twenty seconds off—well remembered from his first interplanetary crossing—and for the next ten minutes the pilots of the other ships practised keeping exactly level with him. They made a striking spectacle, being so huge and close, with every detail sharply etched in pure light, while the world gently sank into the blue haze of distance.

The ships had become Toller's only reality.

Looking down on the sketchy geometries of the city of Prad, he could feel little affinity with the place or its inhabitants. He had again become a creature of the sky, and his preoccupations were no longer those of mere land-locked beings. Affairs of state and the posturing of princes now mattered little in comparison with the condition of a rivet or the correct tensioning of a rope or even the strange ruminative sounds which a balloon would sometimes emit for no apparent reason.

By the time the practice period had ended the squadron had attained a height of two miles and Toller gave the signal for a vertical dispersion to take place. The manoeuvre was carried out quickly and without mishap, changing the tight horizontal group into a loose stepped formation which could face the onset of night with little risk of collision.

Toller had driven himself to the point of exhaustion before the take-off, sometimes getting only two hours sleep in a night, and it was during the enforced idleness of the ascent that his body claimed its due compensation. Even while operating the burner he would sometimes lapse into a torpor, counting off the rhythm by instinct, and much of his rest periods were spent in dozing and dreaming. Often when he awoke he genuinely had no idea where he was, and would gaze up at the patient, looming curvatures of the balloon in fear and confusion until he had deduced what it was and where it was taking him. At other times, especially at night when the meteors flickered continuously all around, he would not succeed in awakening fully and in his tranced condition imagined that he was on an ascent of long ago, in the company of men and women who had long since died or been turned into strangers by the processes of time, all of them voyaging into the future with varying degrees of trepidation and hope.

The changing patterns of night and day enhanced his temporal disorientation. As the ascent continued Overland's night grew shorter and its littlenight expanded, slipping towards the equilibrium which would be attained midway between the sister planets, and Toller found himself almost losing track of the sequence. The surest measure of time's passing became the ship's altimeter—a simple device consisting of nothing more than a vertical scale, from the top of which a small weight was suspended by a delicate coiled spring. At the beginning of the flight the weight had been opposite the lowest mark on the scale, but as the climb continued and the pull of Overland's gravity diminished, the weight drifted upwards in a perfect analogue of the flight, a miniature ship sailing a miniature cosmos.

Another reliable indicator of progress was the increasing coldness. On Toller's first ascent the crew had been surprised by the phenomenon and had been considerably distressed as a result, but now thickly quilted suits were available and the low temperatures were made tolerable. It was even possible, while seated close to the burner, to achieve a cosy, cocooned warmth—a condition which abetted Toller's persistent drowsiness, and in which he could spend hours staring into the darkening blue of the sky, at fierce stars scattered on overlapping whirlpools of light, at the splayed luminance of comets, and at

Farland hanging in the distance like a green lantern.

One of the most important problems facing the mission was that of recognising the exact centre of the weightless zone. Toller knew that in theory there was no actual zone of weightlessness, that it was a plane of zero thickness, and that a fortress positioned as little as ten yards to one side or the other would inevitably begin the long plunge to a planetary surface. It had been assumed, however, that reality would be more forgiving than absolute equations and would allow some leeway, no matter how slight.

Toller's first job was to show that the assumption had been justified.

The six ships had switched over to jet propulsion days earlier, when the lift generated by hot air had become negligible, but now their engines were silent as they hung in a gravitational no-man's-land. Toller found it eerie that the crews could communicate well with each other simply by shouting—although their voices seemed to be absorbed quickly in the surrounding immensities, they could in fact carry for hundreds of yards. For many minutes he had been busy with the device, invented by Zavotle, which was intended to show up any significant vertical motion of his ship. It consisted of a small pan containing a mixture of chemicals and tallow which gave off thick smoke when ignited, and a bellows-like attachment with a long nozzle. The machine made it possible to shoot out from the side of the ship tiny balls of smoke which retained their form and density for a surprisingly long time in the still air. Zavotle's idea was that the smoke, being no heavier than the surrounding atmosphere, would create stationary markers by which the ship's motion could be gauged. Basic though the system was, it seemed to be effective. Toller had forbidden Essedell and Gotlon to move in case they tilted the circular deck, and he had been sighting the smoke puffs along the line of the handrail for long enough to convince him there was no relative displacement.

"I'd say we're holding," he shouted to Daas, pilot of the second midsection, who had been carrying out similar observations. "What say you?"

"I agree, sir." Daas, barely visible as a swaddled figure at the rail of his ship, waved to supplement his message.

Foreday had just begun and the sun was positioned "below" the six craft, close to the eastern rim of Overland. The upflung brilliance was illuminating the underside of the fortress sections, casting their shadows on the lower halves of the balloons, adding an unnatural and theatrical aspect to the scene. Toller suddenly became aware of a sense of elation as he surveyed the unearthly spectacle. He felt well-rested and strong after the brief hibernation of the ascent, ready to do battle in a new kind of arena, and within him was a peculiar

sensation of such intensity that he was obliged to pause and analyse it.

There seemed to be a core of lightness which had nothing to do with the zero gravity conditions, and from that core came varicoloured rays—the metaphor was too simple, but the only one available to him—characterised by feelings of joy, optimism, luck and potency, which infused every part of his mental and physical being. The overall effect was strange and at the same time oddly familiar, and it took him several seconds to identify it and realise that he felt young. No more than that, and no less—he felt *young!*

An emotional reaction followed almost immediately.

I suppose many would think it strange for happiness to come to a man at a time like this. He relaxed his grip on the handrail slightly, allowing his feet to drift upwards from the deck, and the dreaming disk of Overland, cupped in its slim crescent of brightness, came into view beneath the ship. *This is why Gesalla compared me to Leddravohr. She senses the fulfilment I get when called upon to defend our people, but she is unable to share in it and therefore she becomes jealous. No doubt she is anxious about my safety, and that too prompts her to say things she later regrets in the privacy of the bedchamber...*

"I'm ready to go, sir." Gotlon's voice came from close behind Toller, calling him back into the practical universe. Toller brought his feet down on to the deck and turned to see that the young rigger, without awaiting the order, had donned his full personal flight kit. His lanky form was all but unrecognisable in the thick quilting of a skysuit, which included fur-lined gauntlets and boots. The lower half of his face was hidden by a woollen muffler, through which his breath emerged in white vapourings, and his form was further bulked out by a parachute pack and by the air jet unit strapped to his midriff.

"Shall I go out now, sir?" Gotlon fingered the karabiner on the tether which was keeping him close to the ship's rail. "I'm ready."

"I can see you are, but curb your impatience," Toller said. "There must be a full audience for your exploits."

As well as being ambitious, Gotlon was one of those rare individuals who were totally without fear of heights, and Toller felt lucky to have found him in the short time available. The crews of the six fortress sections had been in the weightless zone long enough to start getting used to floating in the air like ptertha, but a huge psychological barrier had yet to be surmounted.

Final assembly of the fortresses could not begin until it had been demonstrated that a man could untie himself, jump free of his ship and successfully return to it by means of his air jet. Although he had intellectual confidence in the hastily devised system, Toller was unashamedly relieved that he was not required to put it to the initial test. Once in reality, and many times

since in nightmare, he had seen a man begin the 2,500-mile fall from the fringes of the central blue, at first moving so slowly that he seemed to be at rest, and then, as the gravitational yearning of the planet grew more insistent, dwindling and dwindling into the plunge which would last more than a day and end in death.

Toller's lungs were labouring in the rarefied air, and he felt a stinging coldness inside his chest as he shouted the necessary orders to the other five pilots. While all crewmen were lining up at the rails of their ships their eyes were fixed on Gotlon. He waved to them like a child attracting his friend's attention before a daring playground stunt. Toller allowed him the breach of discipline in the interests of general morale.

He scanned the five men in the nearest fortress endsection and with some difficulty, because of the all-enveloping skysuits, picked out Gnapperl, the sergeant who had been so vindictive in the matter of Oaslit Spennel's execution. Now ranked as an ordinary skyman, Gnapperl had not even tried to protest when Toller had selected him for the first mission, and had gone through his few days of training with a gloomy acceptance of his fate. It was not in Toller's nature to engineer another's death in cold blood, but Gnapperl had no way of knowing that and had become a very apprehensive and unhappy man—a state in which Toller was prepared to leave him indefinitely.

"All right," he said to Gotlon when he judged the moment to be right. "You may now part company with us—but be sure to return."

"Thank you, sir," Gotlon replied, with what Toller would have sworn was genuine pleasure and gratitude. He unclipped his line, raised himself by using his wrists until he was floating horizontally, then rolled over the rail and kicked himself clear of the side, using more force than Toller would have done. A bright blue void opened between him and the ship, and from one of the other vessels came the sound of a man quietly retching.

Gotlon slid away towards the stars, cradled in sunlight, gradually slowing as air resistance overcame his momentum, and by chance came to a halt in an upright position relative to those watching. Without pause, he twisted with an eel-like motion until he was facing away from the line of ships, and rapid movements of his right arm showed that he was pumping air into the propulsion unit. A few seconds later the hissing of the jet was faintly heard. At first it seemed to be having no effect, then it became apparent that he was indeed returning to his point of departure. His course was not perfectly true, and several times he had to glance back over his shoulder and adjust the direction of his air jet, but in a short time he was close enough to the ship to grasp the cane which Essedell was extending to him. Bracing his feet against the side, Essedell pulled

on the cane and Gotlon came zooming in over the side like a man-shaped balloon.

"Well done, Gotlon!" Toller reached out casually with his right hand to arrest the weightless figure, and was surprised to find his arm painfully driven back beyond its normal traverse. The impact spun him round, still clutching Gotlon, and it was several seconds before the two men were able to stabilise themselves by gripping partitions. Toller was puzzled over what had happened, but the mystery was displaced from his thoughts by an outbreak of cheering and shouting from the crews of the other ships.

Toller had to acknowledge his own feelings of relief and reassurance. It was one thing to sit in a comfortable room in the palace and accept the pronouncements of clever men on the subject of celestial mechanics; but it was a different order of experience entirely to cast free of a ship and tread the thin air of the weightless zone, precariously balanced between two worlds, trusting one's life to little more than a set of blacksmith's bellows. But now he had seen it done! Having been performed once, the miracle was no longer a miracle. It had become part of the skyman's armoury of routine skills—and, importantly, had helped ease Toller's mind with regard to the ordeal which awaited him at the end of the mission.

He gave the order for all personnel to begin practising free flight. The period he could allow for the crews to adapt to the supremely unnatural activity was ridiculously short—but King Chakkell, with Zavotle's concurrence, had decided that time was the most vital factor in the preparations for the battle against Land. The small emergency cabinet had chosen to gear the war effort to meet the most unfavourable case: ten days for the reconnaissance ship to return to Land; two days for Rassamarden to react to the news it was carrying; and, on the assumption that part of his invasion fleet was already operational, a further five days for the vanguard of the enemy to reach the weightless zone.

Seventeen days.

By the end of that time, ran Chakkell's decree, there must be a minimum of six fortresses positioned at the midpoint and ready for combat.

Toller had been stunned by the announcement. The whole concept of fortresses had been presumptuous enough, but the notion of designing, building and deploying six of them in a mere seventeen days had struck him as being absurd in the extreme. He had, however, forgotten about Chakkell's unique combination of abilities—the ambition which had raised him to the throne, the gift for organisation with which he had once assembled a thousand-strong fleet of skyships, the ruthless determination which hurled aside or burst through every obstacle. Chakkell was an able ruler in years of peace, but he only came into his

own during darker hours, and his fortresses were being built on time. It now remained to be seen whether the flesh-and-blood elements of his plan could withstand the same punishing degree of stress as those fashioned from inert matter.

Toller was highly conscious of others watching when it became his turn to push himself out from the side of the ship. He did his utmost to maintain an upright attitude with regard to the balloon and its cylindrical load, and was beginning to think he had succeeded when he realised that the great blue-and-white whorled disk of Land—which had been hidden by the balloon since the start of the ascent—appeared to be on the move above him. It drifted downwards and disappeared under his feet, to be followed by a remarkably similar apparition of Overland partaking in the same stately motion. There was no sensation of tumbling—he seemed to be the only stable object in a rolling universe in which the sun, the sister planets and the line of skyships followed each other in wavering succession—and he was grateful when the movement eventually slowed and ceased. He was also glad to discover that the experience of hanging in the blue emptiness was not as bad as he had feared. Apart from the inexplicable sensation of falling, which troubled all who entered the weightless zone, he felt reasonably secure and capable of functioning.

"Anybody who feels like grinning at my acrobatics should get it over with now," he shouted to the silently watching men. "The serious work begins in a few minutes, and there will be little cause for mirth, I can assure you."

There was appreciative laughter from the crews and renewed activity among the bulkily suited figures as they made their sorties with varying degrees of aptitude. Toller quickly realised that his own initial efforts were not as good as those of young Gotlon, but he persevered with the air jet and picked up the knack of propelling himself with fair accuracy to any point he wished to reach. The skill would have been easier to acquire had the exhaust been on his back, thus enabling him to face forward when in motion, but lack of time had forced the Air Service workshop to produce the simplest possible type of unit.

As soon as Toller was satisfied with his own competence he called the five other pilots to him for a final review of the forthcoming assembly procedure.

The conference was the strangest in which he had ever taken part, with six middle-aged men—all veterans of the Migration—hanging in a circle against a panoply of astronomical features, among which meteors continually darted like burning arrows. Three of the pilots—Daas, Hishkell and Umol—had been known to Toller since his days in the old Skyship Experimental Squadron, and he had relied upon their recommendations to a large extent when recruiting the remaining pair, Phamarge and Brinche.

"First of all, gentlemen," he said, "have we learned anything new? Anything which in your opinion affects the plan for building the fortresses?"

"Only that we should do it as fast as possible, Toller," Umol replied, using permitted familiarity. "I swear this cursed place is colder than the last time I was passing by. Look at this!" He pulled down his muffler to reveal a nose that was distinctly blue.

"The place is the same as ever, old hand," Daas told him. "Your trouble is you no longer have any fire in your balls."

"Did I say gentlemen?" Toller cut in, quelling Umol's obscene response. "*Children*, we have work to do, and nobody wants our task completed faster than I, so let us make sure we know what we are undertaking."

He spoke mildly, knowing from the little he could see of their faces that his companions were pleased with the success of the air jets and that their confidence in the project had increased accordingly. For the next few minutes he rehearsed the sequential stages of the assembly plan in detail. The first step was to rotate the six ships through ninety degrees to bring the fortress sections into their operational attitudes, with their lateral portholes facing both planets. It would then be necessary to unclamp the false decks and fire short bursts on the jets to drive the balloons, still trailing the decks, a short distance away from the circular sections. Once the sections were floating free they could then be linked with ropes, drawn together and sealed to form two cylinders with closed ends.

At that point the work force was scheduled to split into two separate groups.

Those whose duty it was to man the fortresses would go inside them and prepare for their lengthy stay in the weightless zone. Meanwhile, the six pilots—each accompanied by a rigger—would begin returning the precious balloons and engines to Overland for use in further missions. The early stages of the descent were straightforward enough and caused no forebodings among the experienced pilots. It was a matter of rotating the stripped-down craft through a further ninety degrees, and—using the engines in the thrust mode—driving them a short distance into Overland's gravitational field. The ships would be travelling upside down, something no commander liked doing, but that phase would last only a few hours, until they had regained enough weight to give them the balloonist's much-cherished pendulum stability for the descent. A final rotation through half-a-circle would normalise the ships' attitudes, putting Overland in its rightful place beneath the crews' feet, where it would remain for the rest of the journey home.

So far the flight plan and its techniques were conventional—something which any surviving pilot from the Migration could have outlined in seconds—but the strictures of the crisis situation had yet to be applied. Toller could remember,

with diamond clarity, all the relevant words from that first meeting with Chakkell and Zavotle, the words which told him that the sky and he had not yet tested each other to the limit...

"The descent is going to be the worst part," Toller said. "Quite apart from the cold—which will be severe—the men are going to be sitting on an open platform, with thousands of miles of empty air beneath them. Just think of it! Trip on a rope and over the edge you go! It was bad enough in the old-style gondolas, but there you at least had the sidewalls to give you some sense of security. I don't like it, liven—five days of that sort of thing would be a bit too much for any man. I think we..." He stopped speaking, surprised, as he saw that Zavotle was nodding his head in evident agreement.

"You're absolutely right, quite apart from the fact that we simply cannot allow five days for the return," Zavotle said. "We shall need you and the other pilots back on the ground again much sooner than that, to say nothing of the balloons and engine cores."

"So...?"

Zavotle gave him a calm smile. "I suppose you have heard of parachutes?"

"Of course I've heard of parachutes," Toller said impatiently. "The Air Service has been using them for at least ten years. What are you getting at?"

"The men must return by parachute."

"Wonderful idea!" Toller clapped a hand to his forehead in case his sarcasm had not been noticed. "But—correct me if I'm wrong—does a man with a parachute not descend at roughly the same speed as a skyship?"

Zavotle's smile became even more peaceful. "Only if the parachute has been opened."

"Only if..." Toller walked around the small room, staring down at the floor, and returned to his chair. "Yes, I see what you mean. Obviously we can save some time if a man doesn't deploy his parachute until he is well into the fall. At what height *should* he open it?"

"How about, say, one thousand feet?"

"No!" Toller's reaction was immediate and instinctive. "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

Toller stared hard at Zavotle's face, reading the familiar features in an unfamiliar way. "You remember the first time we entered the central blue, liven. The accident. We both looked over the side and watched Flenn being taken away from us. He fell more than a *day*!"

"He didn't have a parachute."

"But he fell for *more than a day*!" Toller pleaded, appalled at what the

intervening years had done to Zavotle. "It's too much to expect."

"What's the matter with you, Maraquine?" King Chakkell put in, his broad brown face showing exasperation. "The end result is the same whether a man falls for a day or a single minute—if he has no parachute he dies, and if he has a parachute he lives."

"Majesty, would *you* like to take that drop?"

Chakkell gazed back at Toller in simple bafflement. "Where's the relevance in your question?"

Unexpectedly, it was Zavotle who chose to reply. "Majesty, Lord Toller has practical cause for concern. We have no idea of the effects such a fall might have on a man. He might freeze to death ... or asphyxiate... Or there may be ill effects of a different ilk—a pilot who was physically sound but insane would be of scant value to you." Zavotle paused, his pencil tracing a strange design on the paper before him. "I suggest that, as I was the one who proposed the scheme, I should be among those who put it to the test."

You had me fooled, you little weasel, Toller thought, listening to his former crewmate with a resurgence of his affection and respect. *And, just for that, I will ensure that you remain where you belong—right here on the ground.*

In general, there was little difference in outlook between the men who had volunteered for the mission and those who had simply been told they were taking part. Both groups understood very well that defying the King's will in a time of war would result in summary execution, and some of the volunteers had simply been making a virtue out of necessity, but confirmation of the fact that they could fly independently of the ships and come to no harm had boosted the general morale. If we have not died thus far, the reasoning had been, perhaps there is no reason for us to die at all. The outward sign of that optimism had been the shouting with which the men filled the sky as they developed their new skills and prepared for the next phase of the undertaking.

But now, Toller noticed, they had again fallen silent.

The last of the balloons had been separated from its fortress section, and—burdened with only its circular false deck and engine unit—had retreated a short distance from the centre of activity. Insubstantial though they were, the sheer hugeness of the gas-filled envelopes had made them dominant features of the aerial environment. In the mind they were vast friendly entities with the power to transport humans safely from world to world—and now, suddenly, they were withdrawing their patronage, abandoning their minuscule dependants in the hostile blue emptiness.

Even Toller, committed to the enterprise as he was, felt an icy slithering in

his gut as he took note of how *small* the unsupported fortress sections looked against the misted infinities all around. Until that point it had seemed to him that the worst thing a man could be called upon to do was to take the long drop to the planetary surface, but he now felt almost privileged in comparison to those who would remain in the weightless zone. Privileged, yet in another way—and the realisation jolted him—oddly cheated.

What is happening to me? he thought, becoming alarmed. He had rarely given himself over to introspection, considering it a waste of time, but recently his emotional reactions to events had been so laden with ambivalence and contradiction that his mind had been obliged to turn inwards. And here was another example. In one instant he had pitied the fortress crews—and in the next he had come close to envying them! Few people knew better than he how illusory was the concept of military glory, therefore he could not have been seduced by his fleeting vision of a new breed of patriots, ultimate heroes, manning their fragile wooden outposts in the lonely reaches of the sky.

What is happening to me? he again demanded of himself. *Why am I no longer satisfied by what satisfied me once? Why, unless I am deranged, do I press forward where any reasonable man would retreat?*

Realisation that he was neglecting his duties prompted Toller to end the self-interrogation and propel himself closer to the first fortress under assembly. The midsection and one endsection had been successfully aligned and brought together, and now the remaining component was about to be drawn into place. It had been deposited rather a long way from its companions, giving the men who were hauling on the link ropes time to develop a fast and effective rhythm. Clinging to the sides of the midsection, four of them were working in unison with their free arms. The endsection, which had been sluggish at first, was now moving at a good speed and showed no signs of slowing down as it neared its assigned place. Toller knew it had no weight and therefore could cause no damage by colliding with the rest of the fortress, but on principle he disliked the use of excessive force in any engineering operation. He could foresee the section rebounding and having to be drawn in again.

"Stop hauling—it's coming in too fast," he shouted to the men on the link ropes. "Get ready to grip it and hold it in place."

The men acknowledged his command with waves and made ready to receive the advancing cylinder. Phamarge, who had been overseeing the task, signalled for another two men who were holding on to the short lashing ropes of the midsection rim to assist their comrades. One of them pulled himself against the leather-covered rim and locked himself in place by clamping his thighs around it.

Toller watched the endsection close in on the waiting man. The wooden structure was losing very little speed and was easily compacting the stout ropes in its path—all of which, Toller thought, was rather strange for an object which was as weightless as a feather. Alarm geysered through his system as he recalled a similar anomaly at the end of Gotlon's first personal flight—the weightless man had delivered a surprisingly powerful impact, almost as though...

"Get off the rim!" Toller bellowed. "Get clear!"

The suited man turned towards him, but made no other movement. There was a frozen instant in which Toller recognised the rough-hewn features of Gnapperl, then the endsection drove against the remainder of the fortress. Gnapperl screamed as his thigh-bone snapped. The entire fortress bucked, dislodging men from its sides, and the endsection—still squandering kinetic energy—slewed a little and partially entered the main structure. Two opposing lengths of rim scissored across Gnapperl's body for a moment, ending his screams, before the fortress sections drifted apart and came to rest.

Toller reflexively triggered his air jet and only succeeded in pushing himself farther away from the scene. He twisted around, pumping more air into the unit, and propelled himself backwards into the confusion of drifting figures. Colliding gently with the midsection, he grasped a lashing point to steady himself and looked at the injured man. Gnapperl was drifting free of the fortress, arms and legs spread, and there was a long rent across the front of his skysuit. Blood had soaked into the exposed insulation, making the tear resemble a dreadful wound, and bright red globules were floating in a swarm around him, glistening in the sunlight. Toller was left with no doubt that Gnapperl was dead.

"Why didn't the fool get out of the way when you told him?" Umol said, using a rope to draw himself closer to Toller.

"Who's to say?" Toller thought of the dead man's odd moment of paralysis before the impact, and wondered if Gnapperl would have been so slow to react had the warning come from anybody else. It could be that his mistrust of Toller had been responsible for his death, in which case Toller also bore responsibility.

"He was a down-looking brute, anyway," Umol commented. "If any of us had to go, he's the one I would have picked—and at least he taught us something useful."

"What?"

"That something which can crush a man on the ground can crush him up here. It doesn't seem to matter that nothing has any weight. Can you understand it, Toller?"

Toller wrenched his thoughts from morality to physics. "Perhaps being totally weightless affects our bodies. It's something we ought to be careful about in the

future."

"Yes, and meanwhile there's a carcass to be disposed of. I suppose we could just leave it be."

"No," Toller said immediately. "We'll take him back to Overland when we go."

Upside down, the six ships had travelled all through the hours of darkness. In addition to the speed imparted by their jets, there had been a slight gain as Overland tightened her gravitational web, but the acceleration had been negligible so early in the descent. And as soon as daylight had returned—with Overland's binary dance swinging her clear of the sun—the engines had been shut down and air resistance had brought the vessels to a halt. The pilots had then used the tiny lateral jets to turn the ships over, an operation conducted in majestic slowness, with the universe and all the stars it contained wheeling at the behest of six ordinary men, and the sun obediently sinking to a new position beneath their feet.

The manoeuvre had been completed without mishap, and now it was time to do things which had never been done before.

Toller was strapped into the pilot's seat, with Tipp Gotlon near to him on the other side of the engine unit. The false deck on which they were sitting was a circular wooden platform, only four good paces across, and beyond its unguarded rim was a yawning emptiness, a drop of more than two thousand miles to the planetary surface. At varying distances the five other skyships were suspended in the void against the complex blue-and-silver background of the heavens. Their two-man crews, because they were in the cylindrical shadows of the decks, were only visible where silhouetted against glowing spirals or the splayed radiance of comets. The huge balloons, brilliantly illuminated on their undersides, had the apparent solidity of planets, pear-shaped worlds with meridians marked by load tapes and lines of stitching.

Toller was concerned less with the unearthly ambience than with the demands of his own microcosm. The deck space was occupied by a clutter of equipment and stores, from the pipe runs of the lateral jets to the lockers used for the storage of power crystals, food, water, skysuits and fallbags. Waist-high partitions of woven cane enclosed the primitive toilet and galley. From the latter protruded the lower part of Gnapperl's body, which had been lashed in place to forestall its unnerving tendency to rise up and meander in weightless conditions.

"Well, young Gotlon, this is where we part company," Toller said. "How do you feel about that?"

"Ready when you are, sir." Gotlon gave his centrally divided smile. "As you

know, sir, it is my ambition to become a pilot, and I would be honoured if you would allow me to pull the rip line."

"Honoured? Tell me, Gotlon—are you enjoying this?"

"Of course, sir." Gotlon paused while an unusually large meteor burned across the sky below the ship, followed by a sonorous clap of thunder. "Well, perhaps it would be wrong to say I'm enjoying it, but I have no wish to do anything else."

A *fair answer*. Toller thought, resolving to keep an eye on the youngster's future progress. "All right, pull the line when you're ready."

Without hesitation Gotlon leaned forward, grasped the red line which ran down to the crew stations from the balloon's interior, and tugged hard on it. The line went slack in his hand. There was no perceptible change in the ship's equilibrium or dynamics, but high in the flimsy cathedral dome of the balloon something irrevocable had happened. A large panel had been torn out of the crown, surrendering the ship to the forces of Overland's gravity. From that moment onwards the ship and its crew could do nothing but fall, and yet Toller felt a strange timidity over the next inevitable step.

"I see no point in sitting around here," he said, taking no chances on having his feelings observed. His feet were already tucked inside his fallbag, which was a fleece-lined sack large enough to enclose his entire body. He unfastened his restraints, straightened up, and in the act of doing so noticed his sword, which was still tied by its scabbard belt to a nearby stanchion. For an instant he considered letting it remain. It was an inconvenient and incongruous article to be taken into the confines of the bag, but leaving it behind would have been like abandoning an old friend. He strapped the weapon to his side and looked up in time to see Gotlon—still smiling!—launch himself backwards from the edge of the deck.

Gotlon tumbled away into the sterile blue, sunlight glancing unevenly from the underside of his cocooned form until he came to rest some thirty yards from the ship. He made no attempt to modify his final attitude, and could have been thought lifeless but for the transient feathering of his breath.

Toller looked towards the sister ships and saw that other men, following Gotlon's example, were venturing into the thin air. It had been decided in advance that there would be no synchronisation—individuals would jump when they were ready—and suddenly he had a fear of being last, and being seen to be last, which outweighed his reluctance to perform the supremely unnatural act. Toller drew the fallbag up to his chest, pushed hard with his feet and sailed face downwards over the rim of the deck.

Overland slid into view beneath him, and they were face to face like lovers,

and she was calling to him from thousands of miles below. Little was visible in the gibbosity where night still reigned, but in the sunlit crescent the equatorial continent could be seen to span the world, pale green powdered with ochres beneath trceries of white cloud, and the great oceans curved away to the mysterious watery poles.

Toller surveyed the entire hemisphere for a short time, chastened and subdued, then drew up his knees to make himself smaller and closed the neck of the fallbag over his head.

I did not expect to sleep.

Who would have thought that a man could sleep during the dizzy plunge from the central blue to the surface of the world?

But it's warm and dark in here, and the hours pass slowly. And as my speed gradually increases and the atmosphere grows thicker, I can feel the bag beginning to rock and sway, and there is a hypnotic quality to the souging of the air as it rushes by. It is easy to sleep. Almost too easy, in fact. The thought has crossed my mind that some of us may not awaken in time to get out of the bags and deploy our parachutes, but surely that is a ridiculous notion. Only a man with a deep inner urge to end his life could fail to be ready when the time comes.

Sometimes I open the bag and look out to see how my companions are faring, but it is becoming impossible to find them, whether above or below me. We are falling at slightly different rates, and as the hours go by we are being strung out in a long vertical line. It is noteworthy that we are all falling faster than the ships—something which had not been predicted. The false decks, being symmetrically attached to the balloons, are trying to maintain a horizontal attitude even though the balloons have collapsed and are being dragged along in their wakes, thus creating greater air resistance.

As we left the ships behind I noticed the decks oscillating in the air stream, and the last time I picked them out they were like six slow-winking stars. I must relate all this to Zavotle and see if he wants to redesign the attachments so that the decks can fall edge-on. The ships would descend faster that way. The impact with the ground would be worse, but the engine cores are indestructible.

Sometimes I think about the men we left up there in the weightless zone, and have found genuine cause to envy them. They at least have something to do! An abundance of tasks to perform ... the sealing of the fortresses with mastic ... the hourly smoke readings to warn of drifting ... the setting up of the pressurisation bellows ... the preparation of the first meals ... the checking of engines and armaments ... the establishment of watch rotas...

*The fallbag rocks gently, and the air whispers persuasively all around.
It is too easy to fall asleep in here...*

Chapter 7

"Gold! You have the gall to offer me gold!" Ragg Artoonl, infuriated, slapped the leather bag away with a calloused hand. It fell to the ground and partially opened, allowing a few squares of stamped yellow metal to spill into the wet grass.

"You're just as barmy as everybody says!" Lue Klo dropped to his knees and carefully retrieved his money. "Do you want to sell your section, or do you not?"

"I want to sell it all right—but I want *real* money. Good old-fashioned glass, that's what I want." Artoonl rubbed the thumb of one hand against the palm of the other, mimicking the counting of traditional Kolcorronian woven glass currency notes. "Glass!"

"It all bears the King's likeness," Klo protested.

"I want to *spend* the stuff—not hang it on a wall." Artoonl glowered around the small group of farmers. "Who has real money?"

"I have." Narbane Ellder sidled to the fore, fumbling in his pouch. "I've got two thousand royals here."

"I'll take it! The section is yours, and may you have better luck with it than I did." Artoonl was extending his hand for the money when Bartan Drumme stepped in between the two men and pushed them apart with a force he would have been unable to exert when he first turned to farming.

"What's the matter with you, Ragg Artoonl?" he said. "You can't sell off your land for a fraction of what it's worth."

"He can do as he pleases," the thwarted Ellder cut in, brandishing his wad of coloured squares.

"And I'm surprised at *you*" Bartan said to him, tapping him on the chest with an accusing finger. "Taking advantage of your neighbour when his mind is disturbed. What would Jop say about that? What would he say about this meeting?" Bartan glanced a challenge around the group of men who had come together in a tree-fringed hollow which offered some protection from the weather. A heavy belt of rain was drifting across the area, and the farmers in their sack-like hoods looked sullen and oddly furtive with their hunched shoulders and dripping features.

"There's nothing wrong with my mind." Artoonl stared resentfully at Bartan

for a moment, then his face darkened even further as a new thought occurred to him. "This is all *your* fault, anyway. It was *you* who brought us to this place of misery."

"I'm sorry about what happened to your sister," Bartan said. "It was a terrible thing, but you have got to think straight about it and realise it's no reason to give up all you have worked for."

"Who are you to tell me what I can and cannot do?" Artoonl's flushed face expressed the kind of mistrust and hostility Bartan had encountered on first entering the commune. "What do you know about the land anyway, Mister Bead-stringer, Mister Brooch-mender?"

"I know Lue wouldn't be offering to buy your section unless he thought it worth his while. He's taking advantage of you."

"Watch your tongue," Ellder said, stepping closer to Bartan with his stubbled jaw thrust forward. "I grow more than a little weary of you, Mister—" he sought a fresh insult, eyes narrowing under the mental strain, and finally was obliged to copy Artoonl—"Bead-stringer."

Bartan looked around the group of cowed figures, assessing the general mood, and was both shocked and saddened to realise there was a genuine possibility of violence towards him if he remained. It was another indication, contrary to all his own arguments, that the farmers had indeed degenerated since occupying the Haunt. In the year that had passed since his marriage to Sondeweere he had seen their old spirit of camaraderie eroded and replaced by a mean competitiveness, with the largest and most successful families begrudging help to their neighbours. Jop Trinchil's mandate had been totally withdrawn from him, and—coincidentally—the loss of his authority had been accompanied by a spiritual and physical diminution. Shrunken and ill-looking, no longer able to exert a cohesive force on his flock, he was rarely seen outside the boundaries of his own family's section. Bartan had never expected to miss the old Trinchil, with his crassness and bullying ways, but the commune seemed to have lost direction without him.

"I am no longer a bead-stringer," Bartan said stiffly to the rainswept assembly. "More's the pity—because with my finest needle and thread I might have fashioned a slim necklace from all your brains. A *very* slim necklace."

His words drew an angry response from perhaps twenty throats. The sound was formless and blurred, like a conflict of sea waves in a narrow inlet, and yet by a trick of selective perception Bartan was able, or thought he was able, to isolate a single sentence: *The fool would be better employed making a chastity belt.*

"Who said that?" he shouted, almost reaching for the sword he had never

worn.

The shadowed archways of several hoods turned towards each other and back to Bartan. "Who said what?" a man asked in tones of gleeful reasonableness.

"Does young Glave Trinchil still lend a hand with your chores?" another said. "If his strength ever fails I'll be willing to take his place—I've been known to plough an excellent furrow in my day."

Bartan came close to running forward and throwing himself at the last speaker, but commonsense and prudence held him in check. The peasants had won again, as they always did, because a dozen cudgels would always overcome one verbal smallsword. The same coarse clichés were ever cherished by them as something entirely original and precious, and thus their ignorance became their armour.

"I hope you will not be too distraught if I withdraw, gentlemen." He paused, hoping the sexual innuendo might have eased some tensions, but it had gone unnoticed. "I have business at the markets."

"I'll travel with you, if that's all right," Orice Shome said, falling in at Bartan's side as he walked away from the group. Shome was an itinerant labourer, one of the few who had recently been hired by members of the commune. He was a slightly wild-eyed young man, with most of one ear missing, but Bartan had heard no bad reports of him and was prepared to accept his company.

"Join me if you wish," Bartan said, "but doesn't Alrahen expect you to be at work?"

Shome held up a small kitbag. "I'm on the road again. Don't want to stay around here."

"I see." Bartan pulled his oilcloth hood closer around his shoulders and climbed up to the driving seat of his wagon. The warm rain was still coming down hard, but above the western horizon was a band of pale yellow which was growing wider by the minute, and he knew the weather would soon improve. Shome sat on the bench beside him, Bartan twitched the reins and his bluehorn moved off, its rain-slicked haunches rising and descending in a steady rhythm. Inexplicably, Bartan found himself dwelling on the taunts about his wife, and to redirect his thoughts he decided to strike up a conversation with his passenger.

"You weren't with Alrahen for long," he said. "Was he not a good employer?"

"I've had worse. It's the place I don't like. I'm leaving because there's something not right about the place."

"Not another scare-monger!" Bartan gave Shome a critical glance. "You don't look like a man who'd be given over to wild imaginings."

"Imaginings can be a lot worse than anything that comes at you from outside. That's probably why Artoonl's sister killed herself. And I heard that boy of hers

didn't just disappear—I heard she slew him and buried the body."

Bartan became angry. "You seem to have heard a lot—for somebody with only one ear."

"There»'s no need to get touchy," Shome said, fingering the remnant of his ear.

"I'm sorry," Bartan said. "It's just that all this talk of... Tell me, where are you bound for next?"

"I'm not sure. Had enough of breaking my back to make other men rich, and that's the truth," Shome replied, staring straight ahead. "Might try to make it as far as Prad. Work is plentiful there—clean, soft work, I mean—because of the war. Trouble is, Prad's so far away. You'd need an..." Shome looked at Bartan with fresh interest. "Aren't you the one who has his own airship?"

"It's laid up," Bartan said, seizing on the mention of the war. "What news have you? Do the invaders still persist?"

"They persist, all right—but always they are repelled."

In Bartan's experience itinerant workers did not identify themselves with national objectives, but there was an unmistakable note of pride in Shome's voice.

"It's a strange war, all the same," Bartan said. "No armies, no battlefields..."

"Don't know about there being no battlefield. I heard the skymen sit astride jet tubes as if they were mounted on bluehorns, and they fly out miles from their fortresses. And there aren't any balloons—no balloons anywhere—nothing to keep you from falling to earth." Shome gave a noisy shudder. "Glad I'm not up there—a man could get himself killed up there."

Bartan nodded. "That's why kings no longer lead their armies into battle."

"Lord Toller doesn't hold with that. You've heard of Lord Toller Maraquine, haven't you?"

Bartan associated the name with the far-off events of the Migration, and was mildly surprised to hear that such an historic figure was still active. "We're not completely cut off from civilisation, you know."

"They say Lord Toller has spent more time up there, fighting the pestilent Landers, than any other man alive." Speaking with patriotic fervour, Shome launched into a series of anecdotes—some of which had to be fanciful—about the heroic exploits of Lord Toller Maraquine in the interplanetary war. At times his voice thickened and shook with emotion, suggesting that he was acting out the tales in his imagination with himself as the central figure, and Bartan's attention began to stray back to the jibes aimed at him by his former friends.

He knew better than to give any credence to the uninspired ritual insults, and yet he could wish that the name of Glave Trinchil had not been used. Glave was

one of the few who still came to the farm and helped when there was heavy work to be done, but—the thought slid into Bartan's consciousness like the tip of a poniard—he usually visited when Sondeweere was alone. Bartan thrust the notion away, but into his mind there crept the image of an event he had all but forgotten—Sondeweere and Glave by the side of the Trinchil wagon when they had believed themselves to be unobserved, the moment of intimacy which had taken neither by surprise.

Why am I suddenly doubting my wife? Bartan thought. *What is doing this thing to me? I know that I cannot have been wrong about Sondeweere. And, while conceding that other men have been blinded by love, I know that I am too clever, too world-wise to be duped in that particular manner by a farm girl. Let the bumpkins jeer to their hearts' content—I will never let them influence me in any way.*

The rain was easing off and the well-defined edge of the cloud shield was now directly overhead, creating a feeling that the wagon was emerging into sunlight from the shade of a vast building. A short distance ahead the track on which they were travelling intersected a wider track, where Bartan would have to turn west for New Minnett. Water-filled ruts reflected the clear sky like polished metal rails.

Feeling oddly guilty, Bartan turned to Shome and said, "My apologies for this, but I have decided against attending the markets today. It's a long way for you to go on foot, but..."

"Think nothing of it," Shome said with a fatalistic shrug. "I have already walked halfway around this planet, and I dare say I can manage the rest."

He shouldered his bag, jumped down from the wagon at the intersection and set off towards New Minnett at a good pace, pausing only to wave goodbye. Bartan returned the farewell and directed the bluehorn east towards his own section.

His feeling of guilt increased as he admitted to himself that he was laying a trap for Sondeweere. She would not be expecting him until close to nightfall, and the trip to town had been arranged days in advance, giving her ample time in which to make all her arrangements with Glave. Self-reproach mingled with self-disgust and a curious kind of excitement as he bent his mind to a new kind of problem. If he did espy Glave's bluehorn from afar, tethered by the farmhouse, could he be underhanded enough to halt the noisy wagon and move in silently on foot? And if he were to find the couple in bed—what then? A year's unrelenting toil had clothed Bartan's frame in hard muscle, but he was still a lightweight compared to Glave and had little experience of fighting.

This is terrible, he thought in a crossplay of emotion. *All I want out of life is*

to find my wife alone, working contentedly in our home. Why take the risk of losing what happiness I have? Why not turn back, catch up on Shome, and go on to the markets as planned? I could sit down with the old crowd and get merry on brown ale and forget all this...

The landscape ahead of Bartan was becoming obscured by refractive peach-and-silver mists as the fallen rain was lured back into the aerial element by the sun, and in the centre of his field of view there had appeared a wavering dark mote which seemed to change shape every few seconds. As he watched, the mote assumed a definite form, resolving itself into a rider approaching at considerable speed.

Bartan knew, long before proper identification was possible, that the rider was Glave Trinchil, and again there was a clash of emotions—simultaneous relief and disappointment over the fact that a confrontation was ruled out. This far from the farm Glave could claim that he was coming from any one of a number of places, and in all fairness there could be no justification for openly disbelieving him. With that analysis of the situation in mind, Bartan expected Glave to pass him with a casual greeting, and he was taken aback when the younger man began waving to him while still some way off, obviously preparing to stop and talk. Bartan's heart quickened with alarm as he saw that Glave was in a state of agitation. Could there have been an accident at the farm?

"Bartan! Bartan!" Glave reined his bluehorn to a halt beside the wagon. "I'm glad to see you—Sondy said you had gone to town."

"She said that, did she?" Bartan replied coldly, unable to shape a more appropriate response. "So you've been paying her another of your conveniently timed visits."

The imputation seemed to pass Glave by. His broad, artless face looked troubled, but Bartan could detect no hint of shiftiness or defiance which might have sprung from guilt.

"Go to her without delay," Glave said. "She has need of you."

Bartan swore at himself for having continued nursing his petty suspicions when it was becoming obvious that something serious had happened to Sondeweere. "What's wrong with her?"

"I truly do not know, Bartan. I called at the farm just to be neighbourly, just to see if there was any heavy work to be done..." Even though overwrought, Glave had to direct a satisfied glance at his well-muscle arms. "Sondy told me there was a tree to be uprooted. You know the one—where you want to plant the wirebeans and—"

"Yes, yes! What happened to my wife?"

"Well, I fetched a spade and an axe and set about the roots. It was hot work,

in spite of the rain, and I was pleased when I saw Sondy coming down from the house with a pitcher of smallbeer. At least, I think it was smallbeer—I never got to drink any. She wasn't more than a dozen paces away from me when she gave a sort of a gasp and let the pitcher fall and sat down in the grass. She was holding her ankle. I was fearful she had done herself a mischief, so I went to her. She looked up at me, Bartan, and she gave a terrible scream, but the worst thing about it was ... was..." Glave's voice faded and he stared at Bartan in perplexity, as though wondering who he might be.

"Glave!"

"It was a terrible scream. Bartan, but the worst thing about it was that her mouth was shut. I was looking straight into Sondy's face, and I could hear her screaming, but her mouth was tight shut. It fair made my blood run cold."

Bartan shifted his grip on the reins preparatory to moving off. "What you're saying doesn't make sense. All right, Sondeweere was moaning! Is that all there was to it? *Had* she turned her ankle? What did she say?"

Glave shook his head, slowly and pensively. "She does not say anything."

"She *doesn't* say anything! What way is that to...?" Bartan began to feel a new kind of alarm. "She can still speak, can't she?"

"I don't know, Bartan," Glave said simply. "You should go to her. I stayed as long as I could, but there was nothing I could do. Nothing I could think of..."

His remaining words were lost in the clatter of hooves and equipage as Bartan sent the wagon forward. He goaded the bluehorn up to the best speed that could be achieved on the uneven track, enduring the discomfort of sliding and bouncing on the unpadded seat. The bright mist had now blanked out the horizon and reduced his range of vision so much that he seemed to be travelling at the centre of a bell-shaped dome in whose sides faint pastel colours swirled all the way up to the sun. A short time later the vapours began to boil off, the sky became a milky blue and Bartan saw his own farm in the distance, gleaming, created anew out of rain and mist. By the time he reached it the sky was returning to its normal intense shade of blue and the daytime stars were reappearing.

He brought the wagon to a standstill, jumped down and ran into the house. There was no reply when he called Sondeweere's name, and a rapid search in which he threw himself from room to room established that she had to be out of doors. The first place he could think of looking was by the tree which Glave had mentioned, though it would be odd if she had lingered there so long—unless she had been overtaken by serious illness. Why had the oafish Glave not escorted her back to the house instead of fleeing as if he had seen an apparition?

Bartan left the building, sprinted past the sty which housed his modest stock

of pigs, and went to the top of the grassy knoll which blocked the view to the east. He saw Sondeweere at once. She was sitting in the grass near the tree where Glave claimed to have been working, and she was still wearing her pale green oilskin cape. He shouted out to her, but she made no response of any kind. She remained completely motionless as he walked down the gentle slope, and his fears for her increased with every step he took. What manner of illness or disability would induce a person to sit for so long, head bowed, apparently oblivious to everything? Could she be fevered, or semi-conscious, or ... dead?

When he was about six paces away from his wife he halted, overcome by a strange timidity, and whispered, "Sondeweere, dear one, are you well?"

She raised her head and a pang of relief went through him as he saw that she was smiling. She gazed at him for a few seconds—smile unchanging, no welcome in her eyes—then lowered her head again, obviously studying something on the ground in front of her.

"Don't play games with me, Sondy." Bartan stooped and went closer, and was reaching out to touch Sondeweere's hair when his eyes abruptly focused on what she was watching. Only a hands-breadth away from her crossed ankles were two small multi-legged creatures, seemingly locked in combat. Their articulated, crescent-shaped bodies were longer than a finger and dark brown on top, pale grey on the underside. They were unlike any other crawling thing he had ever seen in that each sprouted a single thick feeler from just below the head. He was already recoiling in disgust when his eyes began to sort out and comprehend the profuse tangle of legs, eye-stalks and antennae. The creatures had bound themselves together by their central feelers and were engaged in copulation, not combat ... and... There was only one head to be seen. The female had eaten off her partner's head, and was gorging herself on the pale ichors oozing from his thorax, and all the while—quite undaunted, rhythm unaltered—his body went on with its ecstatic thrusting and jabbing into her greedy abdomen.

Bartan's reaction was immediate and totally instinctive. He straightened up and smashed his boot down on the writhing obscenity he had witnessed. Sondeweere was on her feet in the same instant, screaming in a way that hurt his brain. Bartan gazed at her, afraid... *How can she make a sound like that without opening her mouth?* ... then caught her as she toppled towards him in a faint.

"Sondeweere! Sondy!" He inexpertly massaged her throat and cheek, trying to restore consciousness, but her head lolled in the crook of his arm and her eyes glimmered white beneath the lids. He gathered up her limp body and began walking back to the house, his mind overloaded with worries and fears.

A short distance along the faint path he saw a movement on the ground, a brown glistening, and knew at once that it was another of the ugly crawlers. The

sight added to his forebodings—he had never seen any of the creatures before, nor had he heard them described, but now they were beginning to abound. He altered his stride slightly so that his boot came down squarely on the crawler, crunching it into the soil.

Sondeweere stirred in his arms and, as though emanating from the far end of a mile-long corridor, there came a whispering version of her unnatural scream.

Twice more on the way to the house he encountered one of the nameless creatures, labouring towards him in a seething of many-jointed legs, and each time he pulped it underfoot and each time Sondeweere was affected as before. To Bartan it was unthinkable that there could be any kind of affinity or link between his wife and the crawlers, and yet—in spite of being unconscious—she had definitely flinched as each one of them was dying. And there was the question of the screams. How did she make the sounds without opening her mouth, and why were they so disturbing?

A pressing sense of gloom and a coldness on his spine told Bartan that the sunlit normalcy all around him was a sham, that he was straying into realms beyond his understanding. On reaching the house he carried Sondeweere inside and carefully put her down on her bed. Her brow was cool and her coloration normal, giving the impression that she was merely asleep, but she failed to respond to being shaken or to his urgent repetitions of her name. He eased her out of the oilskin and was removing her sandals when he noticed a speck of dried blood on her right ankle. It came away quite readily on a damp cloth and the skin underneath was unblemished, dispelling the idea that she might have been bitten or stung by one of the creeping horrors. But *something* had happened to Sondeweere, and try as he might he could not rid himself of the notion that the creatures were in some way involved. Could they exude a venom so powerful that merely coming into contact with it was enough to render a person unconscious?

Standing by the bed, staring down at his wife's inert form, Bartan felt his fortitude begin to crumble. *Artoon! was right in what he said to me*, he thought. *I kept quiet about the warnings, and I led everybody to this place—and what has been the upshot? Two suicides, one disappearance which is probably a murder, still births, madness and near-madness, strange sightings and bad dreams, friends turning against friends, malice where once there was goodwill—and now this! Sondeweere has been struck down, and the earth spews out horrors!*

With a considerable effort he wrenched his thinking out of the downward spiral and fought to regain his normal optimism. He, Bartan Drumme, *knew* that ghosts and demons did not exist—and, if there was no such thing as an evil spirit, how could there be an evil place? It was true that there had been a spate of

misfortunes since the farmers' arrival in the Basket of Eggs, but runs of bad luck were always cancelled out sooner or later by runs of good. Artoonl was wrong in quitting after investing so much time and effort. What the farmers had to do was stand their ground and wait for things to improve. And Bartan's duty was clear—he had to stay by his wife and do everything in his power to restore her to her old self.

As he settled into his bedside vigil his thoughts were again drawn to the crawling creatures whose appearance had heralded Sondeweere's mysterious affliction. Many curious life forms, some of them highly unprepossessing, had been found on Overland, and it was likely that something so repellent would have been noticed elsewhere. On reflection he had been too quick at destroying the horrors. If he found another crawler he would overcome his revulsion so that he could trap and preserve it for inspection by someone with greater knowledge of such matters.

Bartan raised Sondeweere's limp hand to his lips and was holding it there, willing his own vitality to flow into her body, when he was alerted by a faint scratching sound from another part of the house. He tilted his head and listened intently. The sound was barely audible, but he placed its source at the entrance to the house. He stood up, puzzled, and took the few paces needed to take him out of the bedroom and through the kitchen to the front door. The line of brilliance seeping under the door was uninterrupted, and yet the delicate scratching continued. He opened the door and something which had been clinging to the lintel, something which twisted and squirmed, brushed his face as it fell to the floor.

Bartan gave an involuntary gasp, mouth contorted with shock and loathing, as he leapt back.

The crawler landed upside down with a thud, pale grey underside flashing, then righted itself and began moving into the house with every semblance of purpose. Its single thick feeler was extended ahead of it, undulating, questing. Bartan's hoped-for objectivity failed to materialise. He stamped his foot down on the creature, and heard and felt its body burst and flatten—and between his temples there was the sound of Sondeweere's anguish.

He slammed the door shut and pressed his back to it, appalled, remembering times when he had seen human beings—a farmer's wife, little children at play—extend an arm and wave it in a strange, boneless motion which mimed that of a crawler's central feeler.

Chapter 8

After more than a year of near-continuous service in the fortresses Toller had accepted that he would never be able to sleep properly in weightless conditions. The inexplicable sensation of falling which plagued the station crews could be ignored in waking hours, but the dreaming mind had no defences against it. It was common among crew members to spend the entire rest period mumbling and twisting in their sleep-nets, seeing the planetary surface rise up to meet them with ever-increasing speed, and to awaken at the imagined point of impact with shrieks which entered and distorted the dreams of their comrades.

Toller had devised a personal routine which enabled him to deal with the problem. For the sixteen days of each duty period he made no real attempt to sleep, contenting himself with resting and drowsing when not required for active service. When it was time to return to Overland he would curl up inside the fleecy womb of the fallbag and sleep soundly throughout most of the long drop, rocked by its gentle buffeting and comforted by the low gurgling of the slipstream at the neck of the bag. At first he had been puzzled by his ability to sleep well in such unlikely circumstances, then had decided that the knowledge that he really was falling brought about a necessary accord between his intellect and the sensations of the body.

There was only one day left of his current duty spell and the tiredness had built up in him to the extent that within seconds of getting into his net he had lapsed into a bemused state, halfway between sleep and consciousness, in which there was little distinction between the remembered past and the vaguely apprehended present. It was peaceful inside Command Station One, which he had chosen as his living quarters in order to be close to the centre of operations at all times. The only sounds were the bored and scrappy conversation of the two men on watch, and the occasional swishing of the bellows which maintained a tolerable air pressure. Toller had turned his face to the wall of the station and was resting comfortably, something which would not have been possible at the beginning of the war. The walls were now insulated with flock and covered with skins which reduced heat loss and also helped prevent accidental puncturing of the shell.

One night, during one of his earliest duty spells, Toller had become aware of

a faint but insistent whistling sound and had tracked it down to a large knot in a section of midship planking. The core of the knot had shrunk and was permitting air to escape. When Toller had tapped it with his knuckle the core had promptly disappeared into the outer void, and as he had occasioned the damage he took it on himself to repair the vent with cork and mastic. He had carried out the chore willingly, knowing that reports of it would be widely circulated, thus reinforcing the message that Lord Toller Maraquine did not set himself above the lowliest conscripts in the Sky Service.

He did such things with an undeniable degree of calculation, but excused himself on the grounds that only one kind of leadership was feasible—and correct—in the unnerving circumstances of the interplanetary war. King Chakkell could force soldiers to venture into the weightless zone on pain of death, but once they were there a commander could only get them to give of their best by showing that he was prepared to share every privation and face every danger.

And the dangers had been plentiful.

It had been fortunate indeed for the defenders that King Rassamarden, going about his unimaginable affairs in the unimaginable environment of the Old World, had not launched his invasion fleet in the shortest possible time. Tens of days had gone by after the positioning of the first two fortresses with no sign of enemy activity, and the grace period had been used—under liven Zavotle's direction—to measure the radius of the neck of comparatively dense air at the juncture of the atmospheres. A skyship had been rotated into the plane of the weightless zone and had been driven laterally on jet power for an estimated sixty miles before the pilot had begun to lose consciousness through asphyxiation. He had been in the process of rotating the ship for the return when the balloon had ruptured because of excessive torque from the struts. The pilot had managed to retain his senses long enough to get himself into Overland's gravitational field by means of his personal pneumatic jet, and on the following day had parachuted to the ground within walking distance of Prad. His survival had been a great source of reassurance for rank-and-file members of the Sky Service, but the acquired data had troubled the top echelons of their leadership.

The gateway, as the bridge of breathable air came to be called, had a cross-sectional area of more than ten thousand square miles—and it was apparent that no achievable number of fortresses could bar it to intruders by gunnery alone.

Once again it had been Zavotle, the dogged eroder of problems, who had come up with a solution.

Inspired by the success of the personal flight units, he had proposed the simplest form of fighting craft possible—a jet tube which a man could sit astride

as though he were on a bluehorn. Engines taken from ordinary airships would be about the right size, and when powered by pikon and halvell crystals would enable a warrior to range out many miles from his base. Zavotle's preliminary calculations, assuming an effective fighter radius of only twelve miles, showed that the entire area of the gateway could be covered by only twenty-five fortresses.

Drifting in the soft confines of his sleep-net, Toller recalled the look of wonder and gratification on King Chakkell's face as he was given the unexpected good news. There was no doubt that he could have forced through the construction of the hundred fortresses originally envisaged, but the strain on material and human resources would have been severe. Chakkell had been faced by an additional problem in that a large proportion of his subjects were too young to have had any first-hand experience of the terrors of the pterthacosis plague and were not inclined to accept punishing work loads, especially in the cause of a war which seemed so unreal. The concept of the jet fighter craft had therefore been embraced by Chakkell with a boundless enthusiasm which had led to the completion of the first batch in the remarkably short time of five days, thanks to nature having done most of the construction work in advance.

The jet engine was basically the lower part of the trunk of a young brakka tree, complete with the combustion chamber which had powered its pollination discharges. Pikon and halvell crystals were admitted to the chamber under pneumatic pressure, where they combined explosively to produce great quantities of miglign gas which was exhausted through the open end of the tube to drive the engine forward.

To convert the basic engine into an operational craft, it had been given a full-length wooden cowl which made for the easy mounting of equipment. A saddle-type seat had been installed for the pilot, aft of which were pivoting control surfaces. They looked like stubby wings, but in the weightless condition their sole function was to control the direction of flight. The fighter's armament consisted of two small breech-loading cannon, fixed to the sides of the cowl, which could only be aimed by aligning the entire craft with the target.

Toller, hovering between wakefulness and sleep, vividly remembered his first ride on one of the strange looking machines. The bulkiness of his skysuit had been augmented by his personal jet unit and parachute, and it had taken him some time to adapt to the seat and familiarise himself with the controls. Acutely aware of being watched by the skymen in and around Fortress One, he had pumped the pneumatic reservoir to maximum pressure, then had advanced the throttle lever. In spite of his having been modest with the power demand, he had been astonished by the surge of acceleration which had accompanied the roar of

the exhaust. It had taken him perhaps three minutes, with an icy slipstream tearing at his face, to get the knack of keeping the fighter from doing a slow spiral as it howled through the sky. He had then shut down the engine, allowed air resistance to bring the craft to a halt and had turned in the saddle, laughing with acceleration rapture, to solicit the applause of his fellow pilots waiting by the fortress.

And the fortress had not been there!

That shock, that exquisite stab of pure panic, had been his introduction to the new physics of the jet fighter. It had taken him many seconds to locate and recognise the fortress as a tiny mote of hard light, almost lost in the silver-speckled blue of the universe, and to realise that he had been travelling at a speed previously undreamt of by man.

The nine fighters of Red Squadron were ranged line abreast, their upper surfaces gleaming in the sunlight. A short distance above them was what had been the first fortress, recently extended by the addition of three new sections to make it a command station. Other fortresses comprising the Inner Defence Group were positioned nearby, but they were insignificant objects, hard to see in the deep blue even though reflectors had been added to increase their visibility. Overland, flanked by the sun, was a fire-edged roof for the universe, and the vastness of Land made a circular floor, blue and green dusted with ochre, scrolled with white.

The other object of significance for the fighter pilots was the target ship. Although it was more than a mile away from them the hugeness of the balloon made it an important feature of the celestial environment, one with the apparent solidity of a third planet. It had been positioned well outside the theoretical plane of weightlessness, in the direction of Land, so that cannon balls fired at it would be drawn down into Land's gravitational field. Of the two fatalities which had occurred thus far in training, one had been that of a young pilot who had been making a highspeed practice run when he had been swept off his machine by a cannon ball which had hit him squarely in the chest. At first it was thought that he had been accidentally shot by another flier, then had come the realisation that the two-inch iron ball had been hanging almost motionless in the air, a deadly residue from an earlier practice firing. To prevent similar incidents, Toller had issued a general order that cannon could only be discharged when angled towards Land.

He was sitting astride his fighter, Red One, watching the target ship through binoculars and waiting for the pilot who had positioned it to return to safety. More than forty days had passed since the arrival of the first two fortresses in the

weightless zone, and still there was no sign of a Lander invasion fleet. In some quarters there were rising hopes that King Chakkell's prognosis had been wrong, but Toller and Zavotle refused to be complacent. They had decided to use the strategic leeway to maximum advantage, and to that end were prepared to have a skyship whose balloon was nearing the end of its useful life sacrificed as a target.

The magnified image in Toller's binoculars showed the pilot leaving the skyship's gondola and bestriding a tethered fighter belonging to the as yet incomplete Blue Squadron. The pilot cast off, his craft surged away on a white plume of condensation, and seconds later came the powdery boom of his engine. He swept the fighter into an upward curve and disappeared in the radiant needle-spray of light emanating from the sun.

"Go in without delay," Toller shouted, gesturing to Gol Perobane, pilot of the furthestmost left in the line of fighters. Perobane saluted and drove his machine forward, the roar of his exhaust swelling as it engulfed the remaining craft. His fighter swiftly shrank in apparent size, swooping down on the doomed skyship, and as he was flaring out of the curve both of his cannon streamed vapour. Toller, following the action with his binoculars, judged that Perobane had fired at exactly the right moment. He turned his attention to the balloon, expecting to see it quake and deform, and was disappointed when the serene curvatures appeared to be unaffected.

How can he have missed? he thought, giving the signal for the next fighter in line to blast off.

It was not until the fourth machine, flown by Berise Narrinder, had completed its ineffectual attack that he called a halt to the exercise. He blew crystals into his own engine and flew down to the target ship, cutting the power off early so that air resistance would bring him to a halt close to the huge balloon. At short range he was able to discern several holes in the varnished linen envelope, but they were surprisingly small—almost as if the material had partially healed its wounds—and were far short of the catastrophic damage the cannon should have inflicted. The balloon was beginning to show some slight wrinkling and slackness, but Toller attributed it to natural loss of heat as much as to the insignificant punctures. It was apparent to him that the skyship retained the capability of making a safe descent to ground level.

"Does this mean we have to start firing at the gondolas?" said Umol, drifting into position beside him on Red Two. His chest was visibly labouring to deal with the rarefied air.

Toller shook his head. "If we attack the gondolas we expose ourselves to return fire. We must attack from above, staying within the enemy's blind arc, and

destroy his balloons with ... with..." He paused, striving to visualise the weapon his fliers needed, and at that moment a large meteor struck across the sky far below them, briefly illuminating the scene from underneath.

"With something like that," Umol said, pulling down his scarf to unveil a smile.

"That is somewhat beyond our capabilities, but..." Toller paused again to let the meteor's tardy thunderclap roll by them. "But your thoughts fly in the right direction, old friend! Have somebody go back on board the ship and put heat into the balloon. Keep everything as it is until I return."

He placed his foot on the side of Umol's fighter, which had been nuzzling up to his own machine in stray air currents, and pushed hard. The two machines parted with a lazy wallowing action. Toller advanced his throttle lever, using an extreme sensitivity of touch developed since his first flight, and the fighter growled its way forward to pass within a few yards of the target balloon. As soon as he had gained enough speed to render the control surfaces effective he brought the nose up and around, and made a soaring return to the command station.

The weapon he brought back a short time later was a simple iron spike with a bundle of oil-soaked oakum bound to the blunt end. He ignited it by means of a phosphor wick and, whirling the spike to feed the flame, put the fighter into a shallow dive which took it close to the balloon's upper hemisphere. When he hurled the spike it flew down cleanly, with the stability of a dart, and sank its full length into the yielding material of the envelope. The varnished linen caught fire at once, producing a thick brownish smoke, and by the time Toller had come to a halt a sizeable area of the crown was alight. In less than a minute the balloon was beginning to fold in on itself, pulsing and losing symmetry, while the watching pilots shouted their approval. Without convection currents to bear it away, the smoke gathered around the stricken skyship in a strangely localised cloud.

Toller rejoined the group of fighters. The line was uneven, with no two machines parallel to each other or sharing the same up-down orientation, but that was something he had learned to accept. Unless the fighters were on the move there was little the pilots could do to control them, and several of the gifted youngsters—the ones who were already at home with the new form of flying—seemed to get a mischievous pleasure from conducting conversations with him in mutually inverted positions. Toller made no attempt to curb their high spirits—he had already decided that when war came the best fighting pilots would be those who were least shackled by traditional military customs and outlook.

"As we have just seen," he shouted, "fire is a good weapon to use against a

balloon, but that was all too easy for me. I was able to go in very close, and at low speed, because there were no defenders on the ship and no enemy ships nearby trying to wing me. The low speed meant that I was able to stay in the ship's blind arc during the whole attack, but in battle things are likely to be very different. Most attacking dives will probably have to be conducted at high speed—which means you will not be able to pull out so quickly and will sink into the defenders' arc of fire. You are going to be very vulnerable at that stage—especially if the Landers have developed instant-fire cannon, like their muskets."

Perobane pulled down his scarf. "But it will only be for a few seconds if we're moving fast." He winked at the nearest pilots. "And I can assure you that I'll be moving *very* fast."

"Yes, but you might be heading straight towards another ship," Toller said, quelling some laughter.

Berise Narrinder signalled that she wanted to speak. "My lord, how about bows and arrows? Fire arrows, I mean. Wouldn't an archer be able to flare out of a dive much earlier and stay out of danger?"

"Yes, but..." Toller paused, realising that his objection had been a reflexive one based on the fact that he personally had never taken to the bow as a weapon. The proposal was sound, especially if the arrows were given fish-hook warheads which would trap them in the balloon material. And even a mediocre airborne archer—as he suspected he was likely to be—should find little difficulty in hitting a target as large as a skyship's balloon.

"But what, my lord?" Berise said, raising herself up on her footrests, encouraged by the other pilots' evident approval for her suggestion.

Toller smiled at her. "But would it be fair to the enemy? Armed with bows and fire arrows we would be able to shoot them out of the sky with the ease of a child bursting soap bubbles. It goes against all my sporting instincts to adopt such a..." His words were drowned out in a general shout of laughter from the line of pilots.

Toller bowed slightly towards Berise then turned away, not begrudging the fliers their moment of jubilation. He was the only member of the company with first-hand experience of warfare, and he knew that—no matter how well things might go for the Overlanders—there were some present whose time for nonchalance, merriment and optimism was drawing to an end, whether they lived or died.

At the midpoint between the two worlds the terms "night" and "littlenight" had lost their meaning. The diurnal cycle was divided into two equal spells of darkness of slightly less than four hours each, while the sun was being occulted

by Land or Overland; and two daytime periods of just over eight hours. Toller had given up making any distinction between night and littlenight, foreday and aftday, being content to let time roll by him in an unremarkable sequence mileposted only by the fallbag returns to Overland. Especially when he was off duty, drowsing in his sleep net, there seemed no way to mark the passage of time but for the slow veering of the beams of sunlight from the portholes, and dreamy reprises became as real as life itself...

The sound of an argument slowly drew Toller back to full consciousness.

It was not uncommon to hear members of fortress crews in disagreement, but on this occasion there was a woman involved and Toller guessed it was Berise. For some reason he could not explain, he was interested in Berise Narrinder. There was no sexual element involved, of that much he was sure, because when Gesalla had made it clear that the intimate side of their marriage was over his capacity for physical passion had abruptly died. The process had been surprisingly quick and painless. He was a man who had no need for sex, who never thought of it or regretted its absence from his life, and yet he was aware of everything that Berise did. Without making any effort, he usually knew when her duty spells corresponded with his, where she was and what she was likely to be doing at any given moment.

He opened his eyes and saw that she was on watch—an obligatory duty for all personnel—tethered close to one of the large fixed binoculars which were permanently aimed at Land. Beside her was the tall angular figure of Imps Carthvodeer, the Inner Defence Group administrator, who normally stayed behind a wicker screen at the far end of the command station, in a cramped room he liked to refer to as his office.

"You can either draw pictures, or you can be on watch." Carthvodeer was saying peevishly. "You can't do two things at once."

"*You* may not be able to do two things at once, but I find it very easy," Berise said, her accentuated eyebrows drawn together.

"That's not what I mean." Carthvodeer's long face showed his frustration over the fact that although fighter pilots had the nominal rank of captain they were effectively senior to all non-combatants. "On watch duty you are supposed to concentrate all your attention on looking out for enemy ships."

"When the enemy ships come—if they come—they will be visible for many hours in advance."

"The point is that this is a military installation and has to be run on military lines. You are not being paid to draw pictures." Carthvodeer scowled at the rectangle of stiff paper in Berise's hand. "You don't even show artistic ability."

"How would you know?" Berise said, becoming angry. Farther along the

cluttered tunnel of the station the crewman on bellows shift snorted in amusement.

"Why don't you two stop bickering and let a man get some rest?" Toller put in mildly.

Carthvodeer squirmed around in the air to face him. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you, sir. I have to prepare at least a dozen reports and requisitions in time to go down in the next fallbag, and I find it quite impossible to work and listen to the squeak-squeak-squeak of the captain's charcoal at the same time."

Toller was surprised to note that Carthvodeer, a fifty-year-old officer, was pale with emotion over the trivial incident. "You go back into your office and continue with your reports," he said, unfastening his net. "You won't be further distracted."

Carthvodeer, lips quivering, nodded and propelled himself away with poorly co-ordinated movements. Toller launched into a lazy flight which ended when he grasped a handhold close to Berise. Her green eyes triangulated on him in calm defiance.

"You and I are in a privileged position compared to a man like Carthvodeer," he said in a low voice.

"In what respect, my lord?" Of all the fliers in his command she was the only one who continued to address him formally.

"We *wanted* to come here. We leave the murky confines of these wooden boxes every day and fly through the air like eagles. This waiting and waiting is hard on all of us, but consider what it must be like for someone who had no wish to be here in the first place and who has no escape."

"I didn't realise the charcoal was so noisy," Berise said. "I'll find a pencil and work with that—if you have no objection."

"I don't mind at all. As you say, the Landers cannot take us by surprise." Toller craned his neck to see the drawing in Berise's hand. It showed the interior of the station in an atmospheric style, with strong emphasis on the parallel bars of sunlight slanting from the row of portholes. Human figures and machinery were suggested rather than detailed and in a manner Toller thought pleasing, although he was not qualified to judge the picture's merit.

"Why are you doing this?" he said.

She gave him a wry smile. "Old Imps said I was neglecting my duty, but I believe that everybody on Overland has a higher duty. Each of us has to search for and develop his or her artistic gift. I don't know if I can even be an artist, but I'm making the effort. If I fail I'll go on to poetry, music, dance... I'll keep searching until I find something I can do, then I'll do it to the best of my ability."

"Why is it a duty?"

"Because of the Migration! You can't do what we did and get away without paying a penalty. We left our racial soul behind on the Old World. Do you know that in all the ships that took part in the Migration there was not *one* painting? No books, no sculptures, no music. We left it all behind us."

"It was hardly a pleasure trip, you know," Toller said. "We were refugees carrying the bare essentials of life."

"We brought jewellery and useless money! Tons of weapons! A race needs an armature of culture to support every other aspect of its being, and we no longer have one. The King left it out of his great plan for a new Kolcorron. We left all that kind of thing behind, and that's why Overland feels so *empty*. It isn't because we are so few, spread out over a whole world—we suffer from spiritual emptiness."

Berise's ideas were strange to Toller, and yet her words seemed to find their mark somewhere far inside him, particularly the references to emptiness. As a young man in Ro-Atabri he had always enjoyed the setting of the sun and the gentle approach of darkness—but of late, even with Gesalla at his side, the once satisfying experience had become oddly flat and disappointing. No matter how beautiful the sunset, there was no longer any pleasure in reviewing the achievements of the day, no anticipation of the morrow. The associated emotion, had he ever acknowledged it, would have been a poignant sadness. Overland's western sky, as it deepened through gold and red to peacock green and blue, had seemed to ring with ... *emptiness*.

The word had been a curiously apt one to come from a comparative stranger. He had been attributing his feelings to some unrecognised inner malaise, but had he just been offered a better explanation? Could he be an aesthete at heart, troubled by a growing awareness that his people lacked a cultural identity? The answer came quickly as the pragmatic, practical side of his nature reasserted itself.

No, he thought. *The worm which eats out the core of my life is not concerned with poetry and art—and neither am I.*

He half-smiled as he realised how far he had strayed, in an unguarded moment, into realms of fanciful thought, then he saw that Berise was staring at him.

"I wasn't smiling at your ideas," he said.

"No," she replied thoughtfully, her gaze still hunting over his face. "I didn't think you were."

And, of all the scenes which were played and replayed in Toller's memory, the brightest and most clearly incised were those from the day which saw the war's

true beginning...

Seventy-three days had passed since the positioning of the first two fortresses. It was not a long period of time by the standards of men and women going about their routine affairs on the surface of Overland, but evolution was swift in the unnatural environment of the central blue.

Toller had completed his daily flying and archery practice, and had felt disinclined to return too quickly to the oppressive confines of the station. His fighter was floating about five hundred yards outside the datum plane, a vantage point from which he could observe the ebb and flow of activity in the Inner Defence Group and the surrounding space. To his left he could see a supply ship crawling up from Prad, its balloon a small brown disk sharply outlined against the convex patterns of Overland; to his right was Command Station One, flaring with sunlight against the indigo of the sky. Close to it were lesser three-section habitats which were used as workshops and stores, and in a loose swarm were the fighters of Red Squadron. Dozens of human figures, moving purposefully, could be seen in perfect detail in spite of being so tiny, mannikins from the hand of a master jeweller.

As always, Toller was impressed by the sheer amount of progress which had been made in the time available, since the first naive scheme to blanket the entire weightless zone with fortresses which would have relied on guns to repel an invasion. The invention of the fighter craft had been the major step forward, their astonishing speed having rendered obsolete the idea of each fortress being an isolated and self-sufficient entity. They had ceased to be fortresses, and were now assigned specialised roles—dormitory, workshop, store, armoury—in support of the all-important jets.

No matter how clever was the theoretical planner working on the ground, Toller had realised, innovation and development were usually products of practical experience. Even Zavotle, his thinking conditioned by normal gravity, had not foreseen the problems which would be posed by weightless debris and waste matter. The death of young Argitane, the fighter pilot killed by a drifting cannonball, had been a dramatic example, but the pollution of the environment by human wastes had become a matter of increasing concern.

The psychological stress of life in the gateway was augmented by the indignity and sheer unpleasantness of attending to one's bodily functions in zero gravity, and no commander could countenance the prospect of each station being surrounded by a thickening cloud of filth. Carthvodeer had been obliged to set up a collection team—quickly and mercilessly dubbed the Shit Patrol—whose unenviable task it was to trawl all offensive material into large bags. The bags were then towed a few miles down towards Land by a fighter and released to

continue their journey under the influence of gravity—a practice which occasioned much ribaldry among the fortress crews.

Another problem, one yet to be resolved, had come with the attempts to establish an outer defensive ring. The original intention had been to place stations on a ring thirty miles across, greatly extending the area of interdiction, but with separations of more than about four miles they had become almost impossible to locate and keep supplied. A second fatality among fighter pilots had occurred when a flier, perhaps with substandard eyesight, had simply become lost while returning from an outer station, and had burned up all her power crystals in vain attempts to locate her base. Deprived of the heat generated by her engine, she had perished of hypothermia, and had been found purely by chance. Since that time the policy had been to concentrate all stations in the central group and rely on the fighters to extend their area of influence as required.

As was the case with all the other fliers, Toller had found that his lung capacity had increased to deal with the rarefied atmosphere, but it was impossible to adapt to the relentless cold of the weightless zone. By the time he had been drifting and meditating for twenty minutes all residual heat had leaked away through the wooden cowlings of his engine, and he was beginning to shiver despite the protection of his skysuit. He was pumping up the fighter's pneumatic reservoir, preparatory to returning to the command station, when his attention was drawn to a star which had suddenly increased in luminosity for a second and now was emitting regular pulses of brilliance. No sooner had he deduced that the star was actually a distant station, and that it was sending out a sunwriter message, when he heard the sound of a trumpet, its repeated blasts fast-fading in the thin air. His heart stopped, lay quiescent for a subjective eternity, then began a rhythmic jolting.

They're coming! he thought, sucking in air. *The game begins at last!*

He fed his engine and swooped down towards the command station. As the slipstream began to bite at his eyes he pulled his goggles into place and instinctively searched the area of sky between him and the curving vastness of Land, but was unable to find anything unusual. The slow-moving ships of the enemy armada could be as much as a hundred miles away, visible only in telescopes.

As Toller neared the station the trumpeter, positioned in the newly-added pressure lock, ended the warning call and retreated inside. Fighter pilots, distinguished by the squadron colours on their shoulders, were issuing from the nearby dormitory tube, and swaddled auxiliaries were sailing towards the dart-like machines in their care, propelled by the hissing jets of their personal units.

A mechanic swam to meet Toller with a tethering line, leaving him free to dive straight into the long cylinder of the station. Both doors of the pressure lock had been left open and he found himself suddenly translated from a boundless sunlit universe to a dim microcosm which was fogged with vapours and crowded with human figures and the appurtenances of their continued existence.

Carthvodeer and Commodore Biltid, the operations chief, were hovering by the look-out post, deep in discussion, Biltid, directly appointed by Chakkell, was a stiff-necked and formal individual who was equally embarrassed by his inability to get over the fall-sickness and the ambiguity of his relationship with Toller. The fact that Toller was his superior and yet insisted on riding a jet like an ordinary pilot frequently placed him in dilemmas he found it difficult to resolve.

"Look here, my lord," he said, espying Toller. "The enemy comes in force."

Toller drew himself to the binoculars and looked into the eyepieces. The image which washed into his eyes was of a fiercely brilliant background, blue and green whorled with white, in the centre of which was a meagre sprinkling of black dots, each ringed with prismatic fringes caused by imperfections in the optical system. By narrowing and straining his eyes, Toller found that he could distinguish even smaller specks mingled with the others, and suddenly the scene acquired depth, became vertiginous. He was looking downwards through a vertical cloud of skyships, a cloud which was many miles in depth. It was impossible to say how many ships it contained, but there could not be less than a hundred.

"You are correct," he said, raising his head to look at Biltid. "The enemy comes in force—which is what one would have expected."

Biltid nodded, covered his mouth with a handkerchief, and suddenly the sour smell which usually surrounded him intensified. "I ... I'm sorry," he said, gulping noisily. "We must make ready."

How astute, Toller thought, then became sorry for a man who had been thrust willy-nilly into an unenviable situation as an instrument of the ruler.

"We retain our two great advantages," he said. "We are in sight of the enemy, but he is not aware of us; and we have the fighter craft—something the enemy cannot have even envisaged at this stage. It is now up to us to press home those advantages while we may."

Biltid nodded even more vigorously. "All fighter craft are in a state of mechanical readiness, and will be fuelled and armed. I propose engaging the enemy with the Red and Blue Squadrons, and holding Green in reserve. That is, if you have no..."

"Those might be good tactics in ground warfare," Toller said, "but remember

that we will never again be able to take the Landers by surprise. There is a possibility that we could end this war on the very day it begins if we deal the enemy a sufficiently devastating first blow. In my opinion we should deploy the three squadrons and give all our pilots experience of combat."

"You're right as always, my lord." Biltid finished dabbing his mouth. "Though I'd be happier if we had some means of estimating the enemy's rate of ascent. If they reach the datum plane during the hours of darkness there is a chance of some slipping past us unseen."

"Nothing is to slip past us," Toller snapped, losing his patience. "*Nothing!*"

He moved away from Biltid and Carthvodeer, and went to another porthole where he could have an unobstructed view of Land. The sun was moving towards the Old World and would pass behind its rim in approximately two hours. Toller did some mental calculations and swore as he realised that the timing of the first encounter could be highly unfavourable for the defenders. The two daily periods of darkness had been named Landnight and Overlandnight, depending of which of the planets was occulting the sun, and although they were about equal in length they had important differences.

Landnight, which was coming next, would begin when the sun passed behind Land, but at that stage Overland would still be fully illuminated and the light reflected from it would be strong enough to permit reading. During the following hour that light would steadily weaken as Land's cylindrical shadow slid across Overland, then would come roughly two hours of deepnight, lasting until Overland was again kissed by the sun's rays. Throughout deepnight the heavens would be ablaze with stars, glowing whirlpools and the splayed radiance of comets, but the comparative level of general illumination would be very low—and even a ship's balloon would be hard to detect in the dim reaches of the weightless zone. The problem did not arise to the same extent during Overlandnight because Land was larger than its sister world and could not be completely swallowed by its shadow.

If the enemy ships were a hundred miles away, Toller reckoned, and were already at maximum speed, they could reach the datum plane during deepnight. He contemplated the prospect for a moment, then decided he was being unduly pessimistic. The Lander pilots would be nervous on experiencing the effects of weightlessness for the first time, and would also be apprehensive about the forthcoming inversion manoeuvre. It was entirely reasonable to assume that they would approach the weightless zone slowly and cautiously, and would plan to perform the supremely unnatural act of turning their ships upside down in good light conditions.

Having settled his mind, Toller left the chilling dank fug of the station and

devoted the following hour to making a tour of the Inner Defence Group, calling at the other two command stations which were the bases for Blue Squadron and the newly completed Green. Reports from those on watch showed that the invaders were indeed advancing slowly, but the fighter pilots who had turned out prematurely were unable to resume their rest when darkness came. Some of them passed the time in noisy discussion or gambling by candlelight, while others hovered close to their machines, obsessively checking on the fuelling and arming procedures of the mechanics.

Finally a sliver of light appeared at the edge of Overland and rapidly expanded along it to form a slim crescent. As the sunlit area of the planet spread steadily into the gibbous phase, heralding the reappearance of the sun. Toller made repeated visits to the look-out post in Command Station One and peered through the binoculars. The vast disk of Land was bathed in a dim mysterious light, reflected from the sister world, which gave it the semblance of a sphere of translucent wax somehow lighted from within. Although brightening by the minute, the backdrop it provided refused to yield up a discernible image of enemy skyships, and—in spite of himself—Toller began to fantasise about the invaders having sustained a speed which had enabled them to pass through the datum plane under cover of darkness. The partial emergence of the sun flooded the interior of the station with light, and even then there was an instant during which the ships of the Lander armada remained hidden in the fringes of the planet's slow-swinging shadow.

Then, suddenly, they were *there*.

Unexpectedly beautiful, they appeared in Toller's field of view as a swarm of tiny, perfect crescents of brilliance, level upon level of them, exquisite in their crafted uniformity. For a moment he was awe-struck by the achievement the spectacle represented. Given the audacity and courage to cross the interplanetary gulf in frail constructs of cloth and wood, his kind should be able to unite and turn their eyes towards the outer universe instead of squandering their energies in...

"They can't be very far away," Biltid said, looking up from the other pair of binoculars. "Twenty or thirty miles. We haven't much time."

"Time enough," Toller said, recalled to the practical world of the soldier. On an impulse he propelled himself to his sleeping net, unhooked his sword from the wall beside it and strapped the weapon to his waist. He was conscious of how incongruous the sword was in the circumstances, but it had a psychological value to him in the preparation for battle. Going out through the airlock he saw that the other eight pilots of his squadron were already at their machines, and auxiliaries were swimming among them igniting the hooded fire-cups which had

been installed forward of the saddles. The same scene was repeated in miniature, some distance away in the boundless blue, as the other two squadrons were made ready.

Some of the Blue and Green machines were already edging towards Command Station One to form a combined force, their paths marked by pulses of white condensation. As the swarm increased in size there were numerous gentle collisions between the fighters, occasioning a good deal of banter among the pilots and angry comments from the mechanics who were in danger of being crushed. As he drifted clear of the station Toller shaded his eyes from the sun with a gloved hand and looked in the direction of Land.

He found that the invaders could now be seen without optical aid, silvery specks at the very limits of vision, and he wished for a means of estimating their range. He had to engage the enemy well below the datum plane so that every ship destroyed would fall back towards Land, but if he went too far down to meet then his fighters' fuel reserves would be depleted. It looked as though the ability to judge distances accurately was going to be even more important in aerial combat than on the ground.

When the three squadrons were assembled Toller got astride Red One and wedged his toes into the fixed stirrups. He unclipped his bow, secured it to his left wrist with the safety loop and checked that the quivers mounted on each side of the cowling had a full complement of arrows. His heart was pounding again, and he was aware of the familiar old excitement, tinged with an inexplicable element of sexuality, which had always preceded a foray into the dangers of combat. While pumping up the pressure reservoir of his fuel feed, he glanced along the straggling, yawing line of fighters. The pilots were androgynous shapes in their skysuits, their faces hidden by scarves and goggles, but he picked out Berise Narrinder immediately and was compelled to issue a final word of caution.

"We have rehearsed our battle plan many times," he called out, "and I know you are all anxious to test your mettle against the enemy. I know, also, that you will conduct yourselves with courage, but beware of becoming *too* courageous. In the fever of battle it is possible to grow reckless, to be lured into taking unnecessary risks. But bear in mind that each of you has the potential to destroy *many* of the enemy's ships, and therefore each of you has a value to our cause which is much greater than you may personally place on your life.

"Today we will smite the invader hard—harder than he can ever have dreamed of—but I will not countenance any losses on our side. Not a single pilot, not a single fighting machine! If you expend all your arrows do not be tempted to attack with your cannon. Retire at once from the battle and console

yourself with the knowledge that you will be an even more skilful and more deadly opponent on a future occasion."

Nattahial, the pilot of Blue Three, nodded and vapour wisped through his scarf. "Whatever you wish, sir."

Toller shook his head. "Those are not my wishes—they are my direct *orders*. Any pilot I see behaving like an idiot will have me to answer to afterwards, and I can assure you that will be a more harrowing experience than facing a few scrawny Landers. Is that understood by all?"

Several of the pilots nodded vigorously, perhaps too vigorously, and others chuckled. With few exceptions they were young volunteers from the Air Service. They had been adventure-hungry to begin with, and the boredom of the long wait for this day had turned them into overwound human springs. Toller genuinely wanted them to heed his warnings, but he knew from combat experience that a balance had to be struck between prudence and passion. A warrior with too great a commitment to self-preservation could be even more of a liability than a glory-hunting fool, and the minutes ahead were likely to reveal how many of each were in his command.

"Is it your opinion," he asked, drawing his goggles down into place, "that I have devoted enough time to the making of speeches?"

"Yes!" The loudness of the general assent briefly filled the sky.

"In that case, let us go to war." Toller pulled his scarf up to cover his mouth and nostrils, and put the fighter into a curving dive which centred Land in his field of view. The sun was barely clear of the planet's rim, hurling billions of needles of light against him without creating any warmth. Amid a swelling roar of engine exhausts the other fighters took up their assigned positions, each squadron creating a V-shaped formation.

Slightly behind Toller on the left, leading the Blues, was Maiter Daas, and on his right at the apex of the Green Squadron was Pargo Umol. He wondered what the two middle-aged men—veterans of the old Skyship Experimental Squadron and the Migration—felt as they dropped towards the planet of their birth in circumstances they could never have envisaged. Analysing his own emotions, he was again disturbed to find that he felt youthful, fulfilled, totally alive. Part of him longed to be at home with Gesalla, making amends for all the ways in which he had failed her, and yet within him was the knowledge that, given the impossible opportunity, he would prolong this moment indefinitely. In a magical, irrational universe he would choose to live this way until he died—forever riding out through sprays of cold pure light to face exotic foes and unknown dangers. But in the real universe this phase was likely to be brief, perhaps encompassing only one battle, and when it was all over life would be a

thousand times more humdrum than before, with little for him to do other than passively wait for an unremarkable death.

Perhaps, the thought came softly slithering, it would be better not to survive the war.

Shocked by where the bout of introspection had taken him, Toller forced his thoughts to bear on the task in hand. The plan was to engage the enemy ten to fifteen miles below the datum plane, but as always he was bedevilled by the impossibility of estimating distance or speed in the featureless oceans of air. When he looked over his shoulder he saw that the twenty-seven fighters had laid down a kind of aerial highway with their condensation trails. It narrowed to a distant point, vaporous white threads gathered into perspective's fist, and already the clustered stations and habitats were hard to see, even though he knew exactly where to look. The condensation would later disperse into invisibility, and when that happened the three squadrons would be in danger of becoming lost.

How far had they descended? Ten miles? Fifteen? Twenty?

Swearing at the sun for capriciously aiding the enemy, Toller screened off the blinding orb with his hand and searched for the ascending fleet. The combined speeds of the two forces had brought them much closer in a short time, and now the array of gleaming crescents could easily be resolved by the naked eye, each a perfect miniature of the fire-cusped planet behind it. They were concentrated in a small area of the sky, like glittering spawn.

This is far enough, Toller told himself. We wait here.

He spread both his arms in a prearranged signal and shut down his engine. The absorbent silence of infinity abruptly pervaded the scene as the other pilots closed their throttles in unison. The fighters coasted for some time, gradually becoming uncontrollable as air resistance robbed them of their speed, the V-formations loosening and distorting while they came to rest. Toller knew the appearance of being at a standstill was illusory—the machines had entered Land's gravitational field and were falling, but this close to the datum plane their speed was negligible.

"We will fight here," he called out. "It will profit us to be patient and allow the enemy to come to us, because the longer he takes the farther the sun will move out from behind his ships. Be sure to keep your igniter cups in good trim, and do not allow your hands and limbs to stiffen with the cold. If you think you are becoming too cold you are permitted to make short circular flights to put heat into your machines and warmth into your backsides, but remember that your crystals have to be conserved as much as possible for the battle."

Toller settled into the wait, wishing he had a reliable means of measuring the time. Mechanical clocks were much too large for tactical purposes, and even the

traditional military timepiece was of no value in the weightless zone. It consisted of a slim glass tube containing a cane shoot which was marked with black pigment at regular intervals. When a pace-beetle was put into the tube it devoured the shoot from one end, moving at the unchanging rate common to its kind, thus indicating the passage of time with an accuracy which was good enough for commanders in the field. In zero gravity, however, the beetle was found to move erratically, often ceasing to eat altogether. At first it had been thought to be an effect of the extreme cold, but the same unsatisfactory results were obtained when the tube was kept warm, leading to the remarkable conclusion that the mindless bead-sized beetle was disturbed by its lack of weight. Toller had been intrigued by the findings, which in his mind established a link between human beings and the lowliest and most insignificant creatures on the planet. They were all part of the same biological phenomenon, but only humans had the intelligence which enabled them to override the dictates of nature, to impose their will on the organic machinery of their bodies.

Toller could hear the pilots of his squadron conversing as they waited, and he was pleased to note that there was none of the abrupt laughter which often indicated a failure of nerve. In particular he liked the demeanour of Tipp Gotlon, the young rigger he had promoted to pilot status against the counsel of Biltid. Gotlon, who had shown an instinctive grasp of the mechanics of flying, was exchanging occasional quiet words with Berise Narrinder and between times was scanning the sky ahead with shaded eyes. At eighteen he was the youngest of all the pilots, but he looked eminently calm and self-possessed.

As the minutes dragged by Toller gradually became aware of another sound—a low booming which he identified as emanating from the exhaust cones of the approaching fleet. The balloons of the Lander ships were becoming easier to see as the source of illumination moved progressively to the side, and they had greatly increased in apparent size. Umol and Daas were frequently turning their heads in his direction, obviously impatient for the order to attack, but Toller had decided to hold fire until he could pick out some detail of the crown panels and load tapes on the enemy balloons, by which time the foremost of them should be less than a mile below the waiting fighter craft.

The lack of spatial referents helped confuse the eye, but the skyships seemed to be ascending in groups of three and four, with quite a large vertical interval between the echelons. They formed an attenuated and elongated cloud many miles in depth, with those at the bottom of the stack appearing remote and shrunken compared to the leaders. The arrangement was a logical one for considerations of flight safety, especially when flying in darkness, but it was almost the worst possible for the penetration of defended territory. Toller smiled

as he saw that the Landers had unwittingly given him an advantage which more than compensated for the unfortunate positioning of the sun.

Yielding to a sudden accession of battlefield humour, he drew his sword and used the incongruous weapon to make the downward stroke of the attack signal.

What followed was not a concerted swoop on the invaders, but a deliberate and systematic process of destruction. In conference with Biltid and his two squadron leaders, Toller had decided that—in the first battle of its kind in all of human history—it would be unwise to have twenty-seven highspeed machines milling and plunging through a comparatively small volume of airspace. Also, for psychological reasons he considered important, he did not want a random pattern of success, with some pilots emerging as heroes claiming multiple kills and others failing to achieve the first blood so vital to their morale.

Accordingly, the response to Toller's signal was that only the ninth pilot in each formation detached his machine and rode down to meet the unsuspecting enemy. The three fighters traced lines of vapour which converged on the uppermost of the Lander echelons, then swung across to the right, each one casting off a splinter of amber light. A few seconds later three of the leading balloons developed penumbras of smoke, became dark flowers with writhing centres of red and orange flame. Toller was surprised by the dramatic speed of their destruction compared with that of the balloon once used for target practice, then realised it was because the Lander ships were rising and creating a slipstream which not only fed the flames but directed them down the sides of the varnished linen envelopes.

Another gift, another good omen, he thought as the second trio of fighters roared away on plumes of condensation. One of them picked off the remaining skyship of the four that had formed the top echelon and curved off to the right, while its companions speared on down to find targets in the next level. Their success was betokened after a brief interval by the blossoming of two more dark flowers.

As the carnage continued, with wave after wave of fighters darting down into the affray, Toller began to speculate on the possibility of the entire Lander fleet being destroyed in a single catastrophic engagement. Due to the great size of a skyship's balloon in comparison to the gondola, an ascent had to be made blindly, with the occupants trusting that the sky directly above contained no hazard. When many ships were travelling together the roar of the burners drowned out all other sounds, therefore the members of any given layer could remain quite unaware of cataclysms above until it was too late to take evasive action. If the fighters were able to work their way down to the bottom of the stack, incinerating the skyships echelon by echelon, none of the enemy would

survive to describe to their King how the destruction of his armada had been achieved. Such a total defeat could, indeed, end the interplanetary war on the very day it had begun.

Toller's mind was filled with that heady prospect as he watched the sky being transformed and sullied by conflict. The vapour trails were a complex skein of white tangled around an irregular, granular core of smoke and flame, and as successive fighter groups dived into action it became difficult to impose any sense of order on the scene. The carefully drawn up battle plan was being obscured by frenzied scribbles of condensation.

When it came the turn of the penultimate trio of fighters to set off Toller made a broad curving gesture with his free hand, signifying that they should swing outwards during the descent and intersect the column of skyships below the worst of the chaos. The pilots nodded and roared away on their diverging courses. They were just beginning to swing inwards again when from somewhere in the midst of the havoc came the sound of a powerful explosion.

Toller guessed that a Lander weapon, probably a pikon-halvell bomb, had detonated accidentally—a catastrophic event for the ship carrying it, but one which could benefit the invasion fleet as a whole. The report would have been heard far down the stack, alerting the lower echelons to the fact that all was not well. On hearing it any prudent pilot would use his lateral jets to turn his ship on its side so that he could observe the sky above.

Toller glanced with a new urgency at the other two squadron leaders, Daas and Umol, who were now his only two companions in the serenity of the upper air. "Are we ready?" he shouted.

Daas placed a hand on his lower back. "The longer we sit here the worse my rheumatism gets."

Toller blew crystals into his engine, felt his head being pulled back by acceleration, and watched the battle zone expand to fill his field of view. He had never before been so conscious of the jet fighter's speed. The vapour trails rushing towards him had the semblance of sculpted white marble, and he found it difficult not to flinch as the solid-seeming walls slammed in on him from one side and another, sometimes converging in a promise of certain death. Entire arctic kingdoms had streamed by him before he began to glimpse the wrecks of Lander ships. Their upward momentum had carried them into the flaming tatters of their balloons. He saw soldiers frantically ridding their gondolas of swathes of burning linen and wondered if they understood the futility of their actions. The ruined ships, although apparently locked in place, were already yielding to the gravitational siren call of their parent world, already embarking on the plunge to the rocky surface which waited thousands of miles below.

Toller had expected a considerable gap between the layers of burning ships, and was surprised to find them in a single loose conglomerate, sometimes almost in contact with each other. He realised that the first ships to be attacked had shut down their engines, and those below—still under way—had blundered in among them, vertically compacting the scene of destruction. Floating here and there among the smoke-shrouded leviathans were human figures, some struggling and some quiescent, pathetic debris from the gondola which had been exploded.

Toller barely had time to check that they were not wearing parachutes, then he was through the crowded volume of sky and bearing down on a group of four ships. At the edges of his vision he could see Daas and Umol riding in parallel with him. The Lander pilots must have reacted quickly to the sound of the explosion, because three of the ships were already tilted and he could see rows of faces lining their gondola walls. Far below them other ships, layer upon receding layer, were also turning on their sides.

Toller closed his throttle and allowed the fighter to coast while he snatched an arrow from one of his quivers. The oil-soaked wad at its tip caught fire as soon as he thrust it into the hooded igniter cup. He nocked the arrow and drew the bow, feeling heat from the warhead blowing back on his face, and fired at the balloon of the nearest ship, using the instinctive aiming technique of a mounted hunter. Even at speed and with swiftly changing angles the vast convexity of the balloon was an absurdly easy target. Toller's arrow needled into it and clung like a spiteful mosquito, spreading its venom of fire, and already he was plunging down past the gondola and its doomed occupants. There came a spattering of flat reports and splinters erupted from the wooden engine cowling scant inches from his left knee.

That was quick, he thought, shocked by the speed with which the Landers had brought their muskets into action. *These people know how to fight!*

He steered his machine into a right-hand turn and looked over his shoulder to see two of the other balloons beginning to crumple and wither amid wreaths of black smoke. Daas and Umol, riding on brilliant plumes of condensation, were swinging into wider curves which would bring them into the cluster newly formed by the three squadrons.

As far as Toller could ascertain, all his fliers had survived the first strike and all of them could claim victories, but the nature of the battle was changing and would no longer be so one-sided. The time for calculated and cold-blooded executions had ended, and from now on individual temperament would come into play, with incalculable results. In particular, there could be no more leisurely swoops through the skyships' blind arcs. Not only were the ships far below turning on their sides, they were doing it in such a way that the vulnerable

upper hemispheres of their balloons were facing the centre of each group. Toller had no doubt that rim-mounted cannon were already being loaded, and although the Landers had no metals their traditional charges of pebbles and broken stones would be highly effective against the unprotected fighter pilots.

"Strike where you can," he shouted, "but be..."

His words were lost in the roars of multiple exhausts. The air around him became fogged with white as the most impetuous of the young pilots darted away in the direction of the apparently motionless skyships. Cannon began to boom almost immediately.

Too soon, Toller thought, then it came to him that the sheer speed of the fighters could actually be a disadvantage in this kind of aerial warfare. Long after a skyship's cannon had been discharged it would be surrounded by relatively static clouds of rocky fragments, harmless to the slow-moving ships, but potentially deadly to attacking fighter pilots.

Pushing the thought aside, he gunned his machine into a downward curve which took him on a dizzying plunge in parallel with the vertical conflict. In the ensuing minutes the sky became a fantastic jungle, crowded with thickets, ferns and interlocked vines of white condensation, hung with the bulbous fruit of skyships, garlanded with black smoke. The slaughter went on and on in a frenzy incomprehensible to anyone who had never known the bitter passions of battle—and, as Toller had foreseen, the Landers began to draw blood.

He saw Perobane, on Red Nine, make a reckless dive on two ships and pull out of it with such force that his control surfaces were ripped off. The fighter did an abrupt somersault, throwing Perobane clear of it into a course which took him within twenty yards of a gondola. Soldiers on board fired at him with their muskets. The jerking of his body showed that many were finding their mark, but the soldiers—perhaps aware that their balloon was on fire and that they were bound to die—kept on shooting at Perobane in futile revenge until his skysuit was a mass of crimson tatters.

Shortly afterwards, the pilot of Green Four—Chela Dinnitler—made the mistake of slowly coasting past a soldier who was drifting free some distance from a gondola which was wrapped in the blazing material of its envelope. The soldier, who had appeared to be unconscious, stirred into life, calmly levelled his musket and shot Dinnitler in the back. Dinnitler slumped over his controls and the fighter's exhaust spouted vapour. The machine, with the pilot freakishly locked in his seat, went into a twisting descent which carried it through the lower fringes of the battle. It dwindled into the backdrop of Land, passing through a sprinkling of circular white clouds which resembled balls of fluffy wool.

The soldier who had killed Dinnitler was fitting a new pressure sphere to his

musket, and—incredibly in view of the death-fall facing him—was laughing as he worked. Toller advanced his throttle and drove straight at the man, intending to ram him, then came the thought that even a fleeting proximity might prove enough to infect him with pterthacosis. He hit the plunger on one of his cannon, shattering power crystal containers in the breech, and held a steady course until detonation occurred. The gun had not been designed for precise marksmanship, but luck was with Toller and the two-inch ball hit the soldier squarely on the head, cartwheeling him away in spirals of blood.

Toller banked the fighter away from the corpse and was about to enter the main battle again when, belatedly, his memory of the odd-looking circular clouds began to trouble him. He flew well clear of the column of turmoil and studied the sky below its base. The clouds were still there and now there were more of them. It took Toller several seconds to realise that he was looking at the exhaust plumes of skyships—seen from "below" their gondolas. Pilots in the lower echelons had inverted their ships and were fleeing the scene of destruction upside down. It was something no commander liked to do, because when the thrust of an engine was augmented by gravity a ship could quickly exceed its design speed and tear itself apart, but for the Landers the risk was an acceptable one in the circumstances.

Toller's first impulse was to reverse his original battle plan and go after the most distant of the enemy ships, but an inner voice sounded a warning. In the heat of combat he had lost track of time, and his fighters had been burning crystals at a prodigious rate all the while. He pumped up the pneumatic reservoir of his fuel feed and knew from the number of strokes required that the amount of solid material within the system had been greatly depleted. Looking up towards where the battle had begun he saw that the earliest condensation trails had faded. The squadron's home base was totally invisible, concealed somewhere in the trackless immensities of the space between the worlds, and finding it could be a lengthy job which would require ample reserves of power.

He ignited one of his remaining arrows and slowly waved it above his head. During the next few minutes the other pilots, recognising the signal, detached themselves from the ferment of smoke and cloud to join him. Most of them were intoxicated with excitement and were loudly exchanging stories of daring and triumph. Legends had been born, Toller knew, and were already acquiring the embellishments which would be further elaborated upon in the taverns of Prad. Berise Narrinder was one of the last to arrive, and there was a cheer when it was seen that she had managed to put a line around Perobane's crippled machine and had it in tow.

When it was apparent that disengagement had been completed, Toller

counted the fighters and was disturbed to find there were only twenty-five, including the one Berise had salvaged. He ordered a squadron by squadron check, and there was a lull in the hubbub of talk as it was realised that Green Three, which had been flown by Wans Mokerat, was missing. At some point in the whirling turmoil of the battle Mokerat had met his fate, unobserved by any of his comrades, and had disappeared completely, perhaps engulfed by a burning skyship.

The sobering effect of the discovery was as brief as Toller had expected, with the noise level among the other fliers quickly swelling to what it had been. He knew the youngsters were not heartless by nature—it was simply that, although physically unscathed, they too had become victims of war. *The same thing must have happened to me long ago, he thought, but without my understanding. And only recently has it been revealed to me what I am—a fleshly automaton whose essential hollowness renders him incapable of sustaining warmth or joy.*

Directly ahead of him, but a considerable distance away, was the gondola of a ruined skyship. Its occupants had successfully cast adrift all remnants of their burning balloon, which now hovered above and around them in great flakes of grey ash. The gondola and the fighter squadrons remained in fixed relative positions, because all were falling at the same speed.

Again Toller wondered if the Lander soldiers fully understood that their rate of descent, although insensible at this stage, would show an inexorable increase which would guarantee their deaths. Some of the soldiers were still firing their muskets in spite of the fact that the fighters were out of range, and—in one of the flukes which so often occur in seeming defiance of probability—a bullet came slowly tumbling towards Toller and came to rest within arm's length.

He plucked it out of the air and saw that it was a stubby cylinder of brakka wood. He put it away in a pocket, feeling a strange affinity with the alien marksman. *From one dead man to another*, he thought.

"We have done enough for this day," he shouted, raising his gloved hand. "Now let us find our way home!"

Chapter 9

At the sound of the wagon approaching Bartan Drumme stood up and went to the mirror which hung on the kitchen wall. It felt odd for him not to be dressed in work clothes, and even the face which regarded him from the glass seemed unfamiliar. The boyish, humorous look—which had once earned him the farmers' mistrust—was no longer present, and instead there were the hard, sun-darkened features of a man who was no stranger to solitude, sorrow and relentless toil. He smoothed down his black hair, adjusted the collar of his shirt and went to the farmhouse door.

The Phorateres' wagon was drawing to a halt outside, amid much snorting from an elderly bluehorn which was sweating after the journey in the midday sun. Harro and Ennda waved and called a greeting to Bartan. They had actively befriended him since the grim incident at their farm, and it had been at Ennda's insistence that he had agreed to take some hours off and go into New Minnett to relax. He assisted her down from the tall vehicle and, while Harro was leading the bluehorn to the water trough, slowly walked with her to the house.

"What a handsome young toff you look today," she said, a smile erasing the look of tiredness on her face.

"I managed to preserve one good shirt and one pair of trews, but they seem to have shrunk somewhat."

"You have expanded." She halted to give him an appraising look. "It's difficult to realise you are the same baby-face who used to try to dazzle us with his clever city talk."

"I don't talk much at all these days," Bartan said ruefully. "There isn't much point in it."

Ennda gave his arm a sympathetic squeeze. "Has SONDY not improved in any way? How long has it been? Close on two hundred days?"

"Two hundred! I've lost track of the time, but it must be something like that. SONDY remains as she was, but I'm not giving up hope."

"Good for you! Now, is she still in the bedroom?"

Bartan nodded, ushered Ennda into the house and led the way to the bedroom. He pushed open the door to reveal SONDeweere sitting on the edge of the bed in a full-length white nightdress. She was staring at the opposite wall and remained

that way, apparently unaware of the presence of others. Her yellow hair was well brushed, but was unimaginatively arranged in a way which showed that Bartan had done it.

Ennda went into the room, knelt in front of Sondeweere and gathered her unresisting hands into hers. "Hello, SONDY," she said in a gentle but cheerful voice. "How are you today?"

Sondeweere made no response. The beautiful face was untroubled, the eyes unseeing.

Ennda kissed her on the forehead, stood up and returned to Bartan. "All right, young man! You can go off to town and enjoy yourself for a few hours and leave everything to me. Just tell me what has to be done about SONDY's food and the ... mmm ... consequences."

"Consequences?" Bartan gazed at Ennda in puzzlement until a look of exasperation made her meaning clear. "Oh! You don't have to do anything. She keeps herself clean, attends to all the basics by herself and eats anything that is prepared for her. It's just that nobody else seems to exist for her. She never speaks. She sits there on the bed all day, staring at the wall, and I don't exist. Perhaps I deserve it. Perhaps it's my punishment for bringing her to this place."

"Now you're being silly." Ennda put her arms around him and he clung to her, immensely comforted by her aura of warmth, femininity and resilience.

"What have we here?" Harro Phoratore boomed jovially, entering the shady kitchen from the sunlight outside. "Is one woman not enough for you, young Bartan?"

"Harro!" Ennda rounded on her husband. "What kind of a thing is that to say?"

"I'm sorry, lad—I wasn't thinking about your SONDY being..." Harro hesitated, the circular bite-scar glowing whitely against the pink of his cheek. "I'm sorry."

"No need to apologise," Bartan said. "I appreciate your coming here—it's more than generous."

"Nonsense! It's a welcome break for me as well. I intend to spend a very lazy aftday and—I give you fair warning—to consume a quantity of your wine." Harro glanced anxiously at the group of empty demijohns in a corner. "You *do* have some left, I trust."

"You'll find ample supplies in the cellar, Harro. It's the only solace left to me and I take care never to run short."

"I hope you don't drink too much," Ennda said, showing some concern.

Bartan smiled at her. "Only enough to guarantee a night's sleep. It's too quiet here—much too quiet."

Ennda nodded. "I'm sorry you have to bear your burden alone, Bartan, but it's all we can do to manage our own section now that so many of our family have given up and moved north. Did you know that the Wilvers and the Obrigails have gone as well?"

"After all their work! How many families are left now?"

"Five, apart from us."

Bartan shook his head dispiritedly. "If only the people would wait and..."

"If *you* wait around here much longer it'll be dark before you reach the tavern," Ennda cut in, pushing him towards the front entrance. "Go off and enjoy yourself for a few hours. Go on—*out!*"

With a last glance at his wife, withdrawn to her inaccessible world, Bartan went outside and summoned his bluehorn with a whistle. Within a few minutes he had it saddled and was riding west to New Minnett. He was unable to shake off the feeling that he was doing something shameful, planning to spend half a day free of his crushing burden of work and responsibility, but the fierceness of his hunger for a spell in the undemanding company of amiable toppers told him the excursion would be remedial.

The ride through pastoral scenery was refreshing in itself, and on reaching the township he was surprised by his reaction to the sight of unknown people, clusters of buildings in a variety of sizes and styles, and the lofty rigging of sea-going ships at anchor in the river. When he had seen New Minnett for the first time it had seemed a tiny and remote outpost of civilisation—now, after his lengthy incarceration on the farm, it was a veritable metropolis.

He rode straight to the open-fronted building used as a tavern and was gratified to find in it many of the local characters who had welcomed him and his airboat on that far-off first visit. Compared to the harrowing downward trend of life in the Basket, it was as though the townsfolk had been suspended in time, preserved, ready to spring to life at his behest. The reeve, Majin Karrodall, was present—wearing his smallsword—as was the plump Otler, still protesting his sobriety, and a dozen other remembered individuals whose obvious contentment with their lot was a reassurance that life in general was well worth the living.

Bartan happily drank the strong brown ale with them, finding room for pot after pot of it without wearying of the taste. He was appreciative of the way in which the men—including Otler, who was not known for his tact—made no reference to his people's continuing evacuation of the Haunt. As though sympathising with the reasons for his visit they kept the talk on general subjects, much of the time discussing the latest news of the strange war that was being fought in the sky above the far side of the planet. The notion of a new breed of warriors who rode through the heavens on the backs of jet engines, without the

support of balloons, seemed to have fired their imaginations. In particular, Bartan was struck by how often the name of Lord Toller Maraquine came up.

"Is it true that this Maraquine slew two kings at the time of the Migration?" he said.

"Of course it's true!" Otler banged his alepot down on the long table. "Why do you think they call him the Kingslayer? I was *there*, my friend! Saw it with my own eyes!"

"Balderdash!" Karrodall shouted amid a general cry of derision.

"Well, perhaps I didn't actually *see* what happened," Otler conceded, "but I saw King Prad's ship fall like a stone." He turned his shoulder to the others and aimed his words at Bartan. "I was a young soldier at the time—Fourth Sorka Regiment—and I was in one of the very first ships to leave Ro-Atabri. I never thought I'd complete the journey, but that is another story."

"One we've heard a thousand times," another man said, nudging his neighbour.

Otler made an obscene gesture at him. "You see, Bartan, Prad's ship got entangled with the one which Toller Maraquine was flying. Chakkell, who was then a prince, and Daseene and their three children were in Toller's ship, and he saved their lives by pushing the two ships apart. It took the strength of ten men, but he did it single-handed, and Prad's ship went down. I saw it plunge past me, and I'll never forget the way Prad was standing there at the rail. Tall and straight he was, unafraid, and his one blind eye was shining like a star.

"His death meant that Prince Leddravohr became King, and three days later—after the landing—Leddravohr and Toller fought a duel which lasted six hours. It ended when Toller struck Leddravohr's head off his shoulders with a single blow!"

"He must have been quite a man," Bartan said drily, trying to separate fact from fiction.

"Strength of ten! And what do you mean by must have *been* quite a man? None of those striplings up there can keep pace with him to this day. Do you know that in the first battle against the Landers, after all his fire arrows had been expended, he started cutting their balloons into shreds with his white sword? The selfsame sword with which he overcame Karkarand—Karkarand, mark you!—with only one blow. I tell you, Bartan, we owe that man everything. If I were twenty years younger, and didn't have this bad knee, I'd be up there with him at this very minute."

Reeve Karrodall guffawed into his beer. "I thought you said they had no need of gasbags at the midpoint."

"Very droll," Otler muttered. "Very droll indeed."

The following hours slipped by pleasantly and quickly for Bartan, and it was with some surprise that he noticed the sun's rays slanting redly into the tavern at a shallow angle. "Gentlemen," he said, getting to his feet, "I have stayed longer than it was my intention to do. I must leave you now."

"Have but one more," Karrodall said.

"I'm sorry, but I am obliged to leave. Friends are attending to the farm for me, and I have already done them a discourtesy."

Karrodall stood and took Bartan's hand. "I heard about your wife's misfortune, and I'm sorry," he whispered. "Would you not consider taking her away from that baneful place?"

"The place is just a place," Bartan said lightly, determined not to be offended at this late stage of the gathering, "and I won't surrender it. Good-bye, Majin."

"Good luck, son!"

Bartan saluted the rest of the company and walked out to where his bluehorn was tethered. The alcoholic warmth in his stomach and the pleasant optimistic tingle in his brain, important allies in the day-to-day battle of life, were at their height. He felt privileged to be alive, a beautiful feeling which in the past had suffused his existence, but which of late could only be recaptured near the bottom of a demijohn of black wine. He hoisted himself into the saddle and nudged the bluehorn forward, delegating to the intelligent creature the task of getting him home.

As the sky gradually deepened in colour the daytime stars became more prominent, and the spirals and braids of misty light began to emerge from the background. There were more major comets than usual. Bartan counted eight of them, their tails fanning right across the dome of the heavens, creating alternate bands of silver and dark blue among which meteors darted like fireflies. In his mellow speculative mood he wondered if men would ever solve the mystery of the sky's largest features. The stars were thought to be distant suns; the single green point of brilliance was known to be a third planet, Farland; and the nature of meteors was well understood because sometimes they crashed to the ground, leaving craters of various sizes. But what was the vast whirlpool of radiance which spanned the entire night sky for part of the year? Why did the heavenly population contain so many similar but smaller spirals, sometimes overlapping each other, ranging in shape from circles through ellipses to glowing spindles which concealed their structure until examined by telescope?

The train of thought caused Bartan to pay more attention than usual to the luminous arches of the sky, and thus it was that he noticed an entirely new phenomenon which might otherwise have escaped him. Due east, roughly in the direction of his farm, he saw a tiny and oddly-formed patch of light a short

distance above the horizon. It was like a four-pointed star with in-curved sides, the kind of geometrical shape created at the middle of four touching circles, and each point appeared to be emitting a faint spray of prismatic colour. The object was too small to yield much detail without a glass, but its centre seemed to be teeming with multi-hued specks of brilliance. Intrigued, Bartan watched the eerily beautiful apparition sink swiftly downwards and pass out of sight behind the crest of the nearest drumlin.

Shaking his head in wonderment, Bartan urged his bluehorn forward to the high ground, greatly extending his range of vision, but the object was nowhere to be seen. What had it *been*? Meteors falling to earth sometimes blossomed into vivid colour, but they were accompanied by violent thunderclaps, whereas the phenomenon he had just witnessed had been characterised by silence and the smoothness of its movement. He tentatively reached the conclusion that the object had been much larger than he had supposed, dwarfed by distance, mysteriously sailing through space far beyond Overland's atmosphere.

With his mind fuelled for further musings about the wonders of the universe, Bartan continued on his way. Almost an hour later he caught the first glimpse of the yellow lights of his own farmhouse and felt a fresh pang of guilt over having detained the Phorateres until after darkness. The fact that Sondeweere and he had only one bed made it difficult for him to invite them to stay until morning, unless Harro and he were to spend the night sleeping on the floor. It seemed a poor reward for their kindness to him, especially as neighbourly acts had become so rare in the Basket. Wondering how he was going to excuse himself, he increased the bluehorn's speed to a trot, trusting it to maintain a sure footing on the star-silvered ground.

He was about a mile from the house when his surroundings were suddenly drenched in a varicoloured light so intense that his eyes reflexively clamped themselves shut.

The bluehorn reared up, barking in terror, and Bartan clung to it, quaking in expectation of the cataclysmic explosion which instinct told him had to accompany such a flash of brilliance. There was no explosion—only a ringing, reverberating silence during which he felt his clothing ripple and flap although there was no rush of air. He opened his eyes as the bluehorn dropped its forefeet to the ground. He found himself to be virtually blinded by after-images of trees and shrubs, orange and green silhouettes which seemed permanently printed on his retinas.

"Steady, old girl, steady," he breathed, patting the animal's neck. He blinked hard, knuckled his eyes and looked all about him in search of clues as to the origins of the bewildering, frightening and wildly unnatural event. The dark

landscape had regained its eternal quietude. The sleeping world was trying to reassure him that things were as they had always been, but Bartan—prey to crawling apprehensions—knew better.

He urged the bluehorn forward as fast as he dared and in a few minutes was approaching the farmhouse. The very fact that Harro and Ennda were not outside and scanning the skies was a subtle indication that things were seriously amiss. Or was it? Perhaps he had been caught up in an essentially local disturbance of nature—after all, there were those who claimed that lightning sprang out of the ground, entirely contrary to the popular belief that it struck downwards from the heavens. He rode into the yard, dismounted and went to the farmhouse door. When he opened it the scene before him was a tableau of commonplace domesticity—Ennda doing her embroidery work on a sun hat, Harro in the act of tilting a demijohn to pour himself a cup of wine.

Bartan sighed with relief and then hesitated, his uneasiness returning, as he realised that the couple were indeed like part of a tableau. They were unmoving, rigid as statues. The only hint of animation in their features was a false one, due to the flickering of the lanterns in the draught from the open door.

"Harro? Ennda?" Bartan advanced uncertainly into the kitchen. "I ... I'm sorry I'm so late."

Ennda's needle began to move on the instant, and wine gurgled into Harro's cup. "Don't fret yourself, Bartan," Ennda said. "The sun has hardly set, and..." She looked through the doorway into the blackness beyond and began to frown. "That's strange! How did it...?" Her words were lost in a dulled splintering of glass as the demijohn Harro had been holding crashed on the stone floor. Tentacles of dark wine raced outwards from the shattered vessel.

"Curses!" Harro grabbed at his right shoulder and massaged it. "My arm hurts! My arm is so tired that it ... *hurts!*" He looked down at the floor and his eyes grew round in self-reproach. "I'm sorry, lad—I don't know what..."

"It doesn't matter," Bartan cut in. "What about the light? What do you think it was?"

"The light?"

"The blinding light. The *light*, for pity's sake! What do you think caused it?"

Harro glanced at his wife. "We didn't see any lights. Did you by any chance fall and knock your head?"

"I'm not drunk." Bartan was staring at the couple in perplexity when his gaze was drawn to the bedroom door. It was partially open, allowing a strip of light to slant across the bed, and from what he could see of it the bed appeared to be empty. He strode across the kitchen and pushed the bedroom door fully open. Sondeweere was not in the small square room beyond.

"Where is SONDY?" he said quietly.

"What?" Harro and Ennda leapt to their feet and came to his side, their faces registering astonishment.

"Where is SONDY?" Bartan repeated. "Did you let her go outside alone?"

"Of course not! She's in there!" Ennda thrust her way past him and halted, confounded by the room's patent emptiness and lack of hiding places.

"You must have been asleep," Bartan said. "She must have gone out past you when you were asleep."

"I wasn't asleep. This is imposs—" Ennda paused and pressed a hand to her forehead. "There's no point in our standing around here arguing. We have to go out and find her."

"Take the lights." Bartan picked up a tubular lantern and hurried outside. Even after they had checked the lavatory hut and found it empty he was still only mildly concerned. Although SONDWEERE had never strayed like this before, there were no predatory wild animals in the area, no cliffs or crevasses to threaten her safety. Her absence might even be a good omen, a sign that she was at last beginning to emerge from the shadow which had dimmed her mind and occulted her personality for so long.

It was not until they had been searching and calling her name for more than an hour that a different kind of premonition began to exercise its sway. Firstly, there had been the terrifying manifestation, the unbearable cascade of light; secondly, his wife had mysteriously vanished—and there had to be a connection between the two events. The Haunt—it had been naive and futile to rechristen it the Basket of Eggs—was going about its malign activities again, and SONDWEERE had become its latest victim. He had been given ample opportunity to take her away from the place of evil, but in his stubbornness and intellectual arrogance he had continued to expose her to dangers that no man understood. And *this* was the inevitable outcome...

"This blundering about in the darkness will gain us little," Harro PHORATERE said, tiredness and reason combining in his voice. "We should repair to the house and conserve our strength till daybreak. What do you say?"

"I think you're right," Bartan said dully.

The farmhouse had grown cold by the time they reached it, and while Bartan was preparing a fire in the hearth Harro busied himself by fetching a full demijohn from the cellar and pouring three cups of black wine. But, far from comforting Bartan, the cosy firelit ambience served only to remind him that he had no right to be enjoying the luxury while his wife was wandering somewhere in the night. At best she was cold and lost; at worst...

"How could a thing like this happen?" he said. "If I had known a thing like

this could happen I would never have left her side."

"I suppose I could have fallen asleep," Harro said. "The wine..."

"But Ennda was with you."

Ennda, who had apparently been on the verge of sleep, turned on Bartan immediately, her face twisted with fury. "What are you trying to say, city boy? Are you hinting that I killed your young whore? Do you think I ate her face off? Is *that* what you are saying? But where is the blood? Do you see any blood on my person? Or on this?" She gripped the neck of her blue blouse with both hands and ripped it downwards, partially exposing her breasts.

Bartan was aghast. "Ennda! *Please!* I had no thought of..."

She silenced him by springing out of her chair and dashing her cup into the fireplace. "I keep the dream at bay! It can't devour me any more, and that's the truth!"

Harro stood up and embraced his wife, drawing her tortured face against his shoulder. She leaned into him, sobbing and trembling violently. The wine she had thrown hissed and sputtered in the fire.

"I..." Bartan stood up and set his drink aside. "I didn't know the dream persisted."

"This happens sometimes," Harro said, his eyes contrite, miserable and haunted. "It would be best if I took her home."

"Home?" Ennda, the manic energy having been drained from her, spoke like a child. "Yes, Harro, please take me home ... away from this terrible land ... back east to Ro-Amass. I can't live this way any longer. Let's go back to our *real* home, where we were happy."

"Perhaps you're right," Harro murmured, patting her on the back. "We'll talk about it in the morning."

Ennda turned her head and looked at Bartan with a tremulous smile. "And what have I done to you, Bartan? You're a good boy, and Sindy is a good girl. I didn't mean anything I said."

"I know that," Bartan said uncomfortably. "There is no need for you to leave."

Harro shook his head. "No, lad, we'll go now, but I'll come back in the morning with extra hands. If Sindy hasn't shown up by that time we'll soon find her. You'll see."

"Thanks, Harro." Bartan went outside with the couple and helped them harness their bluehorn to the wagon. Throughout the task he was unable to prevent himself from scanning his dimly seen surroundings, hoping to pick out a drifting patch of white which would betoken Sondeweere's safe return.

His vigilance went unrewarded.

Unknown to Bartan, he was entering the blackest phase of his life, one in which—over a period of several days—he would come to accept that his dumb, tranced wife had departed his world for ever.

Chapter 10

There was nothing unusual about the fact that the enemy was coming out of the sun, but what surprised Toller was the size of the attack wave. It contained at least sixty ships laid out in a protective grid pattern.

His hope that the punishment inflicted on the first invasion fleet would have been enough to end the war had been unjustified, but subsequent attacks had been on a smaller scale. Many of them had seemed like suicide missions whose purpose was to test Overland's defences in new ways. The second force had tried to get through the weightless zone at night, but they had been betrayed by the sound of their exhausts, and had been forced to retreat with heavy casualties. Others had been equipped with varieties of ultra-powerful cannon, the recoil of which had destabilised and destroyed their own ships. And on two occasions the Landers had even deployed jet fighters of their own, launching them from the sides of gondolas. At first the enemy pilots had tried engaging the machines of the three squadrons in direct aerial combat, but they had been hopeless novices compared to Toller's skilled fliers and had been slaughtered, almost to a man. In a second experiment, they had attempted to make high-speed sorties into the Inner Defence Group, evidently with the intention of ramming the stations, but again had been driven off and destroyed.

With the passage of time it had become apparent to Toller that the establishment of a permanent base in the weightless zone had given the defenders an overwhelming advantage. It was a matter for surprise that King Rassamarden had not reached the same conclusion and abandoned the unequal struggle. The only explanation Toller could think of was contained in Colonel Gartasian's report of his meeting with the Lander scouting group. Gartasian had stated that they were overweeningly arrogant, proud and unamenable to reason. Perhaps the New Men of Land, their ruler included, were belated victims of pterthacosis in ways they did not even comprehend, destined to drown in their own irrational venom.

The only noticeable step they had taken towards self-preservation was that they had begun to wear parachutes, and thus could survive the destruction of their ships. It was impossible to say if they had invented the parachute independently, or if they had copied it after finding the body of Dinnitler, the

pilot whose machine had made the runaway plunge towards Land. There was also a theory that they had arrived at the design of their own fighters by piecing together the wreckage of Dinnitler's jet.

But Toller's mind was occupied with more immediate conjectures—did the appearance of a large fleet at this stage of the war betoken nothing more than a massive venting of self-destructive passion on the part of the Landers?

Or was it a sign of confidence in a new type of weapon?

Toller mulled the question over as he rode down against the sunlight at the apex of Red Squadron's formation. The sloping glass screen, a recent modification to the fighter's design, was protecting him from the worst of the icy slipstream. A furlong away on either side he could see the Blues and Greens scoring their own white trails through the spangled heavens, and the old guilt-tinged excitement began to course through him.

Far below, outlined against the great painted curvature of Land, some of the enemy fleet were already turning on their sides. The Landers no longer sailed blindly into ambush. They had developed a method of observing the sky above, probably using lookouts at the end of long tethers, and at the first sign of the fighters' condensation trails rolled their ships into varying attitudes for mutual defence. For that reason the three squadrons now went into action separately, and the style of combat had become individualistic and opportunist. Spectacular individual victories and equally spectacular deaths had ensued; legends had proliferated.

What is going to happen this time? Toller thought, his pulse quickening. *Is there a soldier down there whose destiny it is to end my life?*

As the array of skyships expanded across the view the fighters broke away from their formations and began to weave a basket of vapour trails around their quarry. Toller was aware of Berise Narrinder curving away to his left. There came a spattering of fire from long-range muskets, but it seemed sporadic in comparison to the usual fierce volleying, and Toller's premonition about a radical new weapon returned to him in force. He shut down his engine and waited for the fighter to coast to a halt so that he could study the skyships better. Several of the other fighters were already darting through the grid in high-speed attack runs, and he could see the orange flecks of their arrows, though as yet no balloons were on fire.

Toller reached for his binoculars, but his gauntlets and the bow tied to his left wrist made him clumsy, and it was with still unaided vision that he saw some of the enemy gondolas become surrounded with brownish specks, as though the crews were hurling dozens of missiles towards their attackers. But the specks were fluttering and beginning to move of their own volition.

Birds!

Still untangling the strap of his binoculars, Toller had a moment to let his mind race ahead to the question of what kind of bird the Landers would have chosen to send against human opponents. The answer came immediately—the Rettser eagle. Found in the Rettser mountains in the north of Kolcorron, the eagle had a wingspan exceeding two yards, a speed which defied accurate measurement, and the ability to gut a deer—or a man—almost in the blink of an eye. In the past they had not been trained for hunting or warfare, even against ptertha, because of their unpredictability—but the New Men had shown themselves to have little regard for their own lives when bent on the destruction of an enemy.

Toller's first look through the glasses confirmed his fears, and a chill went through him as he waited to see what havoc the great birds, natural masters of the aerial element, would wreak among his pilots. The pattern of vapour trails abruptly changed as the pilots closest to the skyships perceived the new threat and took evasive action. Seconds dragged by, then it dawned on Toller that the battle situation was remaining strangely static. He had expected the eagles, with their incredibly fast reflexes, to begin their unstoppable attacks on the instant of sighting the human fliers—but they were remaining in the vicinity of the ships from which they had been launched.

The magnified image in the binoculars revealed a curious spectacle.

The eagles were vigorously beating their wings, but instead of being propelled forward by the action were spinning head over tail in tight circles, making little or no progress through the air. It was as though they were being held in place by some invisible agency. The more frantically they flapped their wings the faster they revolved without changing position.

Toller was so bemused by the phenomenon that more drawn-out seconds passed before he began to appreciate that in weightless conditions the eagles would never be able to fly. In the absence of gravity the equations of winged flight were no longer valid. The dominant force acting on the birds was the upward thrust from their wings, and without weight to counterbalance it they were thrown into continuous backward rolls. An intelligent creature might have responded by altering its wing movement to something akin to a swimmer's stroke, but the eagles—prisoners of reflex—could only go on and on with their futile expenditure of energy.

"Bad luck, Landers," Toller murmured, feeding his engine. "And now you have to pay for your mistake!"

In the ensuing minutes he saw balloon after balloon set alight, apparently without loss among his own fliers. Now that the Landers fought from stationary

positions their balloons burned less readily, lacking a flow of air to feed the blaze, and sometimes the flames extinguished themselves long before the entire envelope was consumed, though without making any difference to a ship's eventual fate.

On this occasion the battle was given a touch of the bizarre by the presence of the gyrating eagles. Their terrified shrieking formed a continuous background to the roar of fighter jets, the patter of muskets and occasional blasts from cannon. Most of them kept on spinning, mindlessly squandering their strength, but Toller noticed that some had become quiescent and were drifting with their heads tucked under their wings as though asleep. A few were inert with wings only partially furled, giving every indication of being dead, perhaps overcome by sheer panic.

Immensely gratified by the turn of events, Toller pulled clear of the white-swaddled tumult to search for a likely target and saw a pilot of his own squadron closing in on him. It was Berise Narrinder, and she was rapidly opening and closing her right hand, signalling that she wanted to talk. Puzzled, he closed his throttle and allowed the fighter to coast to a halt. Berise did likewise and the two craft drifted together, gently yawing as their control surfaces became more and more ineffective.

"What is it?" Toller said. "Do you want to bring one of the birds back for dinner?"

Berise shook her head impatiently and pulled her scarf down below her chin. "There's a ship far down below the battle zone. I'd like you to have a look at it."

He looked in the direction she was indicating, but was unable to find the ship. "It has to be an observer," he said. "The pilot was told to remain well out of trouble and return to base with a report."

"My glasses tell me it is not an ordinary ship," Berise said. "Look carefully, my lord. Use your binoculars. Look where that line of cloud crosses the Gulf of Tronom."

Toller did as instructed, and this time was able to pick out the tiny outline of a skyship. It was on its side relative to him, reinforcing his opinion that its function was to observe the outcome of the battle. He wondered if it had yet become apparent to those on board that all was far from well with their fellows.

"I see nothing unusual about it," he said. "Why are you interested?"

"What about the markings on the gondola? Can't you see the blue and grey stripes?"

After further study of the miniature shape Toller lowered his binoculars. "Your young eyes are obviously better than mine." He paused, a coolness on the nape of his neck, as the full import of Berise's words reached him. "Blue and

grey were always the colours of the royal ships—but would Rassamarden have retained them?"

"Why not? They might mean something to him."

Toller nodded thoughtfully. "In spite of his declarations of contempt he seems to covet everything the old kings had. But would any ruler be foolhardy enough to venture so close to a battle?"

"I've been told that Leddravohr often *led* his troops—and he wasn't a New Man," Berise said through featherings of vapour. "And what about the eagles? If they had done what was required of them things would probably have gone very badly for us. Rassamarden may have expected to witness a famous victory."

"Your mind is as sharp as your eyes, captain." Toller gave her an approving smile.

"Compliments are all very well, my lord—but I have a more apt reward in mind."

"Assuming it *is* a royal ship, you want the honour of destroying it."

Berise met his gaze squarely, eyebrows drawn together. "I believe I have that right—I am the one who saw it."

"Your feelings are understandable—and I sympathise with them—but you must consider my position. If Rassamarden is on board that ship all else should be subordinated to the task of slaying him, thus bringing this war to an end. In all conscience, it is my duty to attack the ship with every fighter at my disposal."

"But you don't *know* that Rassamarden is there," Berise said, shifting her argument with a casual speed which reminded Toller of his wife's similar ability. "Surely it would be wrong of you to divert your forces from the main battle to pursue a single ship, especially one which in any case cannot hope to escape us."

Toller gave an exaggerated sigh. "May I at least accompany you and witness the exploit?"

"Thank you, my lord," Berise said warmly, and for once without the hint of challenge she always insinuated into the title. She immediately reached for the throttle of her red-striped machine.

"Not so fast!" Toller protested, pausing as the exhaust of a jet slewing wide of the battle made communication momentarily impossible. "First I want you to seek out Umol and Daas and bring them to me, and I will tell them what we are about. They must keep an eye on our progress. If we fail to return, they must attack that ship in force—on *no* account can the ship be permitted to withdraw with any of its crew or passengers still alive."

Berise tilted her head and frowned, her face a beautiful mask in the upflung light of the sun. "We are two fighters against one skyship—how can you doubt our success?"

"Because of the parachutes," Toller said. "When a skyship carries common soldiers it is enough for us to destroy the balloon. It matters little to us if they survive the drop and come back for more of the same medicine another day. But in this case the ship is of no importance—it would be less than pointless to burn the balloon, but allow Rassamarden to return safely to his pestilent kingdom. In this *crucial* case the balloon is not our target, nor even the gondola.

"We have to kill Rassamarden himself, and I don't need to tell you that will be a far more hazardous business than merely spiking a balloon at long range. Do you still claim the honour?"

Berise's expression was unaltered. "I am still the one who saw the ship."

A few minutes later Toller was riding down towards the distant ship, with Berise holding a parallel course, and it was then that he began to have doubts about allowing her to accompany him. The fighter pilots shared a special bond, a spirit of comradeship which surpassed anything he had previously known in ordinary military service, and she had skilfully made use of it to influence his decision. It was perhaps all right for him, half in love with death, to undertake such a dangerous mission—but what about his responsibility towards all those he commanded?

The dilemma was intensified by the fact that if he were to send Berise back to comparative safety she would jump to the conclusion that his motives were selfish, that he wanted the glory of killing Rassamarden all to himself. Most of the other fighter pilots would side with her, their impulse-governed natures allowing no options, and he dreaded the prospect of losing their esteem. Could that be the obvious nub of a childishly simple problem? Was he prepared to waste a young woman's life rather than forfeit the flattering regard of a handful of young bucks?

The only reasonable and honourable answer had to be: *No!*

Toller looked at Berise, preparing himself for an ordeal, then he was overwhelmed by a rush of unexpected emotion. It was a blend of affection and respect, triggered by the sight of her diminutive figure astride the streamlined bulk of the jet fighter and outlined against silver whirlpools in a dark blue infinity. It came to him that she was both courageous and intelligent, that she had certainly been ahead of him in every one of his ponderous deliberations, and that she was fully qualified to choose her own destiny. As though sensing his interest she gave him an enquiring glance, her features all but hidden by her scarf and goggles. Toller gave her a salute, which she returned, then he concentrated his thoughts on the forthcoming skirmish.

He and Berise were on a straight line between the main battle and the lone skyship. His hope had been that their condensation trails would remain

unnoticed against the tangled confusion of smoke and sun-glowing vapour above, but the evidence was that keen-eyed lookouts had already spotted them. Musketeers were diving out from the gondola, tumbling to the ends of their lines, forming a sparse circle from which they could direct fire at a fighter going for the balloon's vulnerable upper surface. Their chances of disabling a pilot were not great, but the problem in this particular instance was that Berise was required to go in on a level with the musketeers in order to attack the gondola itself, and in previous encounters the Landers had proved themselves to be excellent marksmen.

A few furlongs away from the ship Toller gave the talk signal and shut down his engine, and when Berise drifted to a halt beside him he said, "Before taking any unnecessary risks, have a closer look at the gondola. Find me some evidence that Rassamarden really is on board."

Berise raised her binoculars to her eyes, was quiet for a moment and then—unexpectedly—began to laugh. "I glimpsed a crown! A glass crown! Is that what King Prad and all the others wore? Did they really walk about with ridiculous ornaments like that on their heads?"

"On certain occasions," Toller said, wondering why he had begun to feel offended. "If what you saw was the Bytran diadem it is composed principally of diamonds, and is worth—" He broke off, suffused by a savage gladness. "The fool! The puffed-up, vainglorious *fool!* His fondness for that little glass hat has cost him his life for certain! How many cannon shells have you?"

"The full six."

"Good! I'll take the balloon, but from the side rather than above, so that I'll be visible from the gondola. All eyes will be upon me when I loose my arrow—and that's the moment for your attack. Perhaps fate will let you burst their crystal stores on the first pass. Are you ready?"

Berise nodded. Toller made sure his pneumatic reservoir was at maximum pressure, then blew crystals into his engine and the responsive machine surged towards the skyship. He flew a little slower than he would normally have done and swept outwards into a curve which would take him past the balloon on a descending diagonal. Berise was on a steeper downward course, using her engine in short bursts which left an intermittent trail of white.

As the blue-and-grey gondola expanded in his vision Toller saw a milling of figures among the wicker partitions. He counted eight soldiers at the ends of radial lines, all with a hunched foreshortening of their upper bodies which told him they were aiming their muskets in his direction.

That's what I want, he thought, removing his right glove. *That's just what I want.*

He took an arrow from a quiver, ignited the tip and nocked it on to his bowstring. He gunned his engine, bracing himself against the acceleration, and dived on the balloon. The howl from the exhaust obliterated all musket reports, but he saw their toadstool billows of white. As the monstrous shape of the balloon swelled to become a curved brown wall blotting out much of the universe, he rolled the fighter to put the solidity of the engine between him and most of the enemy marksmen. Land and Overland obediently slid into new positions in the firmament.

Toller drew the bow and fired in a single practised movement, and in the same movement heard the double blast of Berise's cannon. His arrow streaked into the balloon, its line of flight vectored into an arc by his own speed. Something flicked his left leg and tufts of cottony insulation whirled away in the fighter's slipstream. He crouched low on the rounded back of the machine and burned his way out towards the stars. At a safe distance he shut down the engine and pulled into a turn which gave him a view of the battle scene.

Berise was completing a similar manoeuvre above him and to his right. Fire was spreading on one side of the Lander balloon, but although he was certain Berise's aim had been good, the gondola appeared to be undamaged. There was no way of telling what injury, if any, the iron balls passing through it had inflicted on those inside.

Berise was busy clearing the breeches of her cannon and inserting fresh shells. When she had finished she raised a hand and Toller went for the balloon again, trying to draw as much fire as possible in order to give her a second clear run. He successfully put an orange-streaming dart into the now misshapen giant and again sought out Berise in the empty sky beyond. Instead of pausing she reloaded during a sweeping turn and drove in beneath him at speed, coming up from beneath the Lander gondola.

The tethered soldiers were turning their muskets towards her as she fired both cannon. The gondola shuddered as the shot ploughed into the planking of the deck, but it remained structurally intact, and soldiers on board kept on firing through the black smoke which was gathering around the stricken craft.

Toller, who had been praying for a crystal explosion, coasted to a halt. There was a possibility that Rassamarden had been hit, but a man was a small target within the volume of a gondola, and in this instance he *had* to be able to claim a certain kill. Nothing else could be acceptable under the circumstances. He looked around for Berise and saw her swooping down on him in a nimbus of brilliant vapour. As she drew near he tapped his chest and pointed at the skyship, signifying that he intended to mount his own attack. She pulled down her scarf and shouted something he failed to hear above the growl of her engine. Her face

was savage, almost unrecognisable. He barely had time to note that her windscreen was spidered with white lines, then she had given her engine full throttle and was dwindling into the distance—heading straight for the skyship amid an appalling blast of sound.

Toller gave an involuntary cry of protest as the fighter streaked towards the gondola and it became obvious that Berise had no intention of changing course. Barely two seconds before impact she leapt off the machine. It sledged through the wall of the gondola and struck the centrally mounted engine, driving the entire structure forward in a tumbling movement which wrapped large pieces of the still-burning balloon around it. An acceleration strut broke free and flailed off to one side while tethered soldiers were snatched into the turmoil by coiling ropes. A moment later there came a series of whooshing explosions—typical of the pikon-halvell reaction—followed by a great billowing of greenish flame. Toller knew at once that nobody aboard the gondola could possibly have escaped death.

Berise, having kicked herself into a trajectory only slightly different from that of her fighter, had disappeared into the opaque seethings of smoke, becoming lost to Toller's view. Cold with apprehension, senses overloaded, he fed his engine and flew in a semi-circle around the slow-spinning chaos, reaching the dark blue serenity beyond. At first there was no sign of Berise, then he saw a twinkling white mote which was changing position against the background of stars and silver spirals. His glasses showed that it was Berise, perhaps a mile distant and still receding, still using up the energy imparted to her by the fighter's speed.

He went after her, dreading the prospect of finding a mutilated body, adjusting his speed and direction as he drew near. The fighter had begun to wallow as it closed in on Berise, and he had to raise himself on the footrest in order to grip her arm and pull her towards him. He knew immediately that she was alive and well because she expertly took command of their relative motion, guiding herself in such a way that she ended up astride of him, face to face, arms around his neck.

He saw the manic ecstasy on her face, felt the quivering tension of her body despite the bulkiness of her skysuit, and in that moment there was nothing they could do but kiss. Berise's lips were cold, even her tongue was cold, but Toller—the man who had forsworn sexual passion for ever—was unable to stop his groin lifting up against her again and again. She clamped her legs around him and rode him eagerly for the duration of the kiss, then used both hands to push his face away from hers.

"Was I good, Toller?" she breathed. "Was that the best thing you ever saw?"

"Yes, yes, but you're lucky to be alive."

"I know, I *know*!" She laughed and returned to the kiss and they drifted that way for a long time, lost among the stars and luminous swirls of their private universe.

For the most part it was quiet on board the skyship. Toller had carried out the inversion manoeuvre some two hundred miles below the weightless zone, and now the ship was gently falling towards Overland. During the next few days little would be required other than periodic injections of hot gas to give the huge balloon a positive internal pressure which would keep it from falling in on itself. The bitterness of the aerial element was mitigated to some extent by a crystal-powered heater and the fact that it was now standard practice for gondolas to be lined with vellum to prevent the ingress of chill air through chinks in the walls and deck.

It was, however, still very cold within the circumscribed space of the gondola, and when Berise removed her blouse her nipples gathered into brown peaks. Toller, who was already naked and ensconced in layers of eiderdown, extended an inviting hand to her, but she held back for the moment. She was kneeling beside him, gripping one of the transverse lines which were a vital safety feature in the virtual absence of gravity.

"Are you sure about this?" she said. "You haven't been at all discreet." She was referring to Toller having announced his intention of presenting her to the King, and—instead of returning to Overland by fallbag and parachute—commandeering a skyship for just the two of them.

"Are you delaying in this way to give me the opportunity to change my mind?" He smiled and glanced at the globes of her breasts, which were buoyantly beautiful in a way which would have been impossible in normal gravity. "Or is it to prevent me changing my mind?"

Berise placed a forearm across her breasts. "I'm thinking of the Lady Gesalla. It is almost certain that she will be informed, by somebody, and I have no wish for you to look on me afterwards with cold eyes."

"The Lady Gesalla and I live in different worlds," Toller said. "We both do what it is in us to do."

"In that case..." Berise squirmed her cold little body into the quilts beside him, making him gasp with the touch of her cold fingers.

In the days and nights that followed, while the meteors flickered all around, Toller rediscovered vital aspects of his being, learned the extent to which his life had become arid and deficient in recent years. The experience was unbearably sweet and unbearably bitter at the same time, because an inner voice informed

him that he was committing a form of self-murder—a spiritual suicide—while the meteors flickered all around.

PART III
Silent Invasions

Chapter 11

By the time Sondeweere had been away for eighty days Bartan Drumme had developed a new pattern of living.

Each morning he went out and made some attempt to cultivate the nearer portions of his farm—that was a duty he could not ignore—but his real preoccupation was with his hoard of glass and ceramic demijohns, the source of his sustenance and comfort. The production and consumption of wine claimed most of his waking hours. He had learned to dispose of such niceties as using fresh yeast and of waiting for the wine to clear, the latter being an exercise in pointless aesthetics which had no effect on a beverage's alcohol content.

As soon as a jar of wine had ceased working he siphoned it off the dregs and poured in a new batch of juice expressed from fruit or berries, restarting the fermentation with the sludge of the old yeast. The yeast quickly became contaminated with wild strains, yielding wines which were marred by sourness and off-flavours, but the method had the overriding virtue of being *fast*.

Efficiency of production was all that mattered to Bartan. He frequently became ill and was racked by diarrhoea caused by drinking his murky potions, but that seemed a small price to pay for the ability to escape his guilt and to sleep the long night through. The bargain was enhanced by the fact that he had little need of solid food, the bubble-ringed glasses providing most of the nourishment he required to get through the weary succession of days.

Now that even the Phoraterie family had left the Basket he had no companionship from other farmers, but he had given up riding into New Minnett to spend time in the tavern. The journey had begun to seem tedious and lacking in purpose when he had all he could drink at home, and in any case he could detect a new lack of warmth in his reception. Reeve Karrodall had counselled him about his drinking and personal appearance, and subsequently had become a much less congenial person with whom to while away the hours.

He was returning from the fields one day, just before sunset, when he noticed a flurry of movement ahead of him in the dust of the path. Closer inspection revealed that it was a crawler, the first he had seen in a long time. The glistening brown creature was labouring along the path in the direction of the house, with occasional flashes of pallid grey from its underside as it clambered over pebbles.

Bartan stared at it for a moment, his mouth twitching in revulsion, then looked around for a large stone. He found one which required two hands to lift, and dashed it down on the crawler. With his gaze averted in case he glimpsed the sickening result of his handiwork, he stepped over the stone and continued on his way. There were many varieties of small life forms to be found in the soil of Overland, most of them repugnant to his eye, but he usually left them alone to go about their business in peace. The sole exception was the crawler, which he had a compulsion to destroy on sight.

The house and outbuildings were bathed in a mellow red-gold light as he drew near, and he felt the familiar sinking of his spirits at the prospect of spending the night there alone. This was the worst time of the day, when he was met by silence in the house in place of Sondeweere's laughter, and the darkening dome of the sky seemed to reverberate with emptiness. The whole world felt empty at sunset. He passed the pigsty, which was also silent because he had turned the animals out into the wild to fend for themselves, and crossed the yard to the house. On opening the front door he paused, his heart beginning to pound as he realised the place *felt* different.

"Sondy!" he called out, giving way to an irrational impulse. He darted through the kitchen and flung open the bedroom door. The room beyond was empty, with no change in the squalor he had allowed to overwhelm it. Downcast and feeling like a fool, he nevertheless returned to the front entrance and scanned the surroundings. Everything was as usual in the sad coppery light, the only sign of movement coming from the bluehorn which was grazing near the orchard.

Bartan sighed, shaking his head over the bout of idiocy. He had a throbbing pain in his temples, legacy of the wine he had drunk in the afternoon, and he felt parched. He selected a full demijohn from the array in the corner, picked up a cup and returned outside to the bench by the door. The wine tasted less palatable than usual, but he drank the first two cupfuls greedily, pouring them down like water in order to win the blessed muzziness which dulled intellect and emotion. He had a feeling he was going to need it more than ever in the hours to come.

As darkness gathered and the heavens began to throng with their nightly display, he picked out Farland—the only green-tinted object in the firmament—and allowed his gaze to dwell on it. He still retained all his scepticism for religion, but of late had begun to understand the comforts it could offer. Assuming that Sondeweere was dead, it would be so good to believe, or even half-believe, that she had merely taken the High Path to the outer world and was beginning a new existence there. A simple reincarnation without continuance of memory or personality, which was what the Alternist religion postulated, was in many ways indistinguishable from straightforward death—but it offered

something. It offered the hope that he had not totally destroyed a wonderful human life with his stubbornness and arrogance, that in the eternity which lay ahead he and Sondeweere would meet again, perhaps many times, and that he would be able to make amends to her in some way. The fact that they would not consciously recognise each other, and yet might respond as soul mates, unaccountably drawn to each other, made the whole concept romantically beautiful and poignant...

Tears flooded Bartan's eyes, expanding the image of Farland into consecutive rings filled with radial prismatic needles. He gulped down more wine to ease the choking pain in his throat.

Let me know that you are up there, Sondy, he pleaded in his thoughts, surrendering to the fantasy. *If only you could grant me a sign that you still exist, I too would begin to live again.*

He continued drinking as Farland drifted down the sky. Now and again he lost consciousness through exhaustion and increasing intoxication, but when he opened his eyes the green planet was always centred in his field of vision, sometimes as a swirling luminous bubble, at others in the semblance of a circular chalcedonic gem, slowly rotating, striking a languorous green fire from a thousand facets. It seemed to grow bigger, and bigger, finally to develop a mobile core which displayed a creamy luminance, a core which by imperceptible stages evolved into the likeness of a woman's face.

Bartan, Sondeweere said, not in an ordinary voice, but an inversion of sound in which one kind of silence was imposed on another. Poor Bartan, I have been aware of your pain, and I am glad that I have at last succeeded in reaching you. You must desist from blaming yourself, and punishing yourself, and thus squandering your one-and-only life. You have no reason to reproach yourself on my account.

"But I brought you to this place," Bartan mumbled, unastonished, playing the game of dreams. "I am responsible for your death."

If I were dead I would be unable to speak to you.

Bartan replied in his fuddled obstinacy. "The crime remains. I deprived you of a life—the one we should have shared—and you were so lovely, so sweet, so good..."

You must remember me as I actually was, Bartan. Do not fuel your self-pity by imagining that I was anything but a very ordinary woman.

"So good, so pure..."

Bartan! It may help you if I make you aware that I was never faithful to you. Glave Trinchil was only one of the men from whom I took my pleasures. There were many of them—including my Uncle Jop...

"That isn't true! I have dreamed foul lies into your mouth." On another level of Bartan's drugged consciousness there came the first stirrings of comprehension and wonder: *This is not a dream! This is really happening!*

That is so, Bartan. The non-voice, the modulations of silence, somehow conveyed wisdom and kindliness. This is really happening, but it will not happen again—so mark well what I am saying. I am not dead! You must stop torturing yourself and dissipating your one-and-only life. Put the past behind you and go on to other things. Above all, forget about me. Goodbye, Bartan...

The sound of his cup splintering on the ground brought Bartan to his feet. He stood there in the star-shot darkness, swaying and shivering, staring at Farland, which was now just above the western horizon. It registered as a point of pure green light without fringes or optical adornments—but for the first time he saw it as another planet, a *world*, a real place which was as large as Land or Overland, a seat of life.

"Sondy!" he called out, running a few futile paces forward. "Sondy!"

Farland continued its slow descent to the rim of the world.

Bartan went back into the house, fetched another cup and returned to his bench. He filled the cup and drank from it in small, regular, relentless sips as the enigmatic mote of brilliance gradually extinguished itself, winking on the horizon. When it had vanished from sight he found that his mind had acquired a strange and precarious clarity, an ability—which had to fade soon—to deal with unearthly concepts. Momentous judgments and decisions had to be made quickly, before a vinous tide swept him into lasting unconsciousness.

"I still repudiate all religious belief," he announced to the darkness, calling on the act of speaking aloud to help imprint his thinking on the coming days and years.

"In doing so I am being totally logical. How do I know I'm being totally logical? Because the Alternists preach that only the soul, the spiritual *essence*, ventures along the High Path. It is an article of faith that there is no continuance of memory—otherwise every man, woman and child would be burdened beyond endurance with recollections of previous existences. It is obvious that Sondeweere remembers me and every circumstance of our lives—therefore she cannot be an Alternist reincarnation.

"As well as that, there are no known instances of those who have passed on communicating with those who remain. And Sondeweere herself referred to my one-and-only life, which ... which does not really prove anything ... but if we all have only one life, and she *spoke* to me, that proves her life has not ended...

"Sondeweere is physically alive somewhere!"

Bartan shivered and took a longer drink, blurrily elated and overwhelmed at

the same time. His momentous discovery had brought many questions in its wake, questions of a kind he was not accustomed to dealing with. Why was he persuaded that Sondeweere was on Farland and not, as was much more likely, in another part of his own world? Was it that the apparition had been so intimately associated with the image of the green planet, or had the strange voiceless message from her been layered with meanings not contained in the bare words? And if she were on Farland—how had she been transported? And why? Was it something to do with the inexplicable lights he had seen on the night of her disappearance? And, granting the other suppositions, what had given her the miraculous ability to speak to him across thousands of miles of space?

And—most pressing of all—now that he had been vouchsafed the new knowledge, what was he going to do with it? What action was he going to take?

Bartan grinned, staring glassily into the darkness. The last question had been the only one to which he could easily supply an answer.

It was obvious that he had to go to Farland and bring Sondeweere home!

"Your wife was abducted!" Reeve Majin Karrodall's cry of astonishment was followed by an attentive silence among the tavern's other customers.

Bartan nodded. "That's what I said."

Karrodall moved closer to him, hand dropping to the hilt of his smallsword. "Do you know who did it? Do you know where she is?"

"I don't know who was responsible, but I know where she is," Bartan said. "My wife is living on Farland."

Some of those nearby emitted gleeful sniggers and the group around him began to increase in size. Karrodall gave them an impatient glance, his red face deepening in colour, before he narrowed his eyes at Bartan.

"Did you say Farland? Are you talking about Farland ... in the sky?"

"I am indeed talking about the planet Farland," Bartan said solemnly. He reached for the alepot which had been set out for him, overbalanced and had to grasp the table for a moment of support.

"You'd better sit down before you fall down." Karrodall waited until Bartan lowered himself on to a bench. "Bartan, is this more of Trinchil's teachings? Are you trying to say your wife has died and travelled the High Path?"

"I'm saying she is alive. On Farland." Bartan drank deeply from the alepot. "Is that so hard to understand?"

Karrodall straddled the bench. "What's hard to understand is why you let yourself into a condition which so ill becomes you. You look terrible, you stink—and not only of bad wine—and now you are so soused that your talk is that of a madman. I have told you this before, Bartan, but you must quit the Haunt

before it is too late."

"I have already done so," Bartan said, wiping froth from his lips with the back of a hand. "I'll never set foot there again."

"At least that is *one* sensible decision on your part. Where will you go?"

"Have I not said?" Bartan surveyed the ring of gleefully incredulous faces. "Why, I'm going to Farland to rescue my wife."

There was an outbreak of laughter which the reeve's authority could no longer hold in check. More men crowded around Bartan, while others hurried away to spread the word of the unexpected sport which was to be had at the tavern. Somebody slid a fresh tankard into place in front of Bartan.

The plump, limping figure of Otler approached the group, shouldered his way in and said, "But, my friend, how do you *know* that your wife has taken up residence on Farland?"

"She told me three nights ago. She spoke to me."

Otler nudged the man beside him. "The woman looked as though she had a healthy set of bellows, but they must have been better than we knew. What do you say, Alsorn?"

The remark disturbed Bartan's alcoholic composure. He grabbed Otler's shirt and tried to pull him down on to the bench, but the reeve thrust them apart and swung a warning finger between the two men.

"All I meant," Otler complained, tucking his shirt back into his breeches, "was that Farland is a long way off." He brightened up as a witticism occurred to him. "I mean, that's what Farland means, isn't it? *Far-land!*"

"Being in your company is an education in itself," Bartan said. "Sondeweere appeared to me in a vision. She spoke to me in a vision."

Again there was a burst of merriment, and Bartan—stupefied though he was—recognised that he had only succeeded in making himself a figure of fun.

"Gentlemen," he said, rising unsteadily to his feet. "I have tarried here too long, and soon I must depart for the noble city of Prad. I have spent the past two days repairing and refurbishing my wagon—therefore the journey should not be overly prolonged—but nevertheless I will have need of money along the way for the purchase of food and perhaps just a little wine or brandy." He nodded in acknowledgment of an ironic cheer.

"My airboat is on the wagon outside—it needs only a new gasbag—and in addition I have brought some good furniture and tools. Who will give me a hundred royals for the lot?"

Some of the listeners moved away to inspect what was undoubtedly a bargain, but others were more interested in prolonging the entertainment. "You haven't told us how you propose to reach Farland," a hollow-cheeked merchant

said. "Will you shoot yourself out of a cannon?"

"I have as yet little idea how to make the flight, and that is why I must begin my journey by going to Prad. There is one man there who knows more about journeying through the sky than any other, and I shall seek him out."

"What is his name?"

"Maraquine," Bartan said. "Sky Marshal Lord Toller Maraquine."

"I'm sure he'll be very glad to see you," Otler said, nodding in mock-approval. "His lordship and you will make a fine pair."

"Enough of this!" Karrodall gripped Bartan's arm and forcibly drew him away from the group. "Bartan, it grieves me to see you thus, with all your drunken babbling about Farland and visions ... and now this talk of trying to approach the King-slayer. You can't be serious about that."

"Why not?" Striving to look dignified, Bartan prised the reeve's fingers off his arm. "Now that the war is ending Lord Toller will have no further use for his fortresses in the sky. When he hears my proposal to fly one of them to Farland—bearing the flag of Kolcorron, mark you—he will doubtless be pleased to give me his patronage."

"I am sorry for you," Karrodall remarked sadly. "I am truly sorry for you."

As he travelled to the east Bartan kept an eye on the horizon ahead, and eventually was rewarded with his first sight of Land in along time.

In the beginning the sister world appeared as a curving sliver of pale light atop the distant mountains, then as the journey progressed it gradually rose higher to become a glowing dome. The nights grew noticeably longer as Land encroached upon more and more of the sun's path. As the planet continued its upward drift, to show a semi-circle and more, the outlines of the continents and oceans became clearly visible, evocations of lost histories.

Eventually there came the time when Land's lower edge lifted clear of the horizon, creating a narrow gap through which the rising sun could pour mingling rays of multi-coloured fire. The diurnal pattern of light and darkness, familiar to born Kolcorronians, was beginning to re-establish itself, although at this stage foreday was extremely brief. For Bartan—journeying alone in dusty landscapes—the occasion was a significant one, worth commemorating with extra measures of brandy.

He knew that when foreday and aftday reached a balance he would be close to the city of Prad, and from that moment onwards his future would be in the hands of a stranger.

Chapter 12

A great deal of thought and effort had been put into making the garden look as though it had been established for centuries. Some of the statues had been deliberately chipped to give them semblance of antiquity, and the walls and stone benches were artificially weathered with corrosive fluids. The flowers and shrubs had either been grown from seeds brought from Land, or were native varieties which closely resembled those of the Old World.

In a way Toller Maraquine sympathised with the intent—he could imagine that being in the garden would help counterbalance the aching emptiness of the sunset hour—but he had to wonder at the psychology involved. King Chakkell's personal achievements since arriving on Overland would guarantee him a place in history, but somehow that was not enough to satisfy him. He obviously craved all that his predecessors had enjoyed—not only power itself, but the trappings and emblems of power. Identical motivation had just brought about the death of the King of the New Men, reinforcing Toller's belief that he would never be able to comprehend the mentality of those who needed to rule others.

"I am well pleased with the outcome," King Chakkell said, stroking his paunch as he walked, as though having enjoyed a banquet. "The expense of it all was proving a great drain on our resources, but now—with Rassamarden dead—I can rid myself of all those floating fortresses. We will drop them on Land and, with any luck, kill a few more of the diseased upstarts."

"I don't think that would be a good idea," Toller said impulsively.

"What is wrong with it? They have to fall somewhere—and surely better on them than on us."

"I say the defences should be maintained." Toller knew he would be called upon to marshal logical arguments, but was having difficulty in concentrating his thoughts on impersonal matters such as the strategies of war. He and Berise had landed their skyship only hours earlier—and now it was necessary for him to speak to his wife.

Chakkell spread his arms, halting their progress through the garden. "What do you say, Zavotle?"

liven Zavotle, who had a hand pressed into his stomach, looked blank. "I beg your pardon, Majesty—what was the question?"

Chakkell scowled at him. "What's the matter with you these days? You seem more preoccupied with your gut than with anything I have to say. Are you ill?"

"It's just a touch of the bile, Majesty," Zavotle said. "It may be that the food from the royal kitchen is too rich for my blood."

"In that case your stomach has reason to be grateful to me—I propose to dismantle the aerial defence screen and drop the fortresses on Land. What do you say to that?"

"It would advertise our lack of defences to the enemy."

"What does it matter if they lack the means or the will to attack?"

"Rassamarden's successor could be just as ambitious," Toller said. "The Landers may yet send another fleet."

"After the total destruction of the last one?"

Toller could see that the King was becoming impatient, but he did not want to yield. "In my opinion we should retain all the fighters, plus enough stations to support them and their pilots." To his surprise Chakkell gave a hearty laugh.

"I see your game!" Chakkell said jovially, slapping him on the shoulder. "You still haven't grown up, Maraquine. You always have to have a new plaything. The fighters are your toys and the weightless zone is your playground, and you want *me* to go on footing the bill. Isn't that it?"

"Certainly not, Majesty." Toller made no attempt to hide the fact that he was offended. Gesalla had often spoken to him in a similar vein, and he ... *Gesalla! I have betrayed our love, and now I must confess to you. If only I can win your forgiveness I swear to you that I will never again...*

"Mind you," Chakkell went on, "I have a certain sympathy with your viewpoint now that I have met your little playmate."

"Majesty, if you are referring to Skycaptain Narrinder I..."

"Come now, Maraquine! Don't try to tell me you haven't bedded that little beauty." Chakkell was enjoying himself, eagerly resuming the private game now that he had discovered an unexpected area of vulnerability in his opponent. "It's obvious, man! It's written all over your face! What do you say, Zavotle?"

Thoughtfully massaging his stomach, Zavotle said, "It seems to me that if we burned the command stations and fortresses, the ashes could fall anywhere without harming us or betraying information to the enemy."

"That's an excellent thought, Zavotle—and I thank you for it—but you have not addressed the subject."

"I dare not, Majesty," Zavotle said humorously. "To do so I would either have to disagree with a King or insult a nobleman who has a reputation for reacting violently in such instances."

Toller gave him an amiable nod. "What you're saying is that a man's private

life should be his own."

"*Private* life?" Chakkell shook his brown-domed head in amusement. "Toller Maraquine, my old adversary, my old friend, my old court jester—you cannot row upstream and downstream at the same time. Messengers in fallbags preceded your arrival in Prad by days, and the news of your honeymoon flight with the delectable Skycaptain Narrinder has travelled far and wide.

"She has become a national heroine, and you—once *again*—have become a national hero. In the taverns your union has already been blessed with a million beery libations. My subjects, most of whom appear to be romantic dolts, seem to see you as a couple chosen for each other by destiny, but none of them is faced with the unenviable task of explaining that to the Lady Gesalla. As for myself, I almost think I would rather go against Karkarand."

Toller gave the King a formal bow, preparatory to taking his leave. "As I said, Majesty, a man's private life should be his own." Riding south on the highway which connected Prad to the town of Heevern, Toller reached a crest and—for the first time in well over a year—saw his own home.

Still several miles away to the south-west, the grey stone building was rendered white by the afthead sun, making it sharply visible among the green horizontals of the landscape. Within himself Toller tried to manufacture a surge of gladness and of affection for the place, and when it failed to materialise his feelings of self-reproach grew more intense.

I'm a lucky man, he told himself, determined to impose will on emotion. My beautiful solewife is enshrined in that house, and—if she forgives the sin I have committed against her—it will be my privilege to be her loving companion for the rest of our days. Even if she cannot absolve me at once, I will eventually win her over by being what she wants me to be, by being the Toller Maraquine I know I ought to be, and which I genuinely crave to be—and we will enjoy the twilight years together. That is what I want. That is what I WANT!

From Toller's elevated viewpoint he could see intermittent traces of the road which joined his house to the north-south highway, and his attention was caught by a blurry white speck which betokened a single rider heading towards the main road. The stubby telescope which had served him since boyhood hinted at a bluehorn with distinctive creamy forelegs, and Toller knew at once that the rider was his son. This time there was no need to contrive gladness. He had missed Cassyll a great deal, primarily because of the ties of blood, but also because of the satisfaction he had found when they were working together.

In the unnatural circumstances of the aerial war he had somehow almost managed to forget about the projects he and Cassyll had been engaged on, but much remained for them to do—more than enough to occupy any man's days. It

was absolutely vital that the felling of brakka trees should be brought to a halt for ever—otherwise the ptertha would again become invincible enemies—and the key to the future lay in the development of metals. King Chakkell's reluctance to face up to the problem made it all the more imperative for Toller to rejoin his son and resume their work together.

Toller increased his speed towards the juncture of the two roads, anticipating the moment in which Cassyll would notice and recognise him. The intersection was the one where the unhappy incident with Oaslit Spennel had begun, but he pushed the memories aside as he and Cassyll steadily grew closer together on their converging paths. When they were less than a furlong apart and nothing had happened Toller began to suspect that his son was riding with his eyes closed, trusting the bluehorn to find its own way, probably to the ironworks.

"Rouse yourself, sleepyhead!" he shouted. "What manner of welcome is this?"

Cassyll looked towards him, with no sign of surprise, turned his head away and continued riding at unchanged speed. He reached the road junction first and, to Toller's bewilderment, turned south. Toller called out Cassyll's name and galloped after him. He overtook his son's bluehorn and brought it to a halt by grasping the reins.

"What's the matter with you, son?" he said. "Were you asleep?"

Cassyll's grey eyes were cool. "I was wide awake, father."

"Then what...?" Toller studied the fine-featured oval face—previewing the forthcoming meeting with Gesalla—and any joy that was within him died. "So that's the way of it."

"So that's the way of what?"

"Don't fence with words, Cassyll—no matter what you think of me you should at least speak forthrightly, as I am doing with you. Now, what troubles you? Is it to do with the woman?"

"I..." Cassyll pressed the knuckles of his fist to his lips. "Where is she, anyway? Has she, perhaps, transferred her attentions to the King?"

Toller repressed a surge of anger. "I don't know what you have heard—but Berise Narrinder is a fine woman."

"As harlots go, that is," Cassyll sneered.

Toller had actually begun the back-handed slap when he realised what was happening and checked the movement. Appalled, he lowered his gaze and stared at his hand as though it were a third party which had attempted to intrude on a private discussion. His bluehorn nuzzled against Cassyll's, making soft snuffling sounds.

"I'm sorry," Toller said. "My temper is... Are you on your way to the works?"

"Yes. I go there most days."

"I'll join you later, but first I must speak to your mother."

"As you wish, father." Cassyll's face was carefully expressionless. "May I go now?"

"I won't detain you any further," Toller said, struggling against a sense of despair. He watched his son ride off to the south, then resumed his own journey. Somehow it had not occurred to him to take Cassyll's feelings into account, and now he feared that their relationship had been damaged beyond repair. Perhaps the boy would relent with the passage of time, but for the present Toller's main hope lay with Gesalla. If he could win her forgiveness quickly his son might be favourably influenced.

The crescent of sunlight was broadening on the great disk of Land, poised overhead, reminding Toller that aftday was well advanced. He increased the bluehorn's pace. Here and there in the surrounding fields farmers were at work, and they paused to salute him as he rode by. He was popular with the tenants, largely because he charged rents that were little more than nominal, and he found himself wishing that all human relationships could be so easily regulated. The King had joked about facing up to Gesalla, but Toller could remember times when he had genuinely been more apprehensive on the eve of a battle than he was at this moment, preparing to run the gauntlet of his wife's reproach, scorn and anger. Loved ones had an intangible armoury—words, silences, expressions, gestures—which could inflict deeper wounds than swords or spears.

By the time Toller reached the walled precinct at the front of the house his mouth was dry, and it was all he could do to prevent himself from trembling.

The bluehorn was one borrowed from the royal stables, and therefore Toller had to dismount and open the gate by hand. He led the animal inside and while it was ambling to the stone drinking trough he surveyed the familiar enclosure, with its ornamental shrubs and well-tended flower beds. Gesalla liked to look after it personally, and her skilled touch was evident everywhere he looked—a reminder that he would be with her in a matter of seconds.

He heard the front door opening and turned to see his wife standing in the archway. She was wearing an ankle-length gown of dark blue and had bound her hair up in such a manner that its stripe of silver made a natural coronet. Her beauty was as complete and as daunting as Toller had ever known it to be, and when he saw that she was smiling the weight of his guilt became insupportable, turning his own smile into a nerveless grimace, rooting him to the spot. She came to him and kissed him on the lips, briefly but warmly, then stepped back to examine him from head to foot.

"You're not hurt," she said. "I was so afraid for you, Toller ... it all sounded

so impossibly dangerous ... but now I see you're not hurt and I can breathe again."

"Gesalla..." He took both her hands. "I must talk to you."

"Of course you must—and you're probably hungry and thirsty. Come into the house and I'll prepare a meal." She tugged at his hands, but he refused to move.

"It might be best if I stayed out here," he said.

"Why?"

"After you hear what I have to say I may not be welcome in the house."

Gesalla eyed him speculatively, then led the way to a stone bench. When he had sat down she straddled the bench and moved close to him so that he was partly within the triangle formed by her thighs. The intimacy both thrilled and embarrassed him.

"And now, my lord," she said lightly, "what terrible confessions have you to make?"

"I..." Toller lowered his head. "I've been with another woman."

"What of it?" Gesalla said in a calm voice, expression unchanged.

Toller was taken aback. "I don't think you under... When I said I'd been with another woman I meant I'd been in bed with her."

Gesalla laughed. "I know what you meant, Toller—I'm not stupid."

"But..." Toller, knowing he had never been able to predict his wife's reactions, became wary. "Aren't you angry?"

"Are you planning to bring the woman here and put her in my place?"

"You know I'd never do a thing like that."

"Yes, I do know that, Toller. You are a good-hearted man, and nobody is more aware of that than I, after the years we have had together." Gesalla smiled and gently placed one of her hands on his. "So I have no reason to be angry with you, or to reproach you in any way."

"But this is wrong!" Toller burst out, his bafflement increasing. "You were never like this before. How can you remain so placid, knowing the way I have wronged you?"

"I repeat—you have not wronged me."

"Has the world suddenly been stood on its head?" Toller demanded. "Are you saying that it is perfectly acceptable and seemly for a man to betray his solewife, the woman he loves?"

Gesalla smiled again and her eyes deepened with compassion. "Poor Toller! You still don't understand any of this, do you? You still don't know why for years you have been like an eagle pent up in a cage; why you seize every possible opportunity to put your life at risk. It's all an impenetrable mystery to you, isn't it?"

"You make me angry, Gesalla. Please do not address me as though I were a child."

"But that's the entire point—you are a child. You have never ceased to be a child."

"I grow weary of people telling me that. Perhaps I should come back on another day when, if fortune smiles, I will find you less disposed towards talking in riddles." Toller half-rose to his feet, but Gesalla drew him back on to the bench.

"A moment ago you spoke of betraying the woman you love," she said in the softest, kindest tones he had ever heard, "and there lies the source of all your heartache. You see, Toller..." Gesalla paused, and for the first time since their meeting her composure seemed less than perfect.

"Go on."

"You see, Toller—you no longer love me."

"That's a lie!"

"It's the truth, Toller. I have always understood that the long-lasting embers of love are of more importance than the brief bright flame which marks the beginning. If you also understood that, and accepted it, you might go on being happy with me—but that was never the way with you. Not in anything. Look at all your other love affairs—with the army, with skyships, with metals. You always have some impossible idealistic goal in mind, and when it proves illusory you have to find another to put in its place."

Toller was hearing things he had no wish to hear, and the hated worm of disenchantment at the centre of his being was beginning to stir. "Gesalla," he said, making himself sound reasonable, "aren't you allowing yourself to be carried away with words? How could I have a love affair with metals?"

"For you it was easy! You couldn't simply discover a new material and plan to experiment with it—you had to lead a crusade. You were going to end the felling of brakka for ever; you were going to initiate a glorious new era in history; you were going to be the saviour of humanity. It was just beginning to dawn on you that Chakkell and his like would never change their ways when the Lander ship arrived.

"That saved you, Toller—provided you with yet another shining goal—but only for a short while. The war ended too soon for you. And now you are back in the ordinary, humdrum world ... and you are getting old ... and, worst of all, there is no great new challenge ahead of you. The only prospect is of living quietly, on this estate or somewhere else, until you die a commonplace death—just as every commonplace mortal has done since time began.

"Can you face that prospect, Toller?" Gesalla locked solemn eyes with his.

"Because if you cannot, I would prefer that we lived separately. I want to spend my remaining years in peace—and there was precious little of that for me in watching you search for ways to end your life."

The worm was eating hungrily now, and within Toller a dark void was spreading. "There must be some comfort for you in possessing so much knowledge and wisdom, in having such mastery over your feelings."

"The old sarcasm, Toller?" Gesalla tightened her warm grip on his hand. "You do me an injustice if you think I have not wept bitterly over you. It was on the night I stayed with you at the palace that I finally saw through to the heart of this matter. I became angry with you for being what you could not help being, and for a time I hated you—and I shed my tears. But that was in the past. Now my concern is with the future."

"Have we a future?"

"I have a future—I have decided that much—and the time has come when you must make your own choice. I know I have caused you great pain this day, but it was unavoidable. I am going back into the house now. I want you to remain out here until you have reached that decision, and when you have done so you must either join me or ride away. I make only one stipulation—that the decision be final and irrevocable. Do not come into the house unless you know in your heart that I can make you content until your last days, and that you can do the same for me. There can be no compromise, Toller—nothing less will suffice."

Gesalla rose weightlessly to her feet and looked down at him. "Will you give me your word?"

"You have my word," Toller said numbly, racked by fears that this was the last time he would ever see his solewife's face. He watched her go into the house. She closed the door without glancing back at him, and when she was lost to his view he stood up and began aimlessly pacing the precinct. The shadow of the west wall was spreading its domain, deepening the colours of the flowers it engulfed, bringing a hint of coolness to the air.

Toller looked up at Land, which was steadily growing brighter, and in an instant traced the course of his life, from his birthplace on that distant world to the quiet enclosure where he now stood. Everything that had ever happened to him seemed to have led directly to this moment. In retrospect his life appeared as a single, clear-cut highway which he had followed without conscious effort—but now, abruptly, the road had divided. A momentous decision had to be made, and he had just learned that he was ill-equipped for the making of *real* decisions.

Toller half-smiled as he recalled that only minutes earlier he had regarded his dalliance with Berise Narrinder as something of importance. Gesalla—far ahead

of him, as usual—had known better. He had reached the fork in the road, and had to go one way or the other. *One way or the other!*

As he wandered the precinct the sun continued its descent to the horizon and the daytime stars became more numerous. Once the transparent globe of a ptertha sailed overhead on a breeze which could not be detected within the vine-clad walls. It was not until silver whirlpools were beginning to show themselves in the eastern blue that Toller abruptly ceased his pacing, stilled by an accession of self-knowledge, by an understanding of why he was taking so long to choose the future course of his life.

There was no decision point before him! There was no dilemma!

The issue had been decided for him, even as Gesalla was putting it into words. He could never make her content, because he was a hollow man who could never again make himself content—and the subsequent delay had been caused by his craven inability to face the truth.

The truth is that I am halfway to being dead, he told himself, and all that remains for me is to find a suitable way to finish what I have begun.

He gave a quavering sigh, went to the bluehorn and led it to the precinct gate. He took the animal outside, and while closing the gate looked for the last time at the drowsing house. Gesalla was not at any of the darkening windows. Toller got into the saddle and put the bluehorn into a slow-swaying walk on the gravel road to the east. The workers had departed the fields and the world seemed empty.

"What comes next?" he said to the universe at large, his words swiftly fading into the sadness of the surrounding twilight. "Please, what do I do next?"

There was a tiny focus of movement on the road far ahead of him, almost at the limits of vision. In a normal frame of mind Toller might have used his telescope to gain advance information about the approaching traveller, but on this occasion the effort seemed too great. He allowed the natural progression of events to do the work for him at its own measured pace.

In a short time he was able to discern a wagon driven by a solitary figure, and within another few minutes he could see that both the wagon and its occupant were in a sorry state. The vehicle had lost much of its siding and its wheels were wobbling visibly on worn axles. Its driver was a bearded young man, so caked with dust that he resembled a clay statue.

Toller guided his bluehorn to the side of the road to give the stranger room to pass, and was surprised when the wagon drew to a halt beside him. Its driver peered at him through red-rimmed eyes, and even before he spoke it was apparent that he was very drunk.

"Pardon me, sir," he said in slurred tones, "do I have the honour of addressing Lord Toller Maraquine?"

"Yes," Toller replied. "Why do you ask?"

The bearded man swayed for a moment, then unexpectedly produced a smile which in spite of his filthy and dishevelled condition had a boyish charm. "My name is Bartan Drumme, my lord, and I come to you with a unique proposition—one I am certain you will find of great interest."

"I very much doubt that," Toller said coldly, preparing to move on.

"But, my lord! It was my understanding that as Chief of Aerial Defence you concerned yourself with all matters pertaining to the upper reaches of the sky."

Toller shook his head. "All that is over and done with."

"I'm sorry to hear it, my lord." Drumme picked up a bottle and drew the cork, then paused and gave Toller a sombre stare. "This means I shall have to seek an audience with the King."

In spite of all that was pressing on his mind, Toller had to chuckle. "Doubtless he will be fascinated by what you have to say."

"No doubt at all," Drumme agreed, comfortable in his intoxication. "Any ruler in history would have been intrigued by the idea of planting his flag on the world we call Farland."

Chapter 13

The Bluebird Inn in Prad was named after a prominent hostelry in old Ro-Atabri, and it was the ambition of its landlord to win a comparable reputation for decorum. As a consequence, he had been visibly disturbed when Toller had walked into his premises with the disreputable figure of Bartan Drumme in tow. It had been obvious that in his mind the honour of accommodating the heroic aristocrat scarcely compensated for the presence of his smelly and bedraggled companion. He had, however, been persuaded to provide two bedchambers and to set up in one of them a large bath filled with hot water. Bartan was now soaking in the bath, and except for his head the only part of him visible above the soap-greyed water was the hand which was clutching a beaker of brandy.

Toller took a sip from the drink Bartan had given him and grimaced as the crude spirit burned his throat. "Do you think you should be drinking this concoction all the time?"

"Of course not," Bartan said. "I should be drinking *good* brandy all the time, but this is all I can afford. It has cost me my last penny to get here, my lord."

"I told you not to address me as lord." Toller raised his drink to his lips, smelled it and emptied the ceramic beaker into the bath.

"There was no need to waste it," Bartan complained. "Besides, how would *you* like that sort of stuff swilling around your private parts?"

"It may do them good—I think it was intended for external application," Toller said. "I'll have our host serve us with something less poisonous in a little while, but in the meantime I have to go back to the part of your story which sticks in my craw."

"Yes?"

"You claim that your wife is alive on Farland, not as a spirit or a reincarnation—but in the flesh as you knew her. How can you believe that?"

"I can't explain. Her words conveyed more than words—and that was what I got from them."

Toller tugged thoughtfully at his lower lip. "I'm not conceited enough to think I know all there is to know about this strange existence of ours. I concede that there are many mysteries, most of which we may never penetrate, but this does not sit easy with me. It still binds."

Bartan stirred in the bath, slopping water over the side. "I have been a convinced materialist all my life. I *still* scorn those simpletons who cling to a belief in the supernatural, in spite of all I went through in the Basket—but although I am at a loss to explain it, this is something I *know*. There were strange lights that night. Sondeweere did something beyond my understanding, and now she lives on Farland."

"You say she appeared to you in a vision, spoke to you from Farland. I find it difficult to imagine anything more supernatural than that."

"Perhaps we use the word in different ways. My wife did speak to me—therefore it was a natural occurrence. It only appears to smack of the supernatural because of elements beyond our comprehension."

Toller noted that Bartan spoke with impressive fluency in spite of his intoxication. He stood up and walked around the lamplit room, then returned to his chair. Bartan was contentedly sipping his brandy, not looking at all insane.

"liven Zavotle is going to be here soon, provided the messenger has found him all right," Toller said. "And I warn you that he is going to laugh at your story."

"There is no need for him to believe it," Bartan replied. "The part about my wife is of concern to me alone, and I related it only to show that I have personal reasons for wanting to voyage to Farland. I could not expect others to undertake such a journey on my account, whatever my reasons. But it is my hope that the King will wish to succeed where Rassamarden failed—by extending his domain to another world—and that, as originator of the scheme, I will be granted a place on the expedition if it becomes a reality. All I ask of your friend Zavotle is that he devise a means of making the journey possible."

"You don't ask much."

"I ask more than you will ever know," Bartan said, a brooding expression appearing on his young-old face. "I am responsible for what happened to my wife, you see. Losing her was bad enough, but carrying the burden of guilt..."

"I'm sorry," Toller said. "Is that why you drink?"

Bartan tilted his head as he considered the question. "It's probably the reason I started drinking, but after a while I found that I simply prefer being drunk to being sober. It makes the world a pleasanter place to live in."

"And on the night you had the vision? Were you...?"

"Drunk? Of course I was drunk!" Bartan gulped some more brandy as if to reinforce his statement. "But that has no bearing on what happened that night. Please, my lord..."

"Toller."

Bartan nodded. "Please, Toller, feel free to regard me as insane or deluded on

that particular point—it is irrelevant, after all—but I beg you to take me seriously on the question of the expedition to Farland. I *must* go. I am an experienced airship pilot, and if necessary I will even stop drinking."

"That would be necessary, but—much though I am intrigued by the idea of flying to Farland—I can't speak seriously about it, to the King or anybody else, until I hear what Zavotle has to say. I will meet him downstairs and take a private parlour where we can have some refreshment and discuss the matter in comfort." Toller stood up and set his empty beaker aside. "Join us when you have completed your toilet."

Bartan signalled his assent by raising his drink in a salute and taking a generous swallow. Shaking his head, Toller let himself out of the room and went along a shadowy corridor to the stair. Bartan Drumme was a highly disturbed young man, not to say a madman, but when he had first spoken of a mission to Farland something deep within Toller had responded immediately and with a passion akin to that of a traveller who had just glimpsed his destination after an arduous journey lasting many years. A yearning had been born in him, accompanied by a powerful surge of excitement which he had repressed for fear of disappointment.

Wild, extravagant and preposterous though the idea of flying to Farland was, Chakkell could be in favour of it for the reasons Bartan had suggested—but only if liven Zavotle considered the mission feasible. Zavotle had won the King's confidence in anything to do with the technicalities of interplanetary flight, so if the little man with the clenched ears considered Farland to be unreachable then Toller Maraquine would indeed have to accept the prospect of becoming a commonplace mortal awaiting a commonplace death. And that could not be allowed to happen.

I'm behaving exactly as Gesalla says I behave, he thought, pausing on the stair. *But, at this stage of our lives, what would be the point in my trying to do anything else?*

He completed the descent to the inn's crowded entrance hall and saw Zavotle, clad in civilian clothes, making enquiries of a porter. He called out a greeting and within a few minutes he and Zavotle were installed in a small room with a flagon of good wine on the table between them. Lamps were burning steadily in the wall niches, adding a bluish haze to the air, and by their light Toller noticed that Zavotle was looking tired and introspective. Instead of being obviously premature, the whiteness of his hair was now making him look old, although he was some years younger than Toller.

"What ails you, old friend?" Toller said. "Is your stomach still misbehaving?"

"I get indigestion even when I haven't eaten." Zavotle gave him a wan smile.

"It hardly seems fair."

"Here's something to take your mind off it," Toller said, pouring out two glasses of green wine. "You recall the talk we had with the King this morning? Our disagreement about what should be done with the defence stations?"

"Yes."

"Well, only this aftday I met a young man called Bartan Drumme who put forward an intriguing thought. He is permanently soused and quite mad—you'll see that for yourself in a short time—but his idea has a certain appeal to it. He suggests taking one or more of the stations to Farland."

Toller had kept his tones light and almost casual, but he was watching Zavotle's reactions closely and felt a pang of alarm as he saw his lips twitch with amusement.

"Did you say your new friend is *quite* mad? I'd say he's a raving lunatic!" Zavotle smirked into his wine.

"But don't you think it just might...?" Toller hesitated, realising he would have to deliver himself into his friend's hands, come what may. "liven, I *need* Farland. It is the only thing left for me."

Zavotle eyed him speculatively for a moment.

"Gesalla and I have parted for ever," Toller replied to the unspoken question. "It is all finished between us."

"I see." Zavotle closed his eyes and delicately massaged the lids with the tips of a finger and thumb. "A lot would depend on Farland's position," he said slowly.

"Thank you, thank you," Toller said, overwhelmed with gratitude. "If there is anything I can do to repay you, you have but to name it."

"There is something I expect in repayment—and I do not have to name it. Not to you, anyway."

It was Toller's turn to try reading his friend's face. "The flight is bound to be dangerous, liven—why do you want to risk your life?"

"For a time I thought my digestion was too weak, then I discovered it is too strong." Zavotle patted his stomach. "I am being digested, and the incestuous banquet cannot be prolonged indefinitely. So you see, Toller, I need Farland as much as you do, perhaps even more. For myself, it would suffice to plan a one-way journey, but I suspect that the other members of the crew would not take kindly to such an arrangement, and therefore I will have to tax my brain and make provision for their safe return. The problem will provide an excellent distraction for an hour or two, and I thank you for that."

"I..." Toller glanced around the room, blinking as his tears surrounded the wall lights with spiky haloes. "I'm so sorry, liven. I was too wrapped up in my

own worries even to consider that you might be..."

Zavotle smiled and impulsively caught his hand. "Toller, do you remember how it was on the skyship proving flight all those years ago? We flew into the unknown together, and were glad to do so. Let us now put our personal sorrows aside and be thankful that ahead Of us—just when we need them—are an even greater proving flight and an even greater unknown to explore."

Toller nodded, gazing at Zavotle in affection. "So you think the flight is possible?"

"I'd say it might be done. Farland is many millions of miles away, and it is moving—we mustn't forget that it moves—but with plenty of the green and purple at our disposal we could overtake it."

"How many millions of miles are we talking about?"

Zavotle sighed. "I wish that *somebody* had brought science texts from Land, Toller—we have lost most of our store of knowledge, and nobody has had time to start rebuilding it. I have to go by memory, but I believe that Farland is twelve million miles from us at the nearest approach, and forty-two million when it's at the opposite side of the sun. Naturally, we would have to wait for it to come near."

"Twelve million," Toller breathed. "How can we think of flying a distance like that?"

"We can't! Remember that Farland moves. The ship would have to travel at an angle to meet it, so we have to think about flying perhaps eighteen million miles, perhaps twenty million, perhaps more."

"But the speeds! Is it possible?"

"This is no time to be faint-hearted." Zavotle took a pencil and a scrap of paper from his pouch and began to scribble figures. "Let us say that, because of our human frailties, the outward journey must be completed in not more than ... um ... a hundred days. That obliges us to cover perhaps 180,000 miles each day, which gives us a speed of ... a mere 7,500 miles an hour."

"Now I *know* you are toying with me," Toller said. "If you considered the journey impossible you should have said so at the outset."

Zavotle raised both hands, palms outward, in a placatory gesture. "Calm yourself, old friend—I am not being frivolous. You have to remember that it is the retarding of the air, which increases according to the square of the speed, which holds our airships to a snail's pace and even limits the performance of your beloved jet fighters. But on the voyage to Farland the ship would be travelling in almost a vacuum, and would also be away from Overland's gravity, so it would be possible for it to build up quite an astonishing speed.

"Interestingly, though, air resistance could also *aid* the interplanetary

traveller. If it weren't for the necessity of returning we could plunge the ship into Farland's atmosphere, jump clear of it when the speed had been reduced to an acceptable level, and descend to the surface by parachute.

"Yes, it's the necessity of coming back which forms the main stumbling block. That is the nub of the problem."

"What can be done?"

Zavotle sipped his wine. "It seems to me that we need ... that we need a ship which can divide itself into two separate parts."

"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely! I visualise a command station as the basic vessel. Let's call it a voidship ... no, a *spaceship* ... to distinguish the type from an ordinary skyship. Something the size of a command station is necessary to accommodate the large stores of power crystals and all other supplies needed for the voyage. That ship, the spaceship, would fly from the weightless zone to Farland—but it could never make a landing. It would have to be halted just outside the radius of Farland's gravity, and it would have to hang there, stationary, until it was time for the return journey to Overland."

"This is like having wedges driven into one's brain," Toller complained, struggling to assimilate the shockingly new ideas. "Do you see the spaceship dispatching something like a lifeboat to the planetary surface?"

"Lifeboat? That's the general idea, but it would have to be a fully fledged skyship, complete with a balloon and its own power unit."

"But how could it be carried?"

"That's what I was getting at when I said the spaceship would have to be able to divide itself into two parts. Say the spaceship is made up of four or five cylindrical sections, just as a command station is now—the entire front section would have to be detached and converted back into a skyship for the descent. There would have to be an extra partition, and a sealable door, and..." Zavotle shuddered with pleasurable excitement and half-rose from his seat. "I need proper drawing materials, Toller—my mind is on fire."

"I'll have them brought for you," Toller said, motioning for Zavotle to sit down again, "but first tell me more about this dividing of the spaceship. Could it be done in the void? Would there not be a great risk of losing all the ship's air?"

"It would certainly be safer to do it within Farland's atmosphere, and easier as well—that's something I need to ponder over. It may be, if we are lucky, that the atmosphere is so deep that it extends beyond the radius of Farland's gravity, in which case the operation would be relatively straightforward. The spaceship would simply be hanging there in the high air. We could detach the skyship, inflate the balloon and connect the acceleration struts—all in a fairly routine

manner. It is something which should be practised in our own weightless zone before the expedition starts.

"On the other hand, if the spaceship has to wait *outside* the atmosphere, the best course might be for it to descend briefly to a level where the air is breathable, and only then cast the skyship section adrift. The skyship would of course be falling while its balloon was being inflated, but—as we know from experience—the fall would be so gradual that there would be ample time to do all that was necessary. There is much to think about..."

"Including air," Toller said. "I presume the plan would be to use firesalt?"

"Yes. We know it puts life back into dead air, but we don't know how much would be needed to keep a man alive during a long voyage. Experiments will have to be done—because the quantity of salt we'll have to transport could be the principal factor in deciding the size of the crew."

Zavotle paused and gave Toller a wistful look. "It's a pity Lain isn't with us—we have need of him."

"I'll fetch the drawing materials." As Toller was leaving the room his memory conjured up a vivid image of his brother, the gifted mathematician who had been killed by a ptertha on the eve of the Migration. Lain had possessed an impressive ability to unveil nature's hidden machinations and predict their outcome, and yet even he had been seriously in error concerning some of the scientific discoveries made on the first flight from Land to the weightless zone. The mental image of him was a reminder of just how presumptuous and reckless was the plan to fly through millions of miles of space to a totally unknown world.

A man could very easily die attempting a journey like that, Toller told himself, and almost smiled as he took the thought one step further. *But nobody would ever be able to say it had been a commonplace death...*

"I'm trying to decide what irks me most about this Farland business," King Chakkell said, gazing unhappily at Toller and Zavotle. "I don't know if it's the fact that I'm being manipulated ... or if it's the sheer lack of subtlety with which the manipulation is being conducted."

Toller put on an expression of concern. "Majesty, it dismays me to hear that I'm suspected of having an ulterior motive. My sole ambition is to plant the flag of..."

"Enough, Maraquine! I'm not a simpleton." Chakkell smoothed a strand of hair across his gleaming brown scalp. "You prate about planting flags as though they were capable of taking root unaided and producing some manner of desirable crop. What yield would I get from Farland? A meagre one, I'd say."

"The harvest of history," Toller said, already beginning to plan the Farland

project in detail. Chakkell's display of peevishness was a sure indication that he was about to give his consent for the construction and provisioning of the spaceship. In spite of his show of doubt and indifference, the King had been seduced by the idea of laying claim to the outer planet.

Chakkell snorted. "The harvest of history will not be gathered in unless the ship successfully completes both legs of the voyage. I am by no means convinced that it will be able to do so."

"The ship will be designed to cope with any exigency, Majesty," Toller said. "I have no desire to commit suicide."

"Haven't you? There are times when I wonder about you, Maraquine." Chakkell stood up and paced around the small room. It was the same apartment in which he had consulted Toller about the aerial defence of Overland immediately after his reprieve. The circular table and six chairs took up most of the floor space, leaving the King a narrow margin through which to guide his paunchy figure. On reaching the chair in which he had been seated, Chakkell leaned on the back of it and frowned at Toller.

"And what about the money?" he said. "You never trouble yourself with such mundane concerns, do you?"

"One ship, Majesty—and a crew of not more than six."

"The size of the actual crew is a flea-bite, and well you know it. This scheme of yours is bound to cost me a fortune in development and in keeping support stations operational in the weightless zone."

"But if it opens the way to a new world..."

"Don't start playing the same tune all over again, Maraquine," Chakkell interrupted. "I'm going to let you proceed with your wild enterprise—I suppose you are entitled to some indulgence on account of your services during the war—but I make one provision, and that is that Zavotle does not accompany you. I cannot afford to lose his services."

"I regret to say this, Majesty," Zavotle put in before Toller could speak, "but you will shortly be deprived of my services come what may, expedition or no expedition."

Chakkell narrowed his eyes at Zavotle and scrutinised him as though suspecting deviousness. "Zavotle," he finally said, "are you going to die?"

"Yes, Majesty."

Chakkell looked embarrassed rather than concerned. "I would have had it otherwise."

"Thank you, Majesty."

"I must attend to other matters now," Chakkell said brusquely, moving towards the door, "but, under the circumstances, I will not object to your going

to Farland."

"I'm most grateful, Majesty."

Chakkell paused in the doorway and gave Toller a look of peculiar intensity. "The game has almost run its course, eh, Maraquine?" He moved away into the corridor before Toller could frame a reply, and a quietness descended on the room.

"I'll tell you something, liven," Toller said in a low voice. "We have made the King afraid. Did you notice how he twisted everything around so that it appears he is granting us a favour by permitting the expedition to go ahead? But the real reason is that he *wants* his standard to fly on Farland. A guaranteed place in history is a poor kind of immortality, but all kings seem to crave it—and we remind Chakkell of just how futile such ambitions are."

"You speak strangely, Toller," Zavotle said, his gaze hunting over Toller's face. "I won't return from Farland—but surely you will."

"Put your mind at ease, old friend," Toller replied, smiling. "I'll return from Farland, or die in the attempt."

Toller had not been certain that his son would agree to meet him, and it was with a profound sense of gladness that he saw a lone rider appear on the skyline on the road that led south to Heevern. He had chosen the meeting place partly because the nearness of a gold-veined spire of rock and a pool made it easy to specify, but also because it was on the northern side of the final ridge on the way to his house. Had he ridden an extra mile to the crest. Toller would have been able to view his former home in the distance. The knowledge that Gesalla was within the familiar walls would have caused him fresh pain, but that was not the reason he had held back. It was simply that he had taken a vow to separate the courses of their lives for ever, and in a way which was important to him, although he could not rationally justify it, going within sight of the house would have been a breach of his word.

He dismounted from his bluehorn and left the beast to graze while he watched the other rider approach. As before, he was able to identify Cassyll from afar by the distinctive creamy colour of his mount's forelegs. Cassyll rode towards him at moderate speed and reined his bluehorn to a halt at a distance of about ten paces. He remained in the saddle, studying Toller with pensive grey eyes.

"It would be better if you got down," Toller said mildly. "It would make it easier for us to talk."

"Have we anything to talk about?"

"If we haven't there was little point in your riding out here to meet me." Toller gave his son a wry smile. "Come on—neither your honour nor your

principles will be compromised if we talk face-to-face."

Cassyll shrugged and swung himself down from his bluehorn, a movement he accomplished with athletic grace. With his oval face and pronounced widow's peak of glossy black, he owed much of his appearance to his mother, but Toller observed a sinewy strength in his spare figure.

"You look well," Toller said.

Cassyll glanced down at himself and his clothing—rough-spun shirt and trews which would not have looked out of place on a common labourer. "I do my share of work at the foundry and factories, and some of it is heavy."

"I know." Toller was heartened by the civility of Cassyll's response and decided to go straight to the points he had to make. "Cassyll, the Farland expedition leaves in a few days from now. I have faith in liven Zavotle's designs and calculations, but only a fool would refuse to acknowledge that many unknown dangers lie ahead of us. I may not return from the voyage, and it would ease my mind greatly if we settled some matters concerning the future for you and your mother."

Cassyll showed no emotion. "You will return, as always."

"I intend to, but nevertheless I want you to give me your word on certain matters before we part this day. One of them is to do with the fact that the King has confirmed my title as being hereditary—and I want you to accept it if I am declared dead."

"I don't want the title," Cassyll said. "I have no interest in such vanities."

Toller nodded. "I know that, and I respect you for it, but the title represents power as well as privilege—power you can use to safeguard your mother's position in the world, power you can put to good use in worthwhile endeavours. I don't need to remind you how important it is for metals to replace brakka wood in our society—so vow to me you will not reject the title."

Cassyll looked impatient. "All this is premature. You will live to be a hundred, if not more."

"Your vow, Cassyll!"

"I swear that I will accept the title on that far-off day when it eventually falls my due."

"Thank you," Toller said earnestly. "Now, the management of the estate. If at all possible I want you to perpetuate the system of peppercorn rents for our tenants. I take it that the revenues from the mines, foundries and metal works are still increasing and will be ample for the family requirements."

"Family?" Cassyll gave a half-smile to show that he considered the word inappropriate. "My mother and I are financially secure."

Toller allowed the tacit challenge to pass and spent more time on

practicalities connected with the estate and its industrial associations, but all the while he was aware that he was delaying the moment when he would have to admit his most important motive in arranging the meeting with his son. At last, after a tense silence had developed and looked like continuing indefinitely, he accepted that it was necessary for him to speak out.

"Cassyll," he said, "I met my father for the first time only a few minutes before he died by his own hand. There was so much ... *waste* in both our lives, but we were united before the end. I ... I don't want to leave you without putting things right between us. Can you forgive me for the wrongs I have done you and your mother?"

"Wrongs?" Cassyll spoke lightly, affecting puzzlement. He stooped and picked up a pebble which was heavily banded with gold, examined it briefly and hurled it into the nearby pool. The image of Land mirrored on the water broke up into jostling curved fragments.

"What wrongs do you speak of, father?"

Toller could not be put off. "I have neglected you both because I can never be content with what I have. It's as simple as that. My indictment takes but a few words—none of them fancy or abstruse."

"I never felt neglected, because I believed you would love us both for ever," Cassyll said slowly. "Now my mother is alone."

"She has you."

"She is *alone*."

"No more than I am," Toller said, "but there is no remedy. Your mother understands that better than I. If you could learn to understand you might also learn to forgive."

Cassyll suddenly looked younger than his twenty-two years. "You're asking me to understand that love dies?"

"It *can* die, or it can refuse to die; or a man or a woman can change, or a man or a woman can remain changeless; and when a person does not change with time the effect—from the viewpoint of a person who is changing—is as if the unchanging person is actually the one who is undergoing the greatest change..." Toller broke off and stared helplessly at his son. "How can I know what I'm asking you to understand when I don't understand it myself?"

"Father..." Cassyll moved a step closer to Toller. "I see so much pain inside you. I hadn't realised..."

Toller tried to check the tears which had begun to blur his vision. "I welcome the pain. There is not enough of it for my needs."

"Father, don't..."

Toller opened his arms to his son and they embraced, and for the fleeting

period of the embrace he could almost remember what it had been like to be a whole man.

"Put the ship on its side," Toller ordered, his breath rolling whitely in the chill air.

Bartan Drumme, who was at the controls because he took every possible opportunity to practise skyship handling techniques, nodded and began firing short bursts on a lateral jet. As the thrust gradually overcame the inertia of the gondola, Overland slid up the sky and the great disk of Land emerged from behind the brown curvature of the balloon. Bartan halted the ship's rotation by means of the opposing jet, stabilising it in the new attitude, with an entire world on view on either side of the gondola. The sun was close to Land's eastern rim, illuminating a slim crescent of the planet and leaving the rest of it in comparative darkness.

Against the dim background of Land, the waiting spaceship, now less than a mile away, was visible as a tiny bar of light. It was attended by several lesser motes, representing the few habitats and stores which King Chakkell had permitted to remain in the weightless zone to service the newly completed vessel. The group was an undistinguished feature of the crowded heavens, almost unnoticeable, but the sight of it caused a stealthy quickening of Toller's pulse.

Sixty days had passed since he had received the royal assent for the expedition to Farland, and now he was finding it hard to accept that the hour of departure was at hand. Trying to dispel a slight sense of unreality, he raised his binoculars and studied the spaceship.

There had been one major amendment to the design which Zavotle had sketched out during their meeting in the Bluebird Inn. The foremost of the ship's five sections had originally been designated as the detachable module, but the arrangement had posed too many problems in connection with obtaining a view ahead of the vessel. After some unsatisfactory experiments with mirrors it had been decided to use the aft section as the landing module. Its engine would power the flight to Farland, and when the section was separated from the mother craft a second engine would be exposed, ready for the return to Overland.

Toller lowered the binoculars and glanced around the other members of the crew, all of them swaddled in their quilted suits, all of them deep in their own thoughts. Apart from Zavotle and Bartan, there was Berise Narrinder, Tipp Gotlon and another ex-fighter pilot, a soft-spoken young man called Dakan Wraker. Toller had been surprised by the large number of volunteers for the expedition, and he had selected Wraker because of his imperturbable nature and

wide range of mechanical skills.

The conversation among the crew members had been lively in the preceding hour, but now, suddenly, the magnitude of what lay ahead seemed to have impressed itself on them, stilling their tongues.

"Spare me the long faces," Toller said, grimly jovial. "Why, we might find Farland so much to our liking that none of us will ever want to return!"

Chapter 14

As commander of the spaceship, Toller would have liked to have been at the controls when the *Kolcorron* burned its way out of the weightless zone at the beginning of the voyage to Farland.

During training sessions, however, it had become apparent that he was the least talented of the crew when it came to the new style of flying. The ship's length was five times its diameter, and keeping it in a stable attitude while under way required precise and delicate use of the lateral jets, an ability to detect and correct yawing movements almost before they had begun. Gotlon, Wraker and Berise seemed to do it without effort, using infrequent split-second blasts on the jets to keep the crosshairs of the steering telescope centred on a target star. Zavotle and Bartan Drumme were competent, though more heavy handed; but Toller—much to his annoyance—was prone to make overcorrections which involved him in series of minor adjustments, bringing grins to the faces of the other fliers.

He had therefore given Tipp Gotlon, the youngest of the crew, the responsibility for taking the ship out of the twin planets' atmosphere.

Gotlon was strapped into a seat near the centre of the circular topmost deck. He was looking into the prismatic eyepiece of the low-powered telescope which was aimed vertically through a port in the ship's nose. His hands were on the control levers, from which rods ran down through the various decks to the main engine and the lateral thrusters. The fierceness of his gap-toothed grin showed that he was keyed up, anxiously waiting for the order to begin the flight.

Toller glanced around the nose section, which in addition to accommodating the pilot's station was also intended as living and sleeping quarters. Zavotle, Berise and Bartan were floating near the perimeter in various attitudes, keeping themselves in place by gripping handrails. It was quite dim in the compartment, the only illumination coming from a porthole on the sunward side, but Toller could see the others' faces well enough to know that they shared his mood.

The flight would possibly last two hundred days—a dauntingly long period of boredom, deprivation and discomfort—and, regardless of how dedicated a person might be, it was only natural to experience qualms at such a moment. Things would be easier after the main engine had begun to fire, finally

committing everybody to the venture, but until that psychological first step had been taken he and the crew were bound to be racked by doubt and apprehension.

Growing impatient, Toller drew himself to the ladder well and looked down into the ship. The cylindrical space was punctuated by narrow rays of sunlight from portholes which created confusing patterns of brightness and shadow in the internal bracing and among the bins which housed the supplies of food and water, firesalt and power crystals. There was a movement far down in the strange netherworld and Wraker, who had been checking the fuel hoppers and pneumatic feed system, appeared at the bottom of the ladder. He came up it at speed, agile in spite of his bulky suit, and nodded as he saw Toller waiting for him.

"The power unit is in readiness," he said quietly.

"And we are likewise," Toller replied, turning to meet Gotlon's attentive eyes. "Take us away from here."

Gotlon advanced the throttle without hesitation. The engine sounded at the rear of the ship, its roar muted by distance and the intervening partitions, and the crew members gradually floated downwards to take up standing positions on the deck. Toller looked out of the nearest porthole just in time to see the cluster of store sections and habitats slide away behind the ship. Some heavily muffled auxiliary workers were hanging in the air near the structures, all of them vigorously waving their farewells.

"This is quite touching," Toller said. "We're being given a rousing send-off."

Zavotle sniffed to show his scepticism. "They are merely expressing heartfelt relief at our departure. Now, at last, they can quit the weightless zone and return to their families—which is what we would be doing if we had any sense."

"You forget one thing," Bartan Drumme said, smiling. "Which is...?"

"I *am* returning to my family." Bartan's boyish smile widened. "I get the best of both worlds, so to speak—because my wife is waiting for me on Farland."

"Son, it is my considered opinion that *you* should be the captain of this ship," Zavotle said solemnly. "A man needs to be crazy to set out on a journey such as this—and you are the craziest of us all."

The *Kolcorron* had been under way for a little more than an hour when Toller began to feel uneasy.

He visited every compartment of the ship, checking that all was as it should be, but in spite of his being unable to find anything wrong, his sense of disquiet remained. Unable to attribute it to any definite cause, he chose not to confide in Zavotle or any of the others—as commander he had to provide resolute leadership, not undermine the crew's morale with vague apprehensions. In

contrast to his own mood, the others seemed to be relaxing and growing more confident, as was evidenced by the sprightliness of the conversation on the top deck.

Finding the talk distracting, Toller went back down the ladder and, feeling oddly furtive, positioned himself at a midships porthole, in a narrow space between two storage lockers. It was the sort of thing he had sometimes done in childhood when he needed to shut off the outside world, and in the contrived solitude he tried to pinpoint the source of his forebodings.

Could it be the fact that the sky had unaccountably turned black? Or could it be a deep-seated worry, an instinctive emotional protest, over the idea of building up to a speed of thousands of miles an hour? The main engine had been firing almost continuously since the start of the voyage, and therefore—according to Zavotle—the ship's speed already had to be far in excess of anything in man's previous experience. At first there had been a clearly audible rush of air against the hull, but as the sky darkened that sound had gradually faded away. Sunlight slanting in through the porthole made it difficult for Toller to perceive the outside universe clearly, but the eternal calm seemed to reign as always, yielding no evidence that the ship was hurtling through space at many hundreds of miles an hour.

Could *that* fact be related to his unease? Was some part of his mind troubled by the discrepancy between what he observed to be happening and what he knew to be happening?

Toller considered the notion briefly and pushed it aside—he had never been unduly sensitive, and travelling in space was not going to alter his basic nature. If he was going to be nervous it was more likely to be over some practical matter, such as having positioned himself so close to a porthole. The planking of the *Kolcorron's* hull was reinforced with extra steel hoops on the outside and layers of tar and canvas on the inside, imparting great strength to the ship's structure as a whole, but there were areas of vulnerability around the portholes and hatches. On one early test flight a porthole had blown out and a mechanic's eardrums had been ruptured, even though the accident had not occurred in true vacuum.

A brief hissing sound from the upper deck indicated that somebody had mixed a measure of firesalt and water to renew the air's life-giving properties. Perhaps a minute later its distinctive odour—reminiscent of seaweed—reached Toller's nostrils, mingling with the smell of tar which seemed to have been growing stronger.

He sniffed the air, realising that the tarry smell was indeed more noticeable, and his sense of alarm suddenly intensified itself. On impulse he removed one of

his gauntlets and touched the black surface of the hull beside him. It felt warm. The degree of heat was far short of what would have been needed to soften the tar, less than his skin temperature, but it was strikingly in contrast with the chill he had expected. The discovery burst open a gateway in his mind, and all at once he knew exactly what had occasioned all his vague forebodings...

His entire body felt uncomfortably warm!

The quilted skysuit had been designed to keep the fierce cold of the weightless zone at bay, and had been barely adequate for its purpose, but now it was proving so efficient that he was on the verge of breaking into a sweat.

This can't be right! We can't be falling into the sun!

Toller was striving to bring his thoughts under control when the sound of the engine died away and in the same moment he heard Zavotle calling his name from the upper part of the ship. Finding that he was again completely without weight, Toller dived through the air to the ladder and went up it hand over hand. He drew himself on to the top deck by means of a rail and faced the rest of the crew, all of whom, with the exception of Gotlon, were clinging to their sleeping nets.

"Something strange is happening," Zavotle said. "The ship grows warm."

"I have noticed." Toller looked at Gotlon, who was regarding him from the pilot's seat. "Are we on course?"

Gotlon nodded vigorously. "Sir, we are exactly on course and have been since the outset. I swear to you that Gola has not departed the crosshairs for as much as one second." Gola was a figure in Kolcorronian myth who appeared before lost mariners and led them to safe havens, and the name had been given to the guide star selected for the first part of the outward journey.

Toller addressed himself to Zavotle. "Couldn't we nevertheless be moving sideways? Falling towards the sun, but with the prow of the ship pointed at Gola?"

"Why should we fall? And even if we were falling it's too soon for extra warmth to manifest itself on that account."

"If you look aft you'll see that we are still in the same relationship with Overland and Land," Berise added. "We are on course."

"This is something for my flight log," Zavotle said, almost to himself. "We have to take it that space is warm. It isn't surprising, really, because in space there is eternal sunshine. But the sun also shines in the weightless zone—and there a terrible coldness reigns. It's yet another mystery, Toller."

"Mystery or no mystery," Toller replied, deciding to act in a positive manner to offset the uncertainty which had been engendered by the first brush with the unexpected, "it means we can divest ourselves of these cursed suits, and that's

something for which to be thankful. We can at least enjoy a little comfort."

By the third day of the flight a shipboard routine had become well established, much to Toller's satisfaction. He was aware of the dangers of monotony and-boredom which could lie ahead, but those were predictable human problems and he felt capable of dealing with them. It was when nature itself became capricious, giving the lie to man's most cherished beliefs, that he began to feel like a babe wandering in a dangerous forest.

Since the initial, and now welcome, discovery that space was comfortably warm, the nearest thing to a revelation to come along had been the observation—first reported by Wraker—that there were no meteors in the interplanetary void. To Toller's surprise, liven Zavotle had seized on the observation, apparently in the belief that it possessed some significance, and had made it the subject of another long entry in his log.

The little man's illness seemed to be progressing according to his expectations. Although he uttered no complaints he was visibly thinner, and spent much of his time with both fists pressed into his stomach. He had also, which was quite out of character with the old Zavotle, become short-tempered and acidulous with the younger crew members, particularly Bartan Drumme. The others, while convinced that Bartan was subject to spells of insanity, were tolerant in the matter whereas Zavotle frequently made him a target for ridicule. Bartan accepted the abuse with equanimity, secure in his fortress of delusion, but on several occasions Berise had been stung into taking his part and her relationship with Zavotle had become strained.

Toller was loath to interfere, knowing that his old friend was being driven by a demon worse than his own, and he was trusting that Berise would not let the situation get out of hand. His own relationship with her—ever since their five days in the exclusive universe of the sinking skyship—was warm, comforting and totally dispassionate. They had found each other at a special time, a unique time during which their needs had been perfectly complementary, a time which would never come again, and now they were shaping their own separate courses into the future, without obligations or regrets. It had not even occurred to him to object when she had claimed a place with the expedition. He knew that she understood the dangers, that her reasons had to be at least as valid as his own.

Human interactions apart, Toller foresaw that food and drink—whether being ingested or eliminated—were likely to make the greatest demands on the crew's powers of endurance. There could be no fire for cooking, so the diet consisted of strictly apportioned cold servings of dried, and salted meat and fish, desiccated fruit, nuts and biscuits, washed down with water and one tot of brandy per day.

The fact that the main engine was being fired almost continuously, thus

imparting some weight to everything, made the toilet procedures less onerous than in zero gravity conditions, but the experience remained one which called for reserves of stoicism. In the midships lavatory there was a complicated tubular exhaust with one-way valves—the only point at which the hull could be breached in space. Unavoidably, a small quantity of air was lost each time the device was operated, but the volume of gas generated by the firesalt was enough to compensate.

It had originally been envisaged that all six of the crew would take equal turns in the pilot's seat, but the plan was soon modified by practical considerations. Berise, Gotlon and Wraker were able to hold Gola on the crosshairs with ease, and Bartan was rapidly acquiring the same facility—but for Toller and Zavotle the task became even more irksome and tiring. Bowing to expediency, Toller rearranged the duty schedules to let the four young people keep the ship on its interception course with Farland, while he and Zavotle had more time to dispose of as they saw fit. Zavotle was able to occupy himself with astronomical studies and prolonged entries in his leather-bound log, but for Toller the extra hours were burdensome.

At times he thought about his wife and son, wondering what they were doing, and at others he gazed moodily through portholes at a frozen, unchanging panoply of stars, silver whirlpools and comets. In those periods the ship seemed to be permanently locked in place, and try as he might Toller was unable to accept that it was achieving the kind of speed necessary for the interplanetary crossing.

"Are you ready?" Bartan said to Berise. When she nodded he shut down the engine, floated himself out of the pilot's seat and held the straps for Berise while she took his place.

"Thank you," she said, giving him a cordial smile. He nodded politely, impersonally, made his way to the ladder and went down it, leaving Berise to share the top deck with Toller and Zavotle. Gotlon and Wraker were busy loading the fuel hoppers in the tail section.

"I think someone is developing a soft spot for young Bartan," Toller commented, addressing himself to nobody in particular.

Zavotle sniffed loudly. "If that is the case, then that someone is only wasting her time. Our Mister Drumme reserves all his affections for spirits of one kind or another—bottled or disembodied."

"I don't care what you say." Berise paused, hands resting lightly on the controls. "He must have loved his wife very much. If I died or disappeared soon after being married I'd like my husband to fly to another world in search of me. I think it's very romantic."

"You're nearly as mad as he is," Zavotle told her. "I hope we're not all going to be afflicted by some mental contagion, a pterthacosis of the mind. What do you say, Toller?"

"Bartan does his job—perhaps we should leave it at that?"

"Yes." Zavotle gazed through the porthole beside him for a few seconds, his expression becoming enigmatic. "Perhaps he does his job much better than I do mine."

Toller's interest was aroused not only by what the other man had said, but by something in his inflexion. "Is there something wrong?"

Zavotle nodded. "I selected a guide star which was supposed to put us on an interception course with Farland. Had I done the calculations properly, and chosen the guide star well, we should see it and Farland gradually drawing closer together ahead of us."

"Well?"

"We are only five days into the flight, but already it is apparent that Farland and Gola are moving apart. I have put off telling you because I was hoping—foolishly, I suppose—that the situation would change, or that I would be able to devise an explanation. Neither of those things has come to pass, so I must consider myself to have failed to discharge my duties."

"But it isn't all that serious, is it?" Toller said. "Surely, all we have to do is aim closer to Farland. We are not under any threat."

"Only the threat posed by incompetence." Zavotle produced a rueful smile. "You see, Toller, *nothing* is working out as I expected. Farland seems too bright, and also its image in the telescope is too large. I would swear it is twice as big as when we started out. Perhaps optical instruments work differently in the void. I don't know—I can't explain it."

"It could mean that we have completed half the journey," Berise said.

"I didn't ask for your opinion," Zavotle replied tartly. "You speak of matters far beyond your understanding."

Berise's eyebrows drew together. "I understand that when something appears to double in size the distance to it has been halved. It seems quite simple to my mind."

"To the simple mind everything appears simple."

"Let's have no bickering," Toller said. "What we need..."

"But the idiotic woman is suggesting that we have travelled nine or ten million miles in only five days," Zavotle protested, kneading his stomach. "Two million miles in a day! That is a speed of more than eighty thousand miles an hour—which is impossible. The true speed..."

The true speed of your ship is now in excess of one hundred thousand miles

an hour, said the golden-haired woman who had shimmered into existence near the side of the compartment.

Chapter 15

Toller stared at the woman, knowing without being told that she was Bartan Drumme's wife, and his inner model of the universe and all its ways flowed and was changed for ever. He felt cold and weak, but somehow unafraid. Berise and Zavotle had not moved, and although they were looking in different directions he knew they were seeing exactly what he was seeing. The woman was beautiful, and she was wearing a simple white dress, and she glowed like a candle in the dimness of the ship's interior. She spoke in anger shaded with concern.

At first I could not believe it when I sensed Bartan drawing nearer, and then I searched and found that it was true! You set out across space without even understanding the effects of continuous acceleration! How could you fail to realise that you were heading for certain death?

"Sondy!" Bartan had returned to the upper deck and was clinging to a handhold near the head of the ladder. "I am coming to bring you home."

You are a fool, Bartan. All of you are reckless fools. You, liven Zavotle, you who drew up the plans for the voyage—how did you expect to land on this world?

Zavotle spoke like a man in a trance. "We planned to slow our ship down by plunging it into Farland's atmosphere."

And that would have been the end of you! At the speed you would have attained on reaching Farland the friction with the atmosphere would have produced so much heat that your ship would have become a meteor. And even if by some miracle you had landed safely—had you simply assumed that the air would be breathable?

"Air? Air is air."

How little you know! And you, Toller Maraquine, you who style yourself leader of this ill-conceived expedition—do you accept full responsibility for the lives of those you command?

"I do," Toller said steadily. A part of his mind was telling him that he and the others ought to be cringing with fear or reeling with astonishment, anything but calmly answering questions put to them by an apparition, but it was in the nature of the mental communion that all normal human reactions were prorogued. He

now understood Bartan's previous assertion that, by definition, anything which *happens* cannot be supernatural.

In that case, Sondeweere continued, if you retain any vestiges of a conscience, you will immediately abandon this wildest of ventures. I will give you the instructions and guidance necessary to effect a safe return to Overland.

"I cannot agree to that proposal," Toller said. "While it is true that I boast the title of commander of this extraordinary mission, its members have their individual and separate reasons for wanting to set foot on Farland. My authority is rooted in the common will to proceed, and were I to propose turning back my voice would become only one among many."

A slippery answer, Toller Maraquine. The vision regarded him with blue-seething eyes. Does it mean that you are prepared to lead your crew to their deaths?

"I see no need for that? If it is within your power to guide us safely to Overland you must be able to do the same with regard to Farland."

How little you understand! How little you know of the dangers that await you here! The silent words were now tinged with impatience. Many years ago you found Overland to be uninhabited, and now—blindly—you presume that Farland is the same. Has it not occurred to you that this world is peopled, that it has its own civilisation? Did you think I had an entire planet to myself?

"I had given the matter no thought," Toller said. "Until this minute I believed that Bartan was mad, and that you did not exist anywhere."

I see now that I should never have reached out to you, Bartan. It was a mistake I would not have made had my development been complete, but I must bear the responsibility for the jeopardy in which you and your companions have been placed. I beg you, Bartan—do not add to my remorse. You must persuade your friends to return to Overland.

"I love you, Sondy—and nothing will keep me from your side."

But what you contemplate is sheer folly! You cannot hope to rescue me with a force of only six.

"Rescue!" Bartan's voice became sharper. "Are you being held captive?"

There is nothing that anyone can do. I am content here. Turn back, Bartan!

In spite of the curious mood that had been induced in him, the casual and dreamy acceptance of the miraculous, Toller was aware of a growing clamour deep within himself as he listened to the exchange between Sondeweere and Bartan. Revelation was piling on revelation, and with each there came a host of questions which cried out for answers. What were the people of Farland like? Had they landed on Overland by stealth and physically abducted Bartan's wife? If so, what had been their motive? And, above all, how had an unremarkable

woman living on a remote farm acquired the awesome ability to project her image and thoughts across millions of miles of space?

Seeking enlightenment, Toller tried to study Sondeweere's face and discovered that it was impossible to focus on any single aspect of her. The vision he had seemed to exist *behind* his eyes, and it was a composite of many images which continually shifted and merged, making it impossible to scrutinise any one in particular. She was standing a few paces away from him, and at the same time she was so close that he could distinguish the individual down hairs on her skin, and at the same time she was so far away that she had the semblance of a bright star which pulsed in harmony with the silent rhythms of her speech...

By refusing to turn back you place me in an impossible situation. The only way I can save you from certain death in space is by leading you to an equally certain death here on Farland.

"We are responsible for our own lives," Toller said, knowing that he had the full support of his crew. "And we are not easy to kill."

Sondeweere came to the ship many times in the days that followed her first visitation, and for the most part her concern was with discarding its stupendous velocity and altering the course.

After he had recovered from the shock of learning the vessel's true speed, Zavotle became absorbed by the mechanics of the operation. It had not simply been a matter of turning the ship over to reverse the direction of its thrust—numerous course corrections had to be carried out by tilting the ship and firing the engine at an angle to the line of flight. There was no means of looking directly aft, therefore Farland could not be seen and the crew had to take it on trust that they were steadily drawing nearer to their destination.

Zavotle found much to write about in his log, and was particularly intrigued when his spectral tutor explained to him what had been wrong with the plan to halt the ship outside the reach of Farland's gravity. The radius of a planet's gravity can be regarded as infinite, Sondeweere told him, and therefore the ship had to be placed in orbit, a condition in which it falls forever *around* the planet, in exactly the same manner as the planets circle their parent sun.

Toller tried to take an interest in the difficult concept, but found that his normal thought processes were inhibited by the essential strangeness of the situation. There had been too many revelations, and too many mysteries had been uncovered—all of them turning on the central enigma of Sondeweere herself.

He would have expected Bartan Drumme to be more taxed by that enigma than any other member of the company, but the youngster seemed too bemused

by the prospect of being reunited with his wife to think much about what had so drastically interfered with the course of her existence. Allowances had to be made, Toller decided, for the fact that Bartan had spent a long time in an alcoholic twilight of the mind, living with the knowledge that his wife had somehow been transported to Farland and had communicated with him from that distant world.

Also, Bartan was drinking heavily again. With the realisation that the ship was vastly overstocked with all supplies, including brandy, Toller had given permission for the crew to drink freely—seemingly a small enough concession in the circumstances. It had soon become evident to him that Bartan was abusing the privilege, but he had lacked the will to issue a corrective. Matters of shipboard discipline, in which he would normally have been very strict, now seemed irrelevant and trivial in a universe where the impossible had become probable, and the bizarre had become commonplace.

Three days into the deceleration phase he found himself gazing through the forward porthole—which now faced aft—at the twin points of light which were Land and Overland, the worlds which had encompassed his entire life and which he had left far behind. They seemed more distant than the stars, and yet—from what he had learned—there was a human connection between Overland and Farland. What could it be? *What could it be?*

Toller's frustration was increased by the fact that, no matter how insistent were the questions hammering in his mind, each time Sondeweere established communication he was overcome by the same mood of passivity and acceptance, and she was gone before the questions could be put to her. It was as if, for reasons of her own, she had used her strange powers to smother his spirit of enquiry. If that were the case, a new mystery had been added to a surfeit of mysteries, and it all seemed so ... *unfair*.

He glanced around the upper deck, wondering if the rest of the crew shared his frustration. Wraker was in the pilot's seat, holding the crosshairs on the current guide star, and the others were drowsing in their sleeping nets, seemingly unperturbed by their vulnerability, their total ignorance of what lay ahead.

"This is not the way things should be," Toller whispered to himself. "We are entitled to more consideration than this."

I have to agree with you, Sondeweere said, hovering before him, warping space around her to create strange geometries which defied perspective.

I confess that I have done my utmost to erect a barrier around your minds, but my concern was with your collective safety. You see, telepathy—direct mind-to-mind communication—is largely an interactive process. You have enemies here on Farland, powerful enemies, and I had to be certain that I could prevent

the symbonites from becoming aware of your approach to the planet. That much I have been able to achieve, but it would still be best if you would agree to turn back.

We cannot turn back," Bartan Drumme said, forestalling Toller's response.

"Bartan speaks for all of us," Toller added. "We are prepared to face any foe, to die if need be, but by the same token we are entitled to be apprised of the terms of the conflict. What are symbonites, and why are they hostile to us?"

There was a brief pause during which Sondeweere's multidimensional image underwent several shifts and changes in luminosity, then she began to unfold a tale...

The symbols had been drifting in space for untold thousands of years before blind chance brought them into an unremarkable planetary system. It consisted of a small sun which had a retinue of only three worlds, two of them forming a closely matched binary. Under the influence of the sun's gravity the tenuous cloud of spores—many of them linked by gossamer-like threads—sank inwards over a period of centuries.

Almost all of them continued the slow descent to the heart of the system, where they were destroyed in the sun's nuclear furnace, but a few were lucky in that they were captured by the outermost planet.

There they settled in the soil, were nourished by the rain, and entered the receptive phase of their existence. They were doubly lucky in that all of them eventually came into physical contact with members of the planet's dominant species—a race of intelligent bipeds who had recently discovered the use of metals. They entered their hosts' bodies and multiplied and spread through them, showing a special affinity for the nervous system, and produced composite beings in which some of the characteristics of both species were enhanced to a great degree.

The symbonites were stronger and vastly more intelligent than the unmodified bipeds. They also had telepathic powers with which they sought each other out and formed a group of superbeings who easily dominated the indigenous species. The relationship was an amicable and peaceful one, bringing to an end the natives' tribal squabbling.

It could even have been thought of as beneficial to the host race, except that the bipeds were cheated of the right to follow their own evolutionary course.

There followed two centuries during which the symbonites flourished. The offspring of a coupling between a symbonite and an ordinary native was always another symbonite, and with that overwhelming genetic advantage the superbeings inexorably increased their numbers. They developed their own

culture, secure in the knowledge that in time they would entirely supersede the native population.

But millions of miles away, on one of the pair of inner worlds, a new development was taking place.

As the original cloud of symbion spores was drifting towards the sun, two of its members had been intercepted by one of the twin worlds. After they had floated down to the lowest levels of the atmosphere their link had been broken by wind forces, but they had entered the soil close to each other in a fertile region of the planet.

A symbion has no powers of selection. It has to merge into the first living creature with which it comes into contact, and one of the spores was quickly absorbed by one of the planet's lowest life forms—a myriapod which combined some characteristics of scorpion and mantis.

The crawling creature reproduced itself, giving rise to a breed of super-myriapods. They had no brains as such, being controlled by groups of ganglia, so they could not become telepathic in the full sense of the word, but they had the ability to broadcast dim proto-feelings and images from their nervous systems.

They also perpetuated themselves on a downward evolutionary curve, gradually losing their special characteristics, because as organisms they were far too primitive to form a viable symbiotic partnership.

In the case of that symbion spore, nature's blind gamble had not paid off. The breed of super-myriapods was destined to revert to type within a few centuries, and their existence would pass unnoticed by the world at large—except for one relatively unimportant instance. The sub-telepathic emanations of their descendants caused disturbing mental effects among humans who chanced to settle in their locality.

In the case of the second symbion spore, however, the outcome was vastly different...

"Sondy!" It was Bartan Drumme who broke the spell cast by the cool overview of the reaches of time and space, and his anguish was apparent. "Please don't say it! That can't be what happened to you."

That is what happened to me, Bartan. I came in contact with the second spore—and now I too am a symbionite.

There was an awed silence on the upper deck of the ship, then Bartan spoke again, his voice quiet and strained. "Does it mean I've lost you, Sondy? Are you dead to me? Are you now one of ... them?"

No! My appearance has not changed, and in my heart I am as much a human

being as ever, but ... how can I explain it? ... raised to a power. I tried to persuade you to turn back, but having failed I can reveal that I long to escape from this cold, rainy world and live among my own kind again.

"You're still my wife?"

Yes, Bartan, but it is futile to dream of such things. I am a prisoner here, and it would be suicidal for you and your companions to try to alter that fact.

*Bartan gave a tremulous laugh. "Your words have given me the strength of a thousand, Sony—*and I'm coming to take you home.*"*

The odds against you are too great.

"There are things we must know," Toller put in, driven to speak in spite of the awareness that he was intruding. "If you are not allied to these ... symbonites—why have you joined them in Farland? And how was it done?"

Once the spore had entered my system I was destined to become a symbonite, but the more advanced the host is in evolutionary terms the longer the process takes. I spent more than a year in a semi-comatose condition while the inner metamorphosis was taking place, and during that time my telepathic ability was not under control. At a certain stage the symbonites of Farland became aware of me, and they understood at once what was happening.

They are not a belligerent or acquisitive race—violent conquest is not their way—but they divined enough about human nature to fear the rise of human-based symbonites on Overland. They built a spaceship—one which operates on principles I could never explain to you—and flew to Overland.

They spirited me away from the midst of my people, anxious to do so before I could bear children. The action was necessary in their eyes because my children's children would also have been symbonites, and in time there would have been an entire planet populated with them. Springing from a higher evolutionary base, they would have been much superior to the symbonites of Farland. Although transmogrified, it is almost certain that they would have retained the human taste for exploration and expansion—and inevitably they would have set foot on Farland. So, here I am, and here they are determined I will stay.

"It would have been less trouble to kill you," Zavotle said, expressing a thought which had occurred to more than one of the Kolcorron's crew.

Yes, and that is precisely the kind of thinking which prompted the symbonites to abduct me. They are not a murderous race, so they were content to isolate me from my kind and wait for me to die of natural causes. However, they made the mistake of underestimating my telepathic potency. They did not allow for my being able to contact Bartan in an effort to assuage his grief.

And I in turn did not expect this terrible outcome—otherwise I would have

remained silent. Sondeweere's indefinable face, simultaneously close and remote, expressed regret. I must bear the responsibility for whatever befalls you.

"But why should we come to any harm?" Berise Narrinder said, speaking to Sondeweere for the first time. "If your captors are as timorous as you say, they will be unable to stand in our way."

Readiness to kill is no yardstick of courage. Although the symbonites abhor the taking of life, they will do so if they adjudge it necessary—but they are not the ones with whom you will have to contend. The native Farlanders are the instruments of the symbonites ... and they are numerous ... and they are untroubled by any scruples over the shedding of blood.

"Nor are we when the cause is just," Toller said. "Will the symbonites become aware of us before we land?"

Probably not. No mind—telepathic or otherwise—can continue to function unless it protects itself from the spherical bombardment of information. I became aware of you mainly because of the special relationship with Bartan.

"Are you permitted freedom of movement?"

Yes—I roam the planet at will.

"In that case," Toller said, still dully astonished at his ability to commune with a mental apparition, "surely it is within your power to guide our skyship to some remote and lonely spot—at night, if need be—where we could meet you and take you on board our craft. A few seconds should suffice—it is not even necessary for the ship to touch down—and then we could be on our way back to Overland."

The extent of your presumption amazes me, Toller Maraquine. Do you dare to imagine that your analysis of the possibilities, carried out on the spur of the moment, is superior to mine?

"All I'm..."

Do not trouble yourself to answer. Instead, let me put another question to you—for the last time, is it totally inconceivable that you can be persuaded to turn back?

"We go on."

If that is the way of it, Sondeweere's image was retreating as she spoke, we will meet under your terms. But I guarantee that all of you will come to rue the day you left Overland.

Chapter 16

The *Kolcorron* completed two orbits of the planet at a height of more than three thousand miles, hurtling through the tenuous outer fringes of the atmosphere. And then, after Sondeweere was satisfied that she had taken all variables into account, she gave instructions for a series of firings of the main engine, the effect of which was to kill the ship's orbital speed.

The *Kolcorron* began to drop vertically towards the surface of Farland.

At first the rate of fall was negligible, but as the hours went by the speed built up and those on board began to hear a burbling rush of air against the planking of the hull. Tipp Gotlon was at the controls. Under Sondeweere's seemingly omniscient guidance, he brought the ship into a vertical attitude, tail down, and fired a long blast on the engine which not only checked the descent but produced a small upward velocity. At that stage the ship was surrounded by air which, although still rarefied, was capable of supporting human life for a reasonable period. The ship's upward movement would soon be halted and reversed by Farland's gravity, but for the time being the exterior working conditions resembled those of Overland's weightless zone—and the task of deploying the skyship began.

Before going outside, Toller went to the top deck for a final word with Gotlon, ascending the ladder with some difficulty because of his skysuit and the added encumbrances of the parachute and personal propulsion unit. A single ray of sunlight from a porthole was slanting across the compartment, casting a lemon-coloured glow over the pilot's face, upon which was an expression of moody discontent.

"Sir," he said on seeing Toller, "how is Zavotle coping with the outside work?"

"Zavotle is coping very well," Toller replied, aware of what was in Gotlon's mind. He had been disappointed on being told that he was to remain with the ship, and had argued that only the able-bodied members of the crew should take part in what promised to be an arduous and dangerous rescue mission. Toller had countered by saying that the role of the *Kolcorron* was of paramount importance to the whole project, therefore logic demanded that the best pilot should be left in control of the vessel. The tribute to his flying skills had mollified Gotlon only

a little.

"The work I am given could as easily be done by a sick man," he said, returning to his original argument.

Toller shook his head. "Son, liven Zavotle is not merely a *sick* man. He would not thank me for telling you this, but there is little time remaining to him, and I think it is in his heart to be buried on Farland."

Gotlon looked uncomfortable. "I hadn't realised. So that's why he has been so crabbed of late."

"Yes. And if he were to be left here alone on the ship, and chanced to die, what would become of the rest of us?"

"I didn't say goodbye to him. I was resentful."

"He won't be concerned about that. The best thing you can do for Zavotle is to make sure that his logbook is returned safely to Overland. There is much in there that will be invaluable to future space travellers, including all that he has learned from Sondeweere, and I am charging you with the personal responsibility for ensuring that it is delivered into King Chakkell's hands."

"I'll do my utmost to..." Gotlon paused and looked at Toller with eyes which had become strangely aware. "Sir, the mission... Are you in any doubt about the outcome?"

"No doubt at all," Toller said, smiling. He gripped Gotlon's shoulder for a second, then drew himself back to the ladder and went down it, controlling his bulk with difficulty in the confined space because of the weightless conditions.

When he got outside the ship, into the boundless sky, movement became effortless. The others were already at work, separating the skyship section from the main body of the *Kolcorron*, and Farland was an enormous, mind-stunning convex backdrop to their activities.

A white polar cap was visible on the planet, which had more cloud than Land or Overland, giving it a reflective power which enveloped the floating figures in a storm of brilliance. The sky in the lower half of the sphere of visibility had returned to the dark blue coloration with which Toller was familiar, but above him it shaded into a near-blackness in which the stars and spirals shone with unusual clarity.

He took a deep breath as he relished every aspect of the unearthly scene, feeling privileged, savouring the fact that he had been born into unique circumstances which had directed his life to this unparalleled moment.

Ahead of him was a new experience, a new world to ravish his senses, a new enemy to conquer; within him was the kind of fevered joy he had first known when riding down on Red One to engage a Lander fleet.

But there was something else there—an undertow of panic and despair. The

worm at the core of his life had chosen that very instant to resume its coiling and uncoiling, reminding him that after Farland there was nowhere else to go. *Perhaps*, the now familiar thought came stealing, *my grave is down there on that alien globe. And perhaps that is where I want it to be...*

"We need those muscles of yours, Toller," Zavotle called out.

Toller jetted down to the aft section of the ship. The criss-cross ropes which bound the section to the main hull had already been slackened off the lashing pins, but the mastic was exerting an obstinate cohesive force which preserved the unity of the structure. Toller helped drive in wedges, work which was irksomely difficult because of the need to cling to the ship with one hand and contain the reaction of the hammer within his own frame. Levers were quite useless for the same reason, and in the end separation was only achieved by the group working their toes and fingers into the partial gap at one side and using their combined muscle power to rip the skyship clear of the mother craft.

It tilted away, wallowing gently, exposing the exhaust cone of the engine which would take the main ship back to Overland. Dakan Wraker had disconnected the control extensions in advance, and his task now was to rejoin the various rods to both engines and to check that they were functioning properly.

"We should have had jacks," Zavotle commented, his face pale and gleaming with sweat. "And have you noticed that it isn't cold here? We're farther from the sun and yet the air is warmer than in our own weightless zone. Nature delights in confounding us. Toller."

"There's no time to fret about it now." Toller flew to the skyship and took part in pushing it sideways, clear of the *Kolcorron*, with the combined thrust of five personal jets. The crew then began drawing the folded balloon out of the gondola, straightening it out and connecting the load lines. The acceleration struts, which had been sectionised to fit into the ship, were tricky to assemble, but the routine had been practised before the start of the voyage and was completed in good time. Wraker finished his work on the mother ship and within a few minutes of returning to the gondola had fettled its engine in readiness for inflation of the balloon. The operation was facilitated by the fact that the whole assemblage was slowly falling, creating a drift of unheated air into the balloon and helping prepare it for the influx of hot gas.

Toller, as the most experienced skyship pilot, took the responsibility for starting the engine in the burner mode and inflating the balloon with no heat damage to the lower panels. As soon as the insubstantial giant, with all its geometrical traceries, had been conjured into being above the gondola he turned the pilot's seat over to Berise and went to the side.

The *Kolcorron* was now falling slightly faster than the skyship, its varnished timbers gradually slipping downwards past those who watched from the gondola's rail. Gotlon appeared at the open midsection door and waved briefly before closing it and sealing the ship.

A minute later the main engine began to roar. The spaceship stopped sinking, hovered for a fleeting moment and started to climb. Its engine seemed to grow louder as it moved above the skyship and Toller felt the hot miglign gas blasting out of the exhaust, disturbing the equilibrium of the balloon and gondola. He watched the larger ship until it passed out of sight behind the curving horizon of the balloon, and suddenly he felt in awe of Gotlon, an ordinary young man who nevertheless had the courage to fly off into the void alone, trusting a woman he had never met to guide him into orbit with ethereal commands.

Not for the first time, it came to Toller just how foolhardy he had been in setting out to cross interplanetary space with scarcely an inkling of the dangers ahead. Such hubris surely merited disaster. For himself and Zavotle the ordained penalty was perhaps acceptable, but he had to do all that was in his power to ensure that his youthful companions were not drawn into the maelstrom of his own destiny.

The same thought was to recur to him many times during the six days that it took to descend to the surface of Farland.

Associating with the young fighter pilots, especially Berise, had shown him how much they resented any attempt at what they saw as wet nursing. He had to respect their feelings, but was in a dilemma because he knew their outlook was tinged with overconfidence, the unconsciously arrogant belief that they could triumph over any adversary, survive any danger. The exhilaration of riding jet fighters through the central blue had persuaded them that recklessness was a viable philosophy of life.

His own career hardly gave him the right to take a different standpoint, but he was haunted by the knowledge that from the start he had been woefully unfit to lead an expedition to Farland. Even Zavotle had not understood that in space a moving ship can continue at the same speed for ever with its engine shut down, and that the effects of any extra thrusts were cumulative. They would all have died on entering Farland's atmosphere had it not been for Sondeweere's intervention—and she had been right to condemn him for another crass oversight. He had not even considered the idea that Farland might be populated with ordinary beings, let alone talented super-creatures with powers far beyond his understanding. Sondeweere had assured him that landing on the planet would mean death for the astronauts, and as the descent continued he found it harder

and harder to erect barriers of disbelief against her prediction.

Another contributor to his disquiet was Sondeweere herself. Her telepathic visitations had been no surprise to Bartan; Berise and Wraker seemed to have accommodated her in their systems of belief without much difficulty—but Toller had spent too many years as a materialist and sceptic not to feel his inner universe quake every time he thought of her.

The story about the symbion spores had been truly astonishing, but at least he could comprehend every part of it, and with comprehension came acceptance. The notion of direct mind-to-mind contact was in a different category, however.

Even though he had seen the curiously elusive image of her and had listened to her silent voice, something within him rebelled each time he recalled the experience.

It smacked too much of mysticism. If there really were other levels of reality, not accessible to his five ordinary senses, who was to say—to choose but one example—that religious beliefs about the transmigration of souls were unfounded? Where was one to draw the line? Sondeweere's private message for him was that his conviction that he understood the nature of reality, give or take a few minor areas of uncertainty, was and always had been a ludicrous conceit—and that was hard to swallow at his time of life.

Unsettling through Sondeweere's manifestations were, he had little respite from them. She appeared to the crew many times during the descent, especially in the final stages, giving instructions to slow their downward speed, to hover, and once even to ascend for an hour. Her objective was to guide them down through wind layers and weather systems, which were more evident than on Overland, to a landing site she had chosen.

At one stage she correctly warned them of a region of intense cold, many miles in depth, in which the temperature was even lower than that of the weightless zone although the air above and below was relatively warm. In reply to Zavotle's question she spoke of the atmosphere reflecting away some of the sun's heat and of convection currents carrying more of it down to sea level, resulting in a cold layer.

The very fact that Sondeweere knew of such things, she who until recently had been an unlettered agricultural worker, added to Toller's general misgivings. It substantiated her claim to have been sublimated into a superwoman, a genius beyond the ken of genius, and made him feel apprehensive about meeting her face to face. What would a goddess think of ordinary human beings? Would she look on them in much the same manner as they had regarded the gibbons which abounded in the Sorka province of old Kolcorron?

He would have expected Bartan Drumme to show some degree of concern

over the same issue, but the youngster gave no sign of it. When not sleeping or taking his turn at the controls, he spent his time talking to Berise and Wraker, quite often swigging from one of the skins of brandy he had included in his kit. Berise had brought drawing materials and she devoted hours to sketching the others and making maps of the approaching planet, the latter mainly for the benefit of Zavotle. For his part, the little man appeared to be deteriorating at an increasing rate. He lay on his palliasse, forearms pressed against his stomach, and rarely became animated except when in communion with Sondeweere. Given the opportunity he would have questioned her for hours, but her visitations were always brief and her instructions terse, as though many other matters competed for her attention.

Unexpectedly, Toller got the most companionship from the crew member he knew least—Dakan Wraker. Although he had been born after the Migration, the soft-spoken man with the crinkly hair and humorous grey eyes had an intense interest in the history of the Old World. While helping Toller to grease and clean the muskets and five steel swords which had been brought on the mission, he encouraged him to talk for long periods about daily life in Ro-Atabri, Kolcorron's former capital city, and the practical arrangements by which it had spread its influence through an entire hemisphere. It transpired that he had ambitions to write a book which would help preserve the nation's identity.

"So we have an artist and a writer on one ship," Toller said. "You and Berise should form a partnership."

"I'd love to form *any* kind of partnership with Berise," Wraker replied in a low voice, "but I think she has her sights set on another."

Toller frowned. "You mean Bartan? But he's soon to be reunited with his wife."

"An ill-matched couple, don't you think? Perhaps Berise sees no future in the union."

In Wraker's comments Toller recognised an echo of his own thoughts, so it seemed that the only one who was not in doubt about the prospects for Bartan's strange marriage was Bartan himself. Mildly drunk for most of the time, Bartan appeared to live in a state of euphoria, supported by his monomania, buoyed up by the belief that when he met Sondeweere again all would be as it was before. Toller was at a loss to explain how the young man continued to nourish such naive expectations—but could any of the company claim to be displaying greater foresight?

Toller had noticed that even when Sondeweere used a word he had never heard before he nevertheless understood its meaning. It was as though the words themselves were merely convenient carriers, each one freighted with

multitudinous layers of meaning and complementary concepts. When mind spoke to mind there were no misunderstandings or areas of vagueness.

No man who listened to Sondeweere's silent voice could doubt anything she said—and she had predicted that the rescue mission would end in tragedy.

It was dark when the skyship drifted down towards the plain—the kind of darkness Toller had previously known only during the hours of deepnight. While the ship still had some altitude there had been soft glimmerings of light visible here and there in the mysterious black landscape, indicative of scattered towns or villages. But this close to touchdown the only luminance came from the sky, and even the Great Spiral could do little more than add fugitive hints of silver to the mist which patchily shrouded the ground.

The air was seeded with moisture, and to Toller—equatorial dweller from a sun-scoured world—it seemed dauntingly cold, with a strange ability to draw the heat out of his body. He and the others had shed the cumbersome skysuits hours earlier, and now they were shivering and rubbing their goose-pimpled arms in an effort to keep warm. The air was also laden with the smell of vegetation, a dank essence of *greenness* more powerful and pervasive than anything Toller had ever known, and which told him more forcibly than his other senses that he was close to the surface of an alien planet.

As he stood at the gondola's rail he felt keyed-up, exhilarated, entranced—and also regretful that there was to be no opportunity to roam across Farland on foot in daytime and sample its wonders with his own eyes. If Sondeweere met the ship according to plan—and he had little doubt that she would—they would be able to take her on board within seconds. It would not even be necessary for the gondola's legs to make contact with Farland's soil before they headed skywards again under cover of night. By morning they would be out of sight of anybody on the ground, well on their way to a rendezvous with the *Kolcorron*.

Not for the first time, the thought caused Toller to frown in puzzlement. There seemed to be a wide divergence between the actual course of events and Sondeweere's confident forecast of a disastrous end to the venture. Everything seemed to be going too well. Had she simply been doing her best to keep the would-be rescuers out of *possible* dangers, or were there other factors in the situation which Toller had not considered and which she had chosen not to divulge? The extra element of mystery, the hint of lurking perils, worked on him like some potent drug, stepping up his heart rate and increasing his brooding sense of anticipation. He scanned the darkness below, wondering if the enigmatic symbonites could have intercepted and silenced Sondeweere, if the projected landing site could be thronged with waiting soldiers.

Wraker was now firing frequent short bursts into the balloon, reducing the speed of descent to a crawl, and as the ground came nearer Toller's eyes began to play malicious tricks on him. The darkness was no longer homogenous, but was composed of thousands of crawling, squirming shapes, all of them with the potential to be what he least wanted them to be. They ran beneath the drifting ship, silently and effortlessly keeping pace with it, their upraised arms imploring him to come within range and be cut and clubbed and hewn and hacked into anonymous fragments of flesh and bone.

It seemed a long, long time before the encompassing gloom relented and yielded up something unambiguous—a tremulous mote of pale grey which gradually lightened in tone and resolved itself into the figure of a woman dressed in white...

Chapter 17

"Sondy!" Bartan Drumme called, leaning far over the rail beside Toller. "Sondy, I'm here!"

"Bartan!" The woman was walking quickly to keep abreast of the ship. "I see you, Bartan!"

There was no awesome, mind-numbing telepathic contact—just a woman's voice charged with understandable human excitement—and the sound of it overwhelmed Toller with wonder. For the moment all cognisance of symbonite superbeings was gone, and he could think of nothing but the strangeness of this meeting. Here was a woman who had been" born on his home world and had lived an ordinary life there before being transported to another planet in bizarre circumstances. Every dictate of reason said that she should then have vanished forever from human ken, but her grief-crazed, drink-sodden husband had inspired a voyage across millions of miles of space, and—against all the odds—they had reached her. That woman, whose voice trembled with natural emotion, was only a few yards away from him in the alien darkness—and Toller spellbound by the reality of her.

The sound of the gondola's exhaust cone and legs swishing through vegetation snapped him back into a universe of practicalities. Bartan had climbed over the gondola's side and was perched on the outer ledge, reaching towards his wife with one hand. She caught hold of it and within a second was standing beside him. Toller helped her roll herself over the rail, marvelling as he did so at the simple bodily contact. Bartan came inboard again with a single lithe movement and clutched Sondeweere to him. Toller, Berise and Zavotle were spontaneously drawn to them, and arms were lapped upon arms in a gratifying multiple embrace. It ended when the gondola's legs glanced against the ground, sending a shudder up through the deck.

"Take us aloft," Toller said to Wraker, who at once began firing a long burst which was to revitalise the gigantic entity of the balloon waiting patiently above them.

"Yes, yes!" Sondeweere divorced herself from the cluster of bodies and stepped towards Wraker, her right hand extended in a gesture of greeting. He responded by raising his free hand, but the expected clasp did not take place.

Sondeweere reached past him and—before anybody watching could react—caught the red line connected to the balloon's rip panel and jerked it downwards with irresistible force.

There was no immediate reaction in the cramped microcosm of the gondola, but Toller knew that the balloon had been *killed*. Far above him a large trapezium of linen had been torn out of the balloon's crown, and the envelope would already be starting to wrinkle and sag as the hot gas which sustained it was vented into the atmosphere. The ship was now committed to setting down on Farland—possibly for ever.

"Sondy! What have you done?" Bartan's anguished cry was heard clearly through the general clamour of shocked protest. He lurched towards Sondeweere with both arms outstretched, as though belatedly trying to prevent her making an injudicious move. She fended him off and went quickly to an empty section of the gondola. *Sondeweere has gone*. Toller thought. *The symbonite superwoman is now among us*.

"There was good reason for what I did," she said in a firm, clear voice. "If you will listen to me for..."

Her words were lost as the gondola struck the ground and tilted to a steep angle, hurling bodies and loose equipment against one wall, before dropping back to the horizontal.

"Get the struts off," Toller shouted, jolted out of his reverie. "The balloon is coming down around us."

He tugged the quick-release knots which were securing a strut to the corner nearest him and pushed the slim support away from the rail, hoping to prevent it taking the weight of the subsiding envelope. The gondola was being inundated with choking hot miglign gas which was belching down out of the balloon's mouth. A sound of splintering told Toller that at least one of the other struts had already been overloaded.

He climbed over the side, peripherally aware of others doing the same, and leaped down to the ground. He ran a short distance through what felt like ordinary grass and turned to view the collapse of the balloon. The vast shape was still tall enough to blot out part of the sky, but it had lost all symmetry. Distorted, writhing like a leviathan in its death throes, it sank downwards at increasing speed. The slight breeze deposited most of it downwind of the gondola where it lay flapping in the grass, raised into shifting humps here and there by gas that was trapped within.

A brief period of silence followed, then the crew members turned and closed in on Sondeweere. There was no hint of threat in their demeanour, nor even of resentment, but the courses of their lives had been profoundly altered by a single

unexpected action on her part and they sought some kind of reassurance. Toller could see them well enough in spite of the darkness to note that he was the only one wearing his sword. Obeying old instincts, he dropped his hand to the hilt of the weapon and looked all about him, trying to penetrate the folds of alien night.

"There are no Farlanders within many miles," Sondeweere said, addressing herself directly to him. "I have not betrayed you."

"May I be so bold as to enquire what you *have* done?" he replied, falling back on sarcasm. "You will appreciate that we have a certain interest in the matter."

"We need to know," Bartan added in a quavering voice which indicated that he, perhaps more than anybody else, had been devastated by the turn of events.

Sondeweere was wearing a belted white tunic and she drew it closer around her throat before she spoke. "I invite you to consider two facts which are of paramount importance. The first is that the symbonites of this world are aware of my exact whereabouts at all times. They know precisely where I am at this moment, but their suspicions are not aroused and they will take no action because—fortunately for all of us—I am of a restless disposition and it is my habit to travel far and wide at irregular hours.

"The second fact," Sondeweere went on, speaking with a calm fluency, "is that the symbonites brought me here in a ship which can make the interplanetary crossing in only a few minutes."

"Minutes!" Zavotle said. "Only a few minutes?"

"The journey could have been completed in a few seconds, or even fractions of a second, but for short distances it is more convenient to proceed at a moderate speed. My point is that if I had gone aloft in the skyship the symbonites would very quickly have realised what was happening and would have intercepted us with their own ship. As I have already told you, they are not homicidal by instinct, but they will *never* permit me to return to my home world. They would have forced the skyship down, and in doing so would have killed everyone on board."

"Is their weaponry so much superior to ours?" Toller said, trying to visualise the aerial encounter.

"The symbonite ship carries no weapons as such, but in flight it is surrounded by a field—call it an aura—which is inimical to life. The underlying concept cannot be explained to you, but be assured that a meeting with the symbonite ship would have resulted in all our deaths. Whether the symbonites wanted it that way or not—we would have died."

A silence descended on the group of fliers while each assimilated Sondeweere's message. The breeze suddenly freshened, spanging the mute figures with chilling drops of rain which easily penetrated their light shirts and

breeches, and clouds slid across the stars like prison doors closing. *Farland exults*, Toller thought, trying to repress a shiver.

Berise was the first to speak, and when she did so her voice carried an unmistakable note of anger. "It seems to me that you were somewhat high-handed in tampering with our ship," she said to Sondeweere. "Had you told us the full story when you came on board, we could have dropped you off again and returned to Overland unmolested."

"But would you have done so?" Sondeweere gave them a wan smile. "Would any of you have chosen to be so ... logical?"

"I can't speak for the others, but *I* certainly would," Berise said, and all at once Toller intuited that the challenge to Sondeweere had less to do with the ship and the outcome of the expedition than with rivalry for Bartan's affections. He found time, in spite of the extremeness of their plight, to be once again awed by the female mind and to become slightly afraid of Berise. She was another Gesalla. Now that he thought of it, all women seemed to be Gesallas to one extent or another, and a man was no match for them in their chosen arena.

"The skyship has not been harmed beyond repair," Sondeweere pointed out. "I purposely brought you to a remote area where you are unlikely to be discovered by Farlanders, so there is ample time for the work to be carried out."

Then what was the point of collapsing the balloon? Toller thought. *The woman has more to tell us...*

Bartan took a step towards Sondeweere. "The others may leave if they wish—I will stay here with you."

"No, Bartan! Have you forgotten why I was brought here in the first place? The symbonites would slay me rather than permit me to associate with a functional male of my own race."

Toller, with his soldier's interest in tactics, was locked into the problem he had set himself. *The reason Sondeweere collapsed the balloon had to be that she intended the ship never to fly again. In which case...*

"There is an alternative course open to all of you," Sondeweere said. "I will describe it for you, but you must make the decision for yourselves. If you decide against it, I will help repair your ship and will undertake to guide you back to Overland, while I remain here. If you decide in favour of it, you must be apprised of all the dangers and..."

"We decide in favour," Toller cut in. "How far is the symbonite spaceship from here? And how well is it guarded?"

Sondeweere turned to face him. "I am surprised by you, Toller Maraquine."

"There is no need," Toller said. "I am not a clever man, but I have learned that there are some issues which—no matter how wise and learned the disputants

—can be settled in only one way. It is a way I understand."

"The killing way."

"The way of justifiable force, of blocking an enemy sword with a sword of my own."

"Say no more, Toller—I am in no position to make moral judgments. It was my idea to take the ship, because it offers my only hope of escape from this drear and unfulfilled existence, but there are many dangers."

"We are prepared to face danger," Toller said. He glanced around his companions, associating them with the statement.

"But why should any of you be prepared to risk death on my behalf?"

"We all had our own good reasons for taking part in this expedition."

Sondeweere moved closer to Toller, all the while gazing into his face, and for the first time since their meeting he sensed she was employing her extraordinary powers of mind.

"Yours was not a good reason," she said sadly.

"How long must we stand around in this freezing quagmire?" he demanded, stamping his feet on the squelching ground. "We are likely to die of the ague unless we stir our bones. How far from here is the ship?"

"A good ninety miles." Sondeweere spoke with a new briskness, apparently having accepted that an irrevocable decision had been reached. "But I have a transporter which can take us there."

"A wagon?"

"A kind of wagon."

"Good—this is no country for a forced march." Relieved at having been spared any further deliberation, Toller ran with the others to the gondola for the unloading of weapons and food supplies. He took one of the five muskets for his own use, but without much enthusiasm. The net of pressure spheres which accompanied it was likely to be an encumbrance in close combat, and the time it took to lock on a new sphere before each shot detracted seriously from the weapon's efficacy.

"Look what I have found." Zavotle, who was shivering violently, extended an unsteady hand in which he was holding a brakka shaft around which was rolled the blue-and-grey flag of Kolcorron.

Toller took it and hurled it into the ground like a spear. "That's our obligation to Chakkell taken care of—from now on we go about our own business."

He descended from the gondola and was placing his supplies with the others when it occurred to him that Sondeweere was no longer with the company. He scanned the darkness and in that instant heard a strange sound, one which was made up of other sounds—the hissing of a giant snake, the snorting of a

bluehorn, the creaking and rattling of a wagon. A moment later he discerned the squarish outline of a vehicle which was slowly approaching the ship. Curious as to what kind of draught animal was responsible for such a cacophony, he went forward to meet Sondeweere, and halted—confounded—as it became apparent that the lurching vehicle was moving under its own power.

The rear of it resembled a traditional wagon covered with canvas supported on stretchers, but in front was a fat cylinder from which ascended a tube belching white vapours into the murky air. Sondeweere was visible as a pale blur behind the glass screen of a cabin-like structure which formed the forepart of the vehicle's main body. It drew to a halt on wide, black-rimmed wheels, the noise from it decreased to a ruminative snuffling and Sondeweere leapt down from the cabin.

"The wagon propels itself by harnessing the power of steam," she said, forestalling a barrage of questions. "I sometimes use it as a caravan when I'm travelling long distances, and it is well suited for our purposes."

The journey across that region of Farland was one of the most singular Toller had ever undertaken.

Part of the strangeness sprang from the unique governing circumstances and the ambience. In spite of the protection offered by the transporter's canvas top, the five astronauts were oppressed by a clammy coldness unlike anything in their previous experience. Dawn came, not as a fountaining of golden light and heat as on Overland, but as a stealthy change in the colour of the environment, from black to a leaden grey. Even the air within the vehicle became tinged with grey, a mix of exhaled breath and dank mist seeping in from outside which seemed to curdle around the passengers and chill their blood. Only Sondeweere, clad in substantial tunic and trews, was unaffected by the penetrating cold.

Toller and the others parted the canvas frequently, hungry for the sight of an alien world and its inhabitants, but found little to inspire wonder in the glimpses of blue-green grasslands swept by curtains of rain and fog. Toller noted that the road on which they were travelling was paved and well maintained, much superior to anything on Overland. As it gradually widened they got their first glimpse of Farlander dwellings.

The buildings drew some comment, not because they were exotic in any way but because of their sheer ordinariness. Had it not been for the steeply pitched roofs the unadorned single-storey cottages could have blended in with the local architecture almost anywhere on the twin worlds. There was no sign of their inhabitants so early in the morning, and Toller thought it entirely reasonable that they should choose to remain abed for as long as possible, rather than venture

out in such an inhospitable clime.

"It isn't always as cold and gloomy as this," Sondeweere explained at one stage, speaking from her isolated position at the vehicle's tiller. "We are in the mid-latitudes of the northern hemisphere, and you happen to have arrived in the middle of winter."

Toller was familiar with the concept of seasons, thanks to his upbringing in one of the philosophy families of old Kolcorron, but it was new to the younger members of the group, mentally conditioned by living on a world whose equator was exactly in the plane of its orbit around the sun. At first the idea that Farland was tilted was quite difficult for them to grasp, and then as it began to take hold they questioned Sondeweere extensively, intrigued by the thought of days and nights which constantly varied in length, and the consequences thereof. For her part, Sondeweere seemed pleased to be able to put aside the symbion component of her identity for a while, and to react naturally as a human among humans.

Listening to the intercourse, Toller was occasionally overcome by a sense of unreality. He had to keep reminding himself that Sondeweere had undergone an incredible metamorphosis, that the group was on its way to do battle with alien beings for the possession of a ship which had been wrought out of miracles and magic. And, above all, that every member of the group could easily die in the hours that lay ahead. The young warriors appeared to have dismissed that thought, supremely confident—as he had once been—that death could not touch them.

Stay that way as long as you can, he advised them mentally, aware that the nerve-thrumming exhilaration which had always sustained him on the eve of battle was totally absent. Was it the reaction of a sun-dweller to this bleak and mist-shrouded world whose clammy coldness penetrated him to the marrow? Or were premonitions at work? Was the capacity for any kind of pleasure being withdrawn from him in preparation for the final disillusionment?

During one of his periodic inspections of the dreary landscape his attention was caught by the sight of a distant building which, as at last befitted an alien world, was unlike any he had seen before. Nested in a narrow valley, it was little more than a silhouette of near-black among dark greys, but it was huge in comparison to the Farlander houses and had numerous chimneys which plumed smoke into the sullen sky.

"An iron foundry which supplies factories throughout this region," Sondeweere explained in response to his query. "On Overland the various operations would be carried out in the open air, but here—because of the climate—it is necessary to have an enclosure. The native Farlanders would doubtless have produced similar structures in due time, but the symbionites have artificially

accelerated the process of industrialisation. It is one of their crimes against nature in general and against the people of this world in particular."

But you too are a symbonite, Toller thought. *How can you criticise the activities of your own kind?*

The question, far-reaching though he sensed it to be, was at once displaced by others, less philosophical in nature, which had begun to swarm in his mind. Previously, far out of his intellectual depth, he had conjured a simplistic vision of superbeings effortlessly taking control of a primitive world—but now it was dawning on him that the symbonites had been in a situation similar to that of a platoon of well-armed Kolcorronian soldiers facing a thousand Gethan tribesmen. In a straight and simple conflict, no matter how superior their weaponry, they were bound to be overwhelmed—therefore other strategies had been called for.

"Tell me," he said to Sondeweere, "have the Farlanders never offered any resistance to the invaders?"

"They are unaware of any intrusion," she replied, eyes fixed on the dull-gleaming road ahead, "and who could possibly make them aware? You were quite unable to accept anything that Bartan told you about me—so just imagine how you would have reacted had he told you that King Chakkell and Queen Daseene and their children, plus all the aristocrats in the land and *their* children, were alien conquerors in human guise! Would you have believed him and tried to lead a rebellion? Or would you have dismissed him as a raving lunatic?"

"But you speak of the ruling classes. You told us that the symbon spores descended on this world at random, and that they had no choice as regards their hosts."

"Yes, but can't you see that symbonites in any society would quickly infiltrate and dominate the power structure?" Sondeweere went on to outline her view of the developments on Farland over the previous three centuries. In the beginning was the gulf of incomprehension which exists between the masses and the rulers in any primitive society. As far as the indigenous Farlanders were concerned, their lords and masters—already mysterious and god-like—gradually became more innovative, more inventive. They introduced new ideas, such as steam engines for heavy work, and with each step forward their position became more unassailable.

They were forcing the pace of industrial development, but with a sure hand and with patience. Having started with perhaps as few as six symbonite individuals, they well understood the need to proceed with caution, but as decade followed decade they laid down the foundations for a symbonite culture which was destined to dominate an entire world. They mingled freely with the native

population, but also had retreats in which no Farlander ever set foot, secret places where they carried out research work and experimented with scientific ideas which might have excited alarm had they been made public. It was in one of those protected enclaves that the symbonite spaceship had been designed and built.

As Sondeweere was speaking Toller began to piece together from stray references a picture of her own lonely existence on the unprepossessing planet. The native Farlanders saw her as a grotesque caricature of a normal being, a freak which for some inscrutable reason was under the protection and patronage of their masters. They tolerated her presence among them, but made no attempts to communicate.

To the self-interested symbonites she was a mild encumbrance, a threat which had been neutralised. At first they had tried to establish a rapport with Sondeweere, but in return she had displayed all the traits which had led them to forestall the emergence of human-based symbonites—resentment, contempt, hatred and implacable hostility among them—and since then they had been content to keep her under continual telepathic surveillance. They learned what they could from her, stole what they could from her mind, and waited for her to die. Time was on their side. They were a new race and as such potentially immortal; she was an individual—vulnerable and impermanent...

"There's one! More than one!" The exclamations came from Wraker, who had raised the canvas cover to look outside, triggering a general rush to do the same.

"Remember, they must not see us," Toller said as he created a narrow gap between the material and the transporter's wooden siding. He peered out and saw they were passing through a village which to his eyes was remarkable in that it was so unremarkable. It seemed that craftsmen everywhere—masons, carpenters, smiths—came up with universal practical solutions to universal practical problems. The village, like the isolated houses seen earlier, might have been anywhere in the temperate zones of Land, but its inhabitants were a different matter.

They resembled humans, but were considerably shorter, and with quite different bodily proportions. Their hooded and layered garments, obviously designed to turn away rain, did not disguise the fact that their spines arched forward almost as semi-circles, predisposing them to waddle with out-thrust bellies and faces tilted upwards. Their legs were short and stubby, but not as truncated as their arms, which angled outwards from the shoulder and ended where the human elbow might have been placed. Massive hands, which seemed to have only five fingers, clenched and unclenched as they walked. It was difficult to see much of their faces, but they seemed pale and hairless, the

features all but lost in folds of fat.

"Elegant little fellows," Bartan commented. "Is that the enemy?"

"Do not be complacent," Sondeweere said over her shoulder. "They are strong, and they seem to have little fear of pain or injury. They are also fanatical in their obedience to authority."

Toller saw that the Farlanders, possibly on their way to jobs, were regarding the passing transporter with interest, buried eyes emitting flickers of amber and white. "Have they noticed you?"

"Possibly, but such curiosity as their dull minds can muster is probably directed towards the vehicle—motorised transporters are still quite rare. I am privileged in a way."

"How well organised and equipped is their army?"

"The Farlanders do not have an army in your sense of the word, Toller Maraquine. A world state has been in existence for over a hundred years and internecine conflict has been outmoded, thanks to the symbonites, but there is an immense body of citizenry with a title I can best translate as the Public Force. They single-mindedly execute any task assigned to them—flood control, forest clearance, the building of new roads..."

"So they are not trained fighters?"

"What they lack in individual skills they make up for in numbers," Sondeweere said. "And I repeat—they are very strong in spite of their lack of stature."

Zavotle aroused himself from a contemplation of inner pain. "They are not like us, and yet... How can I put it? They have more points of similarity than of difference."

"Our sun is close to the centre of a galaxy, where the stars are very close together. It is possible that all the habitable worlds in this region of space were seeded with life aeons ago, perhaps more than once. An interstellar traveller might find humans or their cousins on many planets."

"What is a galaxy?" Zavotle said, initiating a long question-and-answer session in which Toller, Wraker and Berise participated, eager for the gifts of knowledge which Sondeweere had acquired both from the symbonites and her own powers of deduction, enhanced beyond the understanding of ordinary men and women. For Toller, the realisation that each of the hundreds of misty whirlpools visible in the night sky was a conglomeration of perhaps a hundred thousand million suns came as a blend of mind-stretching delight and poignant regrets. He was simultaneously uplifted by the scope of the new vision, and depressed by two other factors—his personal inadequacy when confronted by the scale of the cosmos, and sorrow over the fact that his long-dead brother,

Lain, had been denied his rightful place at the intellectual banquet.

As the transporter continued its hissing and puffing way through a thickening chain of villages, it gradually came to Toller's notice that Bartan Drumme was the only member of the company to have excluded himself from the precious communion with Sondeweere. He looked uncharacteristically morose and apathetic, not even bothering to change his position to evade a persistent dripping of rain from a leak overhead, and—while drinking very little—was protectively nursing a skin of brandy he had brought from the skyship. Toller wondered if he was downcast at the prospect of going into battle, or if it was beginning to sink into him that the woman he had married and the omniscient, awesomely gifted being they had met on Farland were two quite different people, and that any future relationship between them could not resemble that of the past.

"...not like the burning of fuel, as in a furnace," Sondeweere was saying. "Atoms of the lightest gas present within a sun combine to form a heavier gas. The process yields great amounts of energy and that is what makes a sun shine. I'm sorry I cannot give you a clearer explanation at this time—it would take too long to expound the underlying principles and concepts."

"Could you explain it in your silent voices?" Toller said. "As you did when we were still in the void."

Sondeweere glanced back at him. "That would help, undoubtedly, but I dare not enter into any telepathic communication. I told you that the symbonites are aware of me at all times, and the closer I get to their ship the more I will become a focus of their attention, because it is the one place in all the land which is forbidden to me. Were they to pick up the slightest wisp of telepathic activity their interest in my movements would at once be translated into direct action—and that is something which will happen soon enough."

"They should have destroyed the ship," Berise commented, traces of sourness still in her voice.

"Perhaps—but they have no way of knowing how many symbon spores may remain on Overland waiting to create more human symbonites." Sondeweere cast Berise a smile which perhaps hinted that her preoccupations were far removed from personal rivalries. "Also, the ship was not built without considerable sacrifice on their part."

"The sacrifices may not all be on one side."

"I know," Sondeweere said simply. "I told you that at the outset."

Chapter 18

The transporter made an abrupt turn to the left and within minutes its comparatively smooth movement had given way to a bumpy and lurching progress which drew creaks from the chassis. Toller raised himself and looked out in front, past Sondeweere's white-clad figure, and saw they had left the road and were now heading across open grassland. The horizon seen through rain-spattered glass was almost flat and the terrain was quite featureless except for a scattering of squatly conical trees.

"How far now?" he said.

"Not far—about twelve miles," Sondeweere replied. "This will be uncomfortable for you, but we must proceed with all possible speed from here on. Until now the symbonites had no real cause for alarm, because the highway leads to many destinations, but on this course there is only..." She broke off with a sharp intake of breath and her grip on the tiller failed momentarily, allowing the vehicle to pull to one side. Those beside Toller sat up straighter, hands straying towards weapons.

"Is anything wrong?" he said, half-knowing what had happened.

"We are discovered. The alarm has gone out—and sooner than I had expected." Her voice betrayed no anxiety, but she advanced a lever and the sound from the engine increased. The protests from the chassis grew louder as the vehicle gained speed.

Toller felt a stirring of the old squalid excitement. "Can you tell us anything about what lies ahead? Fortifications? Weapons?"

"Very little, I'm afraid—intelligence of that nature is hard to gather." Sondeweere went on to say that, to the best of her knowledge, the symbonite ship was kept in an ancient meteorite crater which served as a natural revetment. She believed it was further protected by a high fence along the crater's rim. There would be armed guards, whose numbers she could not predict, and their weapons were likely to be swords, and perhaps pikes.

"No bows? No spears?"

"The native physique does not readily lend itself to the use of the bow or any kind of throwing weapon."

"How about firearms?"

"There are no brakka trees on this world, and the Farlanders' knowledge of chemistry is not yet sufficiently advanced for them to have invented artificial explosives."

"This sounds quite encouraging," Wraker put in, nudging Toller. "The defences seem to be disproportionately light."

"In the normal scheme of things there would have been no need to defend the ship against anything but troublesome wild animals," Sondeweere said. "There would have been no point in my trying to get near it alone—and no logical person could have anticipated the arrival of a ship from Overland before another four or five centuries had elapsed." She smiled and a note of warmth crept into her voice. "In the symbonites' eminently reasonable view of the universe people like you five simply do not exist."

Wraker grinned in return. "They'll learn about us soon enough—to their cost."

Toller frowned. "We must not allow ourselves to become too confident. How long will it take the symbonites to call up reinforcements?"

"I don't know," Sondeweere said. "There are large-scale road works to the north of the site, but I cannot say how close they are."

"But you knew *our* exact position when we were many thousands of miles away in the void."

"There is a natural and very powerful empathy between us because we come from the same human stock. The Farlanders' minds are all but closed to me."

"I see," Toller said. "Obviously we cannot decide our tactics in advance, but I have one final question ... about the ship itself."

"Will I be able to fly it? The answer is yes."

"In spite of never having seen it?"

"Again, this cannot be explained to you, not even by telepathic means—and I am deeply sorry about that—but the ship is not governed by mechanical controls. For a person who comprehends all the operating principles it will do exactly as it is bidden; without that necessary understanding it will not move a single inch."

Toller fell silent, chastened by the reminder that Sondeweere, in spite of her perfectly normal appearance and demeanour, was in actuality an enigmatic superbeing. The fact that he and the others could communicate with her on what felt like equal terms had to be almost entirely due to skilled indulgence on her part—as a venerable philosopher contrives to amuse a two-year-old child.

He glanced at Bartan, freshly made aware of the young man's unprecedented situation, and saw that he was staring fixedly at the back of Sondeweere's head, his expression broody and almost sullen. Becoming conscious of Toller's scrutiny, Bartan mustered a wry smile and raised the skin of brandy to his lips.

Toller reached out to prevent him drinking, saw the beginnings of defiance on the young man's face and reflexively turned his hand palm upwards. *I'm growing soft*, he thought as he accepted the skin and took a sizeable drink from it, *but perhaps not before my time*.

"How about you, Sondy?" Bartan said as though issuing a challenge. "Would you like a warming drop of brandy?"

"No. The warmth is spurious, and I find the taste unpleasant."

"I thought you might," Bartan said, and now an aggrieved and surly note was plain in his voice. "What do you subsist on these days? Nectar and dew? When we return to the farm you will be able to have your fill of those, but I trust you won't object if I go on preferring stronger potions."

Sondeweere gave him a single pleading glance. "Bartan, you have the right to force the issue—even though some of what I have to say to you would be best said in private—but we..."

"I have nothing to hide from my friends, Sondy. Proceed! Explain to all of us that it would be unseemly for a princess to bed down with a peasant."

"Bartan, please do not cause yourself needless pain." Sondeweere was speaking loudly to overcome the sounds of the transporter at speed, but there was a concerned tenderness in her voice. "Even though I have changed a great deal, I would still have been a wife to you, but it can never be ... because..."

"Because of what?"

"Because I have a higher duty to the entire human population of Overland. I refuse to deprive my own people of their evolutionary heritage by founding a dynasty of symbonites which would dominate the ordinary humans and eventually drive them into extinction."

Bartan looked stunned, obviously having heard something totally outside his expectations, but he was still nimble enough of mind to respond quickly. "But there is no need for us to have children. There are ways ... maidenfriend is only one of them... I never wanted to be burdened with noisy offspring anyway."

Sondeweere managed to laugh. "You cannot lie to me, Bartan. I know how much you want children, *true* descendants—not alien hybrids. If you have the great good fortune to return to Overland alive, your only chance of happiness will lie in settling down with a normal young woman who will bear you normal children. That, believe me, is a future worth looking forward to and fighting for."

"It is also a future I reject," Bartan said.

"The decision is not in your hands, Bartan." Sondeweere paused as the transporter hit a rough patch of ground and the thunder of it made conversation impossible. "Have you forgotten about the symbonites of this world? If we do succeed in stealing their ship and getting back to Overland with it, they will

build another and go after me. They will take no chances on my surviving, possibly with child. It is my belief that the second ship will have weapons, terrible weapons, and the symbonites will be prepared to use them."

"But..." Bartan drew his fingers across his wrinkled brow. "This is terrible, Sondy. What will you *do*?"

"Assuming I survive the next hour, there is only one course open to me," Sondeweere said. "I will take the ship and fly off into the galaxy, perhaps into many galaxies, beyond the reach of this world's symbonites. It will be a solitary existence, but it will have its compensations. There is much to see before I die."

"I'll go with..." Bartan began the sentence impulsively, then halted, and a tormented look appeared in his eyes. "I could never do that, Sondy. I would die of fear. You have already left me behind."

Toller knew that he had been listening to Sondeweere's normal voice, but her words rang through him—with multiple resonances of meaning—almost as if she had been speaking telepathically. There were echoes of dreams he had never dared to dream, of a vision he had once glimpsed—while riding a jet down through needle-sprays of sunlight—of being able to go on and on until he died, gorging his eyes and mind and soul with images of things he had never seen before, of new worlds, new suns, new galaxies, always something new, new, *new*. It was a prospect the architect of the universe might have designed especially for him; it flooded the dark void at the core of his being with hard light, joyous light; and he had to make the claim, no matter how slight the chances of winning...

"I would go with you," he murmured. "Please take me with you."

Sondeweere half-turned towards him, her mind-force swinging through him like the beam of a lighthouse, and he waited numbly for her answer.

"Toller Maraquine, I told you that your reason for coming to Farland was not a good one," she said, "but your reason for wanting to leave it has its own kind of merit. I make no promises—for all of us may die within minutes—but if you succeed in taking the symbonite ship the universe is yours."

"Thank you." Toller's voice was a painful croak, and he had to blink back his tears. "Thank you!"

The wall of the crater was low, not much differentiated from the surrounding terrain, never lifting itself above the horizon. A general paucity of illumination coupled with the blurring effect of the rain meant that the transporter was less than a mile from the site before Toller was able to pick out any evidence that it was defended.

As Sondeweere had predicted, there was a tall fence around the rim—barely

visible as a hazy grey ellipse—and in it was a darkish knot suggestive of an entrance. His telescope was virtually useless because of the jouncing of the transporter, but its slewing images told him that at least two other mechanised vehicles had been parked across the gateway. Farlanders appeared as moving specks of blackness milling in the general vicinity.

"We must avoid the gate and break through the fence," he said to Sondeweere, putting the telescope away. "Can you make the wagon go faster?"

"Yes, but there is the risk of breaking an axle on this kind of ground."

"Use your best judgment—but remember that if we don't go through the fence we don't go anywhere."

Toller turned to the others and knew at once that they had experienced a loss of confidence, something he had seen happen many times in the irreducible few minutes before a battle. Bartan's face was almost luminous in its pallor, and even Berise and Wraker—proficient in the abstract art of long-range killing—had a look of glum uncertainty about them. Only Zavotle, busy checking his musket, seemed to be unperturbed.

"Don't try to plan anything ahead," Toller told them. "Believe me, you can trust your sword arm to do all the thinking that will be necessary. Now, get those covers out of the way." Within seconds the coarse material screening the truck bed from the outside world had been pulled down and cast off behind the dangerously swaying vehicle. Cold rain swirled in around the lightly clad figures.

"There's something else to bear in mind." Toller glanced at the teeming heavens and gave an exaggerated grimace of distaste. "*Anything* is better than living in this accursed place and slowly turning into a fish."

The laughter his remark drew was louder than it deserved, but Toller had long since learned that subtlety was out of place in battlefield humour, and he was satisfied that vital psychological bridges between him and the crew were being maintained. He drew his sword and positioned himself behind Sondeweere, looking forward over the top of the driving cabin.

The transporter was starting up the incline towards the rim of the crater, and now he could see that the fence was made of spear-like metal uprights railed to stout posts. He considered urging Sondeweere to strive for more speed and momentum, then remembered that her understanding of the mechanics of the operation far surpassed his own. The smokestack ahead of him spouted orange sparks as the heavy vehicle clanked its way to the top of the slope. Far to his left Toller saw Farlanders running, and beyond them he glimpsed a complex greyish lesion in the landscape which indicated road works barely a mile away.

"Hold on!" he shouted and gripped the cabin roof as the transporter sledged

into the fence.

The entire section was torn from its supports and fell inwards, the sound of the impact merging into an appalling mechanical clamour from the engine and a hissing explosion. Hot vapours fanned out around the boiler, momentarily whitening out the entire scene, then the vehicle was rolling down into a circular depression at the centre of which was the symbonite ship. It was sitting on an area of masonry ringed by what was meant to be a moat or a wide drainage ditch.

Toller had tried to visualise the ship's appearance in advance, but he was unprepared for the sight of a nearly featureless metal sphere supported by three flaring legs which ended in circular pads. The sphere was a good ten yards in diameter and had a ring of what seemed to be portholes on the upper half, but there was no sign of an entrance.

In the instant of eyeing the strange ship which embodied his future Toller became aware of brown-clad Farlanders, who had chanced to be near the breach in the fence, running towards the transporter from the right. Although the vehicle was now on a downward slope it was rapidly losing speed, amid a continued metallic thrashing, and the Farlanders were easily intersecting its course. They looked like circus grotesques as they bounded along on stocky legs, cowls thrown back to reveal hairless skulls. Toller's stomach gave an icy spasm as he saw they were not carrying weapons.

"Stay back!" he cried involuntarily as the two reached the side of the transporter, but one of them sprang and gripped its siding while the other leaped on to the running board of the cabin, reaching for Sondeweere with a powerful hand. Toller split his unprotected skull with a downward sword-stroke which went deep into the head, and he fell away without a sound, radially spurting blood.

The other, trying to raise himself over the siding, took Wraker's sword through the throat. He sank down again, but his fingers remained in view, obstinately clinging to the wooden edge. Wraker and Berise both hacked at his fingers, severing most of them, before he dropped to the ground. He lay where he fell, but to Toller's amazement the one with the cloven skull was on his feet. The alien took several steps in the grassy wake of the transporter, arms outspread, before sinking to his knees and pitching forward.

So hard to kill, Toller thought. These little people could bring down giants...

The transporter clanked and shuddered to a halt, wreathed in smoke and mist. Toller glanced towards the gateway on the crater's rim and saw that other Farlanders were coming through it and beginning to head down the long slope in groups of two or three. Occasional dull flashes told him they were armed. He

took a musket, straddled his way over the side of the transporter, and jumped down to the ground as part of a general abandonment of the vehicle.

Sondeweere flitted ahead of the others, unencumbered by weapons, and sped across a simple wooden bridge. Toller and the others followed her, feeling the boards quiver beneath their feet. As Sondeweere neared the ship a rectangular section opened in its side, gliding outwards on elbowed hinges. Toller slid to a halt, raising his musket.

"Don't shoot!" Sondeweere called out to him. "I opened the door. A ladder will now descend, or ... or..." An uncharacteristic note of indecision had crept into her voice.

Toller, following the upwards direction of her gaze, noticed empty metal brackets below the doorway, and for the moment his soldier's mind was abreast of hers in comprehending that the ship was normally entered by means of a fixed ladder. Someone had taken the simple and pragmatic precaution of removing it, and as a result entry was denied to genius and fool alike. The lower edge of the doorway was at least twelve feet above ground level, on the out-curving lower half of the sphere, and to an individual of typical Farlander stature its elevation would have created a formidable barrier indeed. But for humans...

"Bring the wagon across the bridge," Zavotle shouted. "We can climb on it."

"It cannot be moved," Sondeweere replied. "And the bridge is too light, anyway."

"We can reach the door," Toller said, laying his weapons on the paving. "Sondeweere, it is logical that you should go first. You will stand on my shoulders. Come!"

He looked briefly towards the advancing Farlanders, then made a gesture which took in Zavotle, Wraker and Berise. "Go forward and defend the bridge! Use the muskets as much as possible. Take mine as well and persuade the wretched pygmies that they would be better to keep their distance. And see if the timbers of the bridge can be torn up."

They ran to the bridge, unhitching their nets of pressure spheres, inside which minute measures of pikon and halvell had already been combined. Toller positioned himself beneath the ship's doorway and extended his hands to Sondeweere, who came to him immediately. He put his hands around her waist and lifted her to his shoulders, a process which she aided with a kind of scrambling movement of her feet. She straightened up, standing on him, and became steady as she got her hands on to the sill of the doorway.

Concurrently, the first groups of Farlanders racing down the slope were coming within musket range and the defenders were opening fire. The first volley of shots appeared to bring down only one of the attackers, but the musket

reports—magnified by the natural amphitheatre—threw them into disarray. They slid and skidded into each other in their efforts to check the downward rush.

Toller turned away from the scene to get his hands under Sondeweere's feet and as he was straightening his arms to propel her into the ship's doorway he was acutely aware of a nerve-thrumming pause before the muskets could be fired again. The delay, caused by the need to unscrew each expended sphere and replace it, was the main reason he had scant regard for firearms.

By the time Sondeweere was safely into the ship it was beginning to dawn on the Farlanders that, no matter how terrifying the psychological impact of the unfamiliar weapons, the actual casualties inflicted by them had been light. They were surging forward again, short swords in hand. A fresh volley of shots, this time at shorter range, knocked over at least three more of the aliens, but failed to check their general advance.

"Find a rope," Toller shouted up to Sondeweere.

"Rope? The ship has no need of ropes."

"Then find *something*!" Toller turned towards the bridge in time to see a knot of Farlanders press across it.

liven Zavotle, fighting his own war against a private enemy, ran to meet them with a musket in his left hand and sword in his right. He fired the musket at point blank range through a Farlander's out-thrust belly and almost at once was lost in a flailing confusion of arms and swords. Toller sobbed aloud as he saw that his oldest friend, the patient eroder of problems, was being hacked to death.

Within seconds there came a fresh round of musket fire and this time, on the narrow front of the bridge, the effect on the Farlanders was considerable. They fell back, leaving their dead and convulsing wounded, but retreated no farther than the opposite bank, where one who seemed to be a commander began to harangue them in the staccato alien tongue. Facing them across the bloodied bridge, the three remaining Overlanders were feverishly recharging their guns.

Toller ran towards his companions, at the same time glancing back at the ship. Sondeweere was visible in the dark rectangle of the doorway, helplessly watching the fighting.

I'll be with you soon, he vowed inwardly, repulsing a new enemy, an enemy of the mind which could wreak even greater havoc than an external foe by implanting the idea that defeat was inevitable. Nearing the bridge from the side, he confirmed his first impression that it was simply an arrangement of thick timbers resting on a masonry shelf on each side of the moat.

"Berise," he shouted, "take the muskets and try to use all of them. Bartan and Dakan, help me with these boards!"

He knelt beside the bridge, got his hands under the nearest timber and used all

the power of his back and thighs to stand up with it. Bartan and Wraker lent a hand, and together they turned the massive waterlogged timber and hurled it down into the moat. There was a shout from the Farlanders and a fresh surge on to the remaining five boards. Berise fired four muskets in rapid succession, during which time Toller and his helpers, working with panic-boosted strength, lifted and disposed of four more timbers, sending bodies—living and dead—down into the brown water. Toller did not look at the curious white-and-crimson thing which had been Zavotle.

He picked up his sword as desperate Farlanders streamed on to the last timber. Wraker, already facing them, caught the leading alien with a lateral blow to the neck which cart-wheeled him into the moat. Berise shot the next Farlander in the throat, propelling him back against the one behind. They both swayed and began to fall sideways, but in the instant of parting company with the bridge the uninjured one hurled his sword. The short heavy weapon flew with freakish accuracy and buried itself almost to the hilt in Wraker's stomach. He emitted a terrible bubbling belch, but stood his ground.

Toller pounced past him, dropping to his knees, and grasped the last timber. It was slimed with algae and the extra weight of the Farlanders moving on to it defeated even his vein-corded muscles. He was vaguely aware of another musket shot and of Bartan taking up a protective stance over him. He pushed the timber to one side, this time aided by its slippery surface, and got it almost off the shelf. Two Farlanders reached him as he was making the final effort which sent the timber tilting down and away, and he heard the impact of blows just above him as Bartan engaged the aliens. The tip of a sword sliced through Toller's right ear as he threw himself back and scrambled to his feet.

One of the Farlanders had disappeared with the timber, but the other had leapt on to the paving and his arms were circling as he strove to regain his balance. Wraker, still on his feet in spite of being transfixed, disposed of him by driving the point of his sword into the alien's face, sending him backwards over the edge.

Bartan, looking pale and introspective, was standing close by, clutching a wound in his left shoulder. Blood was flowing copiously through his fingers. Berise was on her knees, her diminutive figure bowed over the muskets, fingers flying as she changed pressure spheres.

Toller looked beyond the milling group of Farlanders on the far side of the moat and saw a much greater force of them pouring through the gateway on the crater's rim. The action at the bridge had bought the defenders some time, but a miserly amount, a period which could conveniently be measured in seconds—and they were going to be at their most vulnerable while trying to enter the ship.

Toller turned his attention to Wraker, wondering if the soft-spoken young

pilot understood that he was dying, that his history book would never be written. Bloodstains were spreading swiftly in his rain-soaked clothing, from around the protruding handle of the Farlander sword, and he was becoming unsteady on his feet, but he managed to speak clearly.

"Toller, why are you wasting valuable time?" he said. "Go while the going is good. I'm sorry I am unable to join you—but I have some unfinished business with our unprepossessing little friends."

He turned at once and sank to his knees at the edge of the moat, placing his sword in readiness on the masonry beside him. Berise stood up, carried three loaded and charged muskets to Wraker and laid them with his sword. He looked around as if to say something to her, his eyes seeking hers, but she had already retrieved the fourth musket and had run to Bartan. She pushed Bartan, rousing him from his bemused state, and they both ran towards the waiting ship.

Toller hesitated. He saw two Farlanders leap out from the other side of the moat, their short legs pedalling the air as they strove for maximum distance. Even if the aliens were inept swimmers they would soon be able to make use of the strewn timbers of the bridge to cross the water barrier—all the more reason to abandon Wraker, who was already doomed, and get on board the spacecraft. Still unable to shake off the feeling that he was betraying a comrade, Toller turned and ran to where Berise and Bartan were waiting for him below the huge, enigmatic sphere.

"There aren't any ropes," Sondeweere cried from the darkness of the doorway overhead. "What can you do?"

"As before," Toller replied. "I can lift Berise and Bartan."

"But what about *you*? How will you get in?"

Battle fever inflamed Toller's mind as he heard Wraker fire a musket. "Lower a sword belt—I'll be able to reach." He sheathed his sword and extended his hands to Berise. "Come!"

She shook her head. "Bartan is hurt and he needs help even to reach your shoulders. He must go first."

"Very well," Toller said, reaching for Bartan, who was swaying drunkenly. Bartan made as if to evade him, but there came the sound of another musket shot and Toller's forbearance deserted him. Growling with rage and frustration, he encircled Bartan's thighs with his arms and hoisted him upwards. Berise joined in, steadying Bartan and getting a shoulder beneath one of his feet, and from above Sondeweere lent her own strength to pull the protesting man over the rim of the doorway.

The entire operation had been completed in a few seconds, but in that sliver of time Toller had heard two more musket shots. He glanced towards the moat

and saw that Wraker had his sword in hand and was chopping downwards at Farlanders who must have been threatening him from the angled timbers of the bridge. Toller's heartbeat became a series of dull internal explosions as he realised that his precious store of hard-won seconds was spilling away at a prodigious rate.

Berise had slung her musket on her back and was reaching out to him. He caught her by the waist and raised her to his shoulders in one movement. Even then she was not tall enough to reach the sill of the doorway, and she swayed precariously for a moment before Sondeweere and Bartan reached down, found her hands and drew her up into the ship.

During that moment Wraker was snatched out of sight, down to join Zavotle in the pit of death, and the white-gleaming heads of four Farlanders appeared above the moat's nearer edge. They threw weapons in front of them and began to squirm up on to the pavement. The slope beyond them was now massed with Farlander reinforcements, swarming like a field of brown insects.

Toller looked up into the mysterious interior of the ship, which now seemed as remote as the stars to which it was to carry him, and after a subjective lifetime saw Bartan's leather belt being reached to him. It had been re-buckled to form a loop, and the three inside the doorway each had a hand on it.

Two Farlanders, more agile than their fellows, were on their feet and running, swords at the ready.

Toller estimated the time left to him and knew he could expect only one chance to reach safety. Sondeweere's voice rang in his head: *Hurry, Toller, hurry!* He tensed himself—aware of the snorting approach of the Farlanders, hearing the slap of their feet—then sprang upwards and caught the belt with his right hand. The sudden manifestation of his weight on the belt was too much for those above, dragging them downwards and away from whatever purchase they had on the inside of the hull. Berise, lightest of the three, was pulled halfway through the opening and would have fallen had she not released the belt and grabbed the rim of the doorway.

Toller let go in the same instant.

He had his sword half-drawn when he hit the ground between the two Farlanders, but there was little he could do to compensate for the terrible disadvantage of his position. He turned the withdrawal of the weapon from its sheath into a cross-stroke which deflected a thrust from the alien in front, and at the same time leaped sideways to evade danger from behind—but he was slowed by his recovery from the drop.

The delay was only a fraction of a second, but it felt like an age in the fevered entropy of close combat. Toller grunted as the Farlander blade stabbed upwards

into his lower back. He spun around, his sword singing in a horizontal sweep which caught his attacker on the side of the neck and all but decapitated him. The alien went down in pulsing gouts of crimson.

Toller continued his spin to face the other one, but the truncated warrior was backing away, knowing that time was on his side—at least ten of his fellows were racing across the paving stones and would be around Toller in the space of a few heartbeats. A smile of triumph appeared on the alien's fat-enfolded face, but almost at once it was transformed into an expression of blank astonishment as Berise—who was directly above him—fired a shot into the top of his head. He sat down abruptly in a vertical fountain of blood.

"Grab the musket, Toller!" Bartan shouted from the ship's entrance. "We can still bring you in!"

But Toller knew it was too late.

The bounding Farlanders were almost upon him, and even if he could be supported by the down-reaching musket his undefended body would be run through a dozen or more times while he tried to pull himself upwards. Experiencing a peculiar reticence, a desire to prevent his friends witnessing what had to come next, he retreated out of their sight towards the centre of the spherical hull.

But, although there was little pain from the wound in his back, his legs were weak and strangely difficult to control. He halted with the lowest point of the metal curvature almost brushing his head, and tried to make a final stand which would cost the enemy dearly, but his legs failed him and he went down under a concerted onslaught.

Sondeweere, he called as the grey light was blocked out by dripping brown forms and alien blades began to find their marks, *don't allow the pygmies to have the satisfaction. Please fly the ship ... for me...*

We love you, Toller, she said inside his head. *Goodbye.*

Unexpectedly, in the seconds remaining to him—before his body was sheared into atoms by a conflict of natural and artificial geometries—Toller achieved a final triumph.

He found he was genuinely sorry to die.

And there was gladness in the discovery.

The full measure of his humanity was restored to him by the realisation that it was far worse for a man to live when he would rather die, than to die when he would rather live.

And there's another consolation, he thought as the ultimate deepnight closed around him. *Nobody could ever say mine had been a commonplace dea—*

Chapter 19

Bartan and Berise kept looking back over their shoulders as they walked, and they were almost two furlongs from the ship when it abruptly disappeared.

In one second it was there—a dull grey sphere perched on the crest of a low hill; and in the next second there was a complex of globes of radiance, expanding and contracting through each other. There was no sound, but even the foreday sun was dimmed in comparison to the fierce light which washed out of the spectacle. It rose vertically into the sky, gaining speed, changing shape. For a moment Bartan saw a four-pointed star with in-curved sides, each point emitting a spray of prismatic colour. There was a core which seethed with multi-hued specks of brilliance, but even as he was trying to focus his eyes on it the beautiful star was dwindling out of sight, swinging clear of the great disk of Land before finally vanishing into the blue.

The emotional turmoil within Bartan intensified into an ache which swamped the pain from his wounded shoulder. Less than an hour earlier he had been on rain-swept Farland, watching his friends die one by one—Zavotle, Wraker, and finally Toller Maraquine. Somehow, even in those last terrible seconds, Bartan had not expected the big man to die. He had seemed unkillable, an imperturbable giant destined to go on fighting his wars for ever. It was not until he had asked Sondeweere to take him with her into the bleakness of infinity—an unthinkable prospect which withered Bartan's soul—that he had realised Toller was more than just a gladiator. Now it was too late to get to know him, too late even to offer his thanks for the gift of life.

In addition to his grief over Toller, Bartan had been forced to accept that his wife could no longer be his wife, that she had become another kind of a giant, an intellectual colossus with whom he was unfit to share the man-woman relationship. He knew that Sondeweere had not yet flown off into the galaxy—she would spend some days guiding Tipp Gotlon safely home—but in a way she was already more remote from him than the faintest stars. His personal Gola had winked out of existence, leaving him with no direction to his life.

"I don't think we need to walk any farther," Berise said. "It looks as though we will have transport into the city."

Bartan shaded his eyes and looked towards Prad, the outskirts of which were

about two miles away. He was peering through a shifting screen of after-images, but was able to discern dust clouds being thrown up by wagons and riders on a winding road. Some agricultural workers, no doubt drawn by the spectacle of the symbonite ship, were approaching at a run through nearby fields.

"I'm glad we have plenty of witnesses," Berise went on, "otherwise the King would have difficulty in swallowing all we have to report to him."

"Witnesses," Bartan said humbly. "Yes, witnesses."

Berise looked closely into his face. "I don't think you could go much farther, anyway. You'd better sit down and let me check that bandage."

"I'll be all right—I still have some of my excellent cure-all." Bartan untied the skin of brandy from his belt and was pulling out the stopper when he felt Berise's restraining hand on his own.

"You don't really need that kind of medicine, do you?" she said.

"What's it got to do with...?" He paused, blinking down into Berise's face, noting that her expression was one of concern more than anger. "No, I don't actually *need* the drink."

"Then throw it away."

"*What?*"

"Throw it away, Bartan."

It came to him that it had been a long time since anybody had shown concern about what he did, but it was with some reluctance that he let the leather container fall to the ground.

"Anyway, it was nearly empty," he muttered. "Why are you smiling?"

"For no reason." Berise's smile grew wider. "For no reason at all."

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PART I:
The Return to Land

Chapter 1

The lone astronaut had fallen from the very edge of space, down through thousands of miles of gradually thickening atmosphere, a drop which had lasted more than a day. In the later stages of the descent his body had been acted on by wind forces which had carried him far to the west of the capital city. Perhaps through inexperience, perhaps from a desire to be free of the restraints of the fallbag, he had opened his parachute too soon. It had been deployed a good ten miles above the planetary surface, and as a result was being wafted even farther into the sparsely populated regions which lay beyond the White River.

Toller Maraquine II, who had been patrolling the area for eight days, examined the creamy fleck of the parachute through powerful binoculars. It was an inconspicuous object, hardly as bright as the daytime stars, seemingly fixed in position beneath the great curving rim of the sister world which filled the centre of the sky. The movement of Toller's airship made it difficult to keep the parachute centred in his field of view, but he was able to pick out the tiny figure slung beneath it and he felt a growing sense of anticipation.

What would the astronaut have to report?

The very fact that the expedition had lasted longer than expected was a good omen in Toller's eyes, but in any case it would be a relief to pick the man up and transport him to Prad. Patrolling the near-featureless region, with nothing to do but return the companionable waves of farm workers, had been monotonous in the extreme, and Toller had a craving to get back to the city where he could at least find congenial company and a glass of decent wine. There was also some unfinished and highly pleasurable business with Haryana, a blonde beauty in the Weavers' Guild. He had been in ardent pursuit of her for many days, and he sensed she had been on the verge of yielding when he had been sent away on the current irksome duty.

The airship was running easily before the easterly breeze, requiring only an occasional nudge from the jet engines to keep pace with the parachutist's lateral motion. In spite of the shade provided by the elliptical gasbag overhead, the heat on the upper deck was becoming intense, and Toller knew that the twelve men comprising his crew were as eager as he to see the mission come to an end. Their saffron airmen's blouses were dappled with sweat and their postures were as

drooped as was compatible with observance of shipboard discipline.

Two hundred feet below the gondola the striated fields of the region slipped quietly by, forming patterns of stripes which flowed out to the horizon. It was now just over fifty years since the migration to Overland, and the Kolcorronian farmers had had time to impose their designs on the natural coloration of the landscape. On a planet without seasons the edible grasses and other vegetation tended to be heterogeneous, each plant following its own maturation cycle, but the farmers had painstakingly sorted them into synchronous groups to achieve the six harvests a year which had been traditional on the Old World since history began. Each field of grain displayed linear variations in colour, from the delicate green of young shoots to harvest gold and the brown of shorn earth.

"There's another ship to the south of us, sir," shouted Niskodar, the helmsman. "Same altitude or a bit higher. About two miles away."

Toller located the ship—a dark sliver low on the purple-hazed horizon—and turned his glasses on it. The magnified image showed that the craft had blue-and-yellow Sky Service markings, a fact which caused Toller some surprise. Several times in the previous eight days he had glimpsed the ship which was patrolling the sector adjoining his to the south, but that had been at the mutual limit of the sweeps and the visual contacts had been fleeting. The newcomer was well inside Toller's assigned territory and, as far as he could determine, was closing with him as though also intending to intercept the returning parachutist.

"Get on the sunwriter," he said to Lieutenant Feer, who was at the rail beside him. "Give the commander of that ship my compliments and advise him to change course—I am on the Queen's business and will brook no interference or obstruction."

"Yes, sir," Feer replied eagerly, obviously pleased that the incident had come along to add a hint of savour to the foreday. He opened a locker and took out a sunwriter which was of the new lightweight design employing silvered mirror slats in place of the conventional glass sandwich construction. Feer aimed the instrument and worked the trigger, producing a busy clacking sound. For about a minute after he had finished there was no visible response, then a tiny sun began to blink rapidly on the distant ship.

Good foreday, Captain Maraquine, came the pulsed message. The Countess Vantara returns your greeting. She has decided to take command of this operation in person. Your attendance is no longer required. You are hereby instructed to return to Prod immediately.

Toller choked back the angry swear words the message had inspired in him. He had never met Countess Vantara, but he knew that she, as well as holding the rank of sky-captain, was a granddaughter of the Queen and that she habitually

used the royal connection to enhance her authority. Many other commanders faced with a similar situation would have backed down, perhaps after a token protest, for fear of prejudicing their careers, but Toller was constitutionally unable to accept what he saw as a slur. His hand dropped to the hilt of the sword which had once belonged to his grandfather, and he scowled fiercely in the direction of the intruding ship as he composed a reply to the countess's imperious message.

"Sir, do you wish to acknowledge the signal?" Lieutenant Feer's manner was absolutely correct, but a certain brightness in his eyes showed that he relished seeing Toller faced with a tricky decision. Although of subordinate rank he was somewhat the older of the two, and he almost certainly subscribed to the general view that Toller had achieved captaincy so early through family influence. It was apparent that the prospect of witnessing a duel between the privileged and the privileged had a strong appeal to the lieutenant.

"Of course I wish to acknowledge it," Toller said, hiding his irritation. "What is that woman's family name?"

"Dervonai, sir."

"All right, forget all that countess frippery and address her as Captain Dervonai. Say: Your kind offer of assistance is noted, but in this instance the presence of another vessel is likely to be more of a hindrance than a help. Continue with your own business and do not impede me in the execution of the Queen's direct orders."

A look of gratification appeared on Feer's narrow face as he beamed Toller's words out to the other ship—he had not expected an outright confrontation to develop so quickly. There was only the briefest pause before a reply came. *Your show of discourtesy, not to say insolence, has also been noted, but I will refrain from reporting it to my grandmother if you withdraw at once. I urge you to be prudent.*

"The arrogant bitch!" Toller snatched the sunwriter out of Feer's hands, aimed it and worked the trigger. *I deem it more prudent to be reported to her Majesty for discourtesy than for treason, which would be the case were I to abandon my mission. I therefore urge you to return to your needlework.*

"Needlework!" Lieutenant Feer, who had been able to read the message from the side, gave an appreciative chuckle as Toller handed the sunwriter back to him. "The lady aviator won't appreciate that one, sir. I wonder what her reply will be."

"There it is," Toller said, having raised his binoculars just in time to discern smoke pluming out from the other ship's main jets. "She's either departing the scene in a huff or going all out to reach our objective first—and if what I've

heard about the Countess Vantara is true... Yes! We have a race on our hands!"

"Do you want full speed?"

"What else?" Toller said. "And tell the men to put on parachutes."

At the mention of parachutes Feer's gleeful expression faded and was replaced by one of wariness. "Sir, you don't think it's going to come to—"

"Anything can happen when two ships dispute a single piece of sky." Toller injected a note of joviality into his voice, subtly punishing the lieutenant for the improprieties in his attitude. "A collision could easily result in deaths, and I would prefer it that they were all on the opposition's side."

"Yes, sir." Feer turned away, already signalling to the engineer, and a moment later the main jets began a steady roar as maximum continuous power was applied. The nose of the long gondola lifted as the jet thrust tried to rotate the entire ship about its centre of gravity, but the helmsman quickly corrected its attitude by altering the angle of the engines. He was able to do so single-handed, by means of a lever and ratchets, because the engines were of the modern lightweight type consisting of riveted metal tubes.

Until quite recently each jet would have utilized the entire trunk of a young brakka tree, and consequently would have been heavy and unwieldy. The power source was still a mixture of pikon and halvell crystals, which throughout history had been extracted from the soil by the root systems of brakka trees. Now, however, the crystals were obtained directly from the earth by means of chemical refining methods developed by Toller's father, Cassyll Maraquine.

Industrial chemistry and metallurgy were the cornerstones of the Maraquine family's immense fortune and power—which in turn were the source of most of the personal difficulties Toller had with his parents. They had expected him to understudy his father in preparation for taking up the reins of the family's industrial empire—a prospect he had viewed with dread—and his relationship with them had been occasionally strained ever since he had chosen to enter the Sky Service in pursuit of excitement and adventure. Those two qualities had been less plentiful than he had hoped for, which was one of the reasons for his determination not to be elbowed aside on this particular occasion...

He returned his attention to the astronaut, who was still a good mile above the surface of the undulating farmlands. There was no practical point in racing to the parachutist's estimated touchdown point, but it might strengthen Vantara's case if she could claim to have been at the site first. Toller guessed that she had by pure chance intercepted the sunwriter message he had relayed to the palace earlier in the day, and then had decided on a whim to take over at the interesting phase of what had been a tedious mission.

He was considering whether or not to send her a final warning message when

he noticed that a line of dark blue had appeared on the western horizon. His binoculars confirmed that there was a substantial body of water ahead, and on consulting his charts he found that it was called Lake Amblaraate. It was more than five miles across, which meant that the astronaut had little chance of drifting himself clear of its edges, but it was traversed by a line of small, lowlying islands from which a skilful parachutist ought to be able to select a good landing site.

Toller beckoned Feer to him and showed him the chart. "I think we may be in for some sport," he said. "Those islets look scarcely big enough to accommodate a parade ground. If yonder flyaway seed manages to plant himself on one of them the task of plucking him up again will call for some fancy airmanship. I wonder if the lady aviator, as you dubbed her, will remain so anxious to claim the honour."

"The important thing is that the messenger and his dispatches are conveyed safely to the Queen," Feer replied. "Does it really matter who picks him up?"

Toller gave him a broad smile. "Oh yes, lieutenant—it matters a great deal."

He leaned on the gondola's rail, enjoying the cooling effect of the gathering slipstream, and watched the other ship draw nearer on the converging course. The range was still too great for him to be able to see any of the crew clearly, even with binoculars, but he knew they were all female. It had been Queen Daseene herself who had insisted on women being allowed to enter the Sky Service. That had been during the emergency of twenty-six years earlier, at the time of the threatened invasion from the Old World, but the tradition persisted to the present day, though for mainly practical reasons it had been decided not to use mixed crews. Toller, who had spent most of his active service on the far side of Overland, had not previously encountered any of the very few airships crewed by women, and he was interested in finding out if gender had any noticeable effect on ship-handling techniques.

As he had expected, both ships reached Lake Amblaraate while the parachutist was still high above them. Toller judged which of the islands was most likely to provide the touchdown point, ordered his ship down to a hundred feet and began cruising in a circle around the triangular patch of green. To his annoyance, Vantara adopted a similar tactic, taking up a station at the opposite side of the circle. The two ships rotated as though attached to the ends of an invisible rod, the intermittent blasts of their jets disturbing colonies of birds which nested on the low ground.

"This is a waste of good crystals," Toller grumbled.

"A criminal waste." Feer nodded, permitting himself a hint of a smile over the fact that his commander was frequently reprimanded by the Service's

quartermaster general for using up his stores of pikon and halvell at a greater rate than any other captain because of his impatient flying style.

"That woman should be grounded and—" Toller broke off as the parachutist, apparently having agreed with his audience on a choice of landing site, abruptly furling part of his canopy, increasing his fall-speed and steepening his angle of descent.

"Get us down there with all possible speed!" Toller ordered. "Use all four anchor guns on first contact—we must land on the first pass."

The smile returned to Toller's face as he saw that the crucial moment had come while his ship was well to the west of the island, so that a single natural manoeuvre would bring it into position for an upwind landing. It very much looked as though the aerial wheel of chance had declared against Vantara. He glanced again at the Countess's ship and was appalled to see that it was already breaking out of the flight pattern and beginning a steep descent to the island, obviously intent on making an illegal downwind landing.

"The bitch," Toller whispered. "The stupid bitch!"

He watched helplessly as the other vessel, its speed enhanced by the following breeze, speared down through the lowest levels of the air and drove towards the centre of the island. *Too fast*, he thought. *The anchors will never take the strain!* Puffs of smoke appeared on each side of the gondola as its keel touched the grass and the anchor cannon fired their barbs into the ground. The ship slowed abruptly, its gasbag distorting. For a moment it looked as though Toller's prediction would be proved wrong, then both ropes on the left side of the gondola snapped. The ship rolled and turned, hauling its rear anchor out of the soil, and would have broken free had not the crew member on the solitary remaining anchor begun paying out line at maximum possible speed, thus easing the strain on the rope. Against the odds the single line took up the load without breaking, and all at once it was impossible for Toller to bring off his intended landing manoeuvre—Vantara's ship, dipping and wallowing, lay across his line of descent.

"Abort the landing!" he shouted. "Up! Go up!"

The main jets sounded immediately and, following the emergency drill, the crewmen who were not otherwise engaged ran aft to transfer their weight and help tilt the nose of the vessel upwards. Prompt though the corrective actions had been, the inertia of the tons of gas in the envelope which strained overhead slowed down the ship's response. For nightmarishly protracted seconds it continued on its course, with the obstructing vessel expanding to fill the view directly ahead, then the horizon began to sink with nerve-abrading slowness.

From his position at the side of the bridge Toller glimpsed the long-haired

figure of Countess Vantara, a momentary vision which was replaced by the swift-sliding curvatures of the other gasbag, so close that he could make out the individual stitches of the panels and load tapes. He held his breath, willing himself and his ship to rise vertically, and was beginning to hope that a collision had been averted when there came a vast groaning sound from below. The sound—low-pitched, quavering, reproachful—told him that his keel was ploughing its way across the upper surface of the other ship's gasbag.

He looked aft and saw Vantara's ship emerging from beneath his own. At least two seams had given way in the varnished linen envelope, allowing the supportive gas to spew into the atmosphere. The rents, although serious, were not bad enough to cause a catastrophe—the elliptical gasbag was slowly becoming misshapen and wrinkled, allowing the gondola beneath it to sink to the ground.

Toller gave the orders for his ship to resume normal flying and to make another circuit in preparation for landing. The manoeuvre gave him and his crew an excellent opportunity to watch the countess's ship sink down at the end of its tether, and—the final ignominy—be blotted out of sight by the collapsing gasbag. As soon as it had become apparent that nobody was going to be killed or even injured, the release of tension caused Toller to laugh. Taking their cue from him, Feer and the rest of the crew joined in and the merriment became almost hysterical when the parachutist—whose existence had virtually been forgotten—descended into the scene of action, made a comically awkward landing and ended up sitting on his backside in a patch of swamp.

"There's no hurry now, so I want a flawless showpiece landing," Toller said. "Take her in slowly."

In accordance with his instructions the ship settled down against the breeze with a stately motion and grounded with a barely perceptible shudder. As soon as the anchor cannon had secured the craft, Toller swung himself over the rail and dropped to the grass. The first of Vantara's crew were beginning to struggle out from beneath the folds of their gasbag, but Toller ignored them and walked towards the parachutist, who had risen to his feet and was gathering the sprawled canopy. He raised his head and saluted as he saw Toller approaching. He was a lean, fair-skinned youngster who looked barely old enough to have left his family home, but—and Toller was impressed by the realization—he had completed a double crossing of the void that lay between the sister worlds.

"Good foreday, sir," he said. "Corporal Steenameert, sir. I bear urgent dispatches for her Majesty."

"I thought as much," Toller smiled. "I am under orders to transport you to Prad without delay, but I think we can take a moment to let you get out of that

skysuit. It can't be very comfortable walking around with a wet arse."

Steenameert returned the smile, appreciating the way in which Toller had put the relationship on an informal footing. "It wasn't one of my best landings."

"Bad landings seem to be the order of the day," Toller said, glancing past Steenameert. Countess Vantara was striding towards him, a tall black-haired woman whose high-breasted figure was made even more impressive by the fact that she was holding herself angrily erect. Close behind her was a smaller woman, much rounder in build, wearing a lieutenant's uniform, who was labouring to keep pace with her superior. Toller returned his attention to Steenameert, his sense of wonder stirring as he thought of the magnitude of the journey the boy had completed. In spite of his youthfulness, Steenameert had seen sights and had been granted experiences Toller could scarcely imagine. Toller envied him and also was deeply curious about what had been discovered on the voyage to Land—the first since the colonization of Overland had begun fifty years earlier.

"Tell me, corporal," he said. "What was it like on the Old World?"

Steenameert looked hesitant. "Sir, the dispatches are privy to her Majesty."

"Never mind the dispatches. Man-to-man, what did *you* see? What was it *like*?"

A gratified expression appeared on Steenameert's face as he struggled out of his one-piece skysuit, making it apparent that he had a compulsion to talk about his adventures. "Empty cities! Great cities, cities which make Prad look like a village—and all of them empty!"

"Empty? But what about the—?"

"Mister Maraquine!" The Countess Vantara was still a dozen paces away, but her voice was forceful enough to silence Toller in mid-sentence. "Pending your dismissal from the Service for wilfully damaging one of her Majesty's airships, I am taking command of your vessel. You will consider yourself under arrest!"

The arrogance and the sheer unreasonableness of Vantara's words checked Toller's breath, inspiring in him a pang of fury so intense that he knew it was vital for it to be subdued. He put on his most relaxed smile, turned slowly towards the countess, and immediately wished he had met her under different circumstances. She had one of those faces which have the effect of filling men with hopeless admiration and women with hopeless envy. It was oval, grey-eyed and perfect—flawless in a way which set its owner apart from all the other women Toller had ever seen.

"What are you grinning at?" Vantara demanded. "Did you not hear what I said?"

Putting his regrets aside, Toller said, "Don't be silly. Do you need any help

with repairs to your ship?"

Vantara glanced in outrage at the lieutenant who had just arrived at her side, then triangulated her gaze on Toller's face. "Mister Maraquine, you don't seem to realize the seriousness of your situation. You are under arrest."

Toller sighed. "Listen to me, captain. You have behaved very stupidly, but fortunately no real damage has been done and there is no need for either of us to make an official report. Let us just go our separate ways and forget the whole sorry incident."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"It would be better than prolonging this lunacy of yours."

Vantara's hand moved to the butt of the pistol in her belt. "I repeat, Mister Maraquine, you are under arrest."

Scarcely able to believe what was happening, Toller instinctively gripped the haft of his sword.

Vantara's smile was icily perfect. "What do you think you could do with that ridiculous museum piece?"

"Since you ask, I'll tell you," Toller said, lightly and evenly. "Before you could even raise your pistol I could cleave your head from your body, and were your lieutenant foolhardy enough to try menacing me she would suffer the same fate. Furthermore, even if you had two others of your crew with you ... and even if they managed to fire and put their bullets into me ... I would nevertheless be able to run at them and cut them down."

"I hope I have made myself clear, Captain Dervonai. I am under direct orders from her Majesty, and if *anybody* attempts to prevent me executing those orders that attempt will end in terrible bloodshed. Those are the simple facts of the matter." Keeping his expression bland, Toller waited to see what effect his words would have on Vantara. The physique he had inherited from his grandfather was a living reminder of the days when the military had comprised a separate caste in Kolcorron. He towered over the countess and had twice her weight, and yet he was not at all certain that things were going to go his way. She had the look of one who was not accustomed to being thwarted, whatever the circumstances.

There was a tense moment during which Toller was acutely aware that his entire future was trembling in the balance, and then—unexpectedly—Vantara gave a delighted laugh.

"Just *look* at him, Jerene!" she said, nudging her companion. "I do believe he's taking all this seriously." The lieutenant seemed startled for an instant, then she mustered a weak smile.

"It is a very serious—"

"Where's your sense of humour, Toller Maraquine?" Vantara cut in. "Of

course, now that I think of it, you always did take yourself too seriously."

Toller was taken aback. "Are you claiming that we have met before?"

Vantara laughed again. "Don't you remember your father taking you to the Migration Day reception at the palace when you were little? Even then you went around wearing a sword ... trying to look like your famous grandfather..."

Toller was certain he was being mocked, but if this was the countess's way of backing down without too much loss of face he was prepared to be compliant. Anything was better than continuing the needless confrontation.

"I confess to not remembering you," he said, "but I suspect it is because your appearance has changed to a greater degree than mine."

Vantara shook her head, rejecting the implied compliment. "No. It's simply that you have a poor memory—what about this skyman for whose custody you were, only minutes ago, prepared to risk the safety of two ships?"

Toller turned to Steenameert, who had been listening to the exchange with interest. "Go aboard my ship and have the cook prepare you a meal. We will continue our conversation in comfort." Steenameert saluted, took hold of his parachute and dragged it away.

"I presume you asked him why the expedition lasted so much longer than expected," Vantara said casually, as though the clash of wills had never taken place.

"Yes." Toller was unsure of how to deal with the countess, but he decided to try making their relationship as informal and friendly as possible. "He said that Land was empty. He spoke of empty cities."

"Empty! But what has become of the so-called New Men?"

"The explanation, if there is one, should be in the dispatches."

"In that case I must visit her Majesty, my grandmother, as soon as possible," Vantara said. The reference to her royal family connection had been unnecessary, and Toller took it as an indication that he was expected to keep his distance.

"I, too, must return to Prad with all possible speed," he said, making his tone brisk. "Are you sure you don't want any help with repairs?"

"Positive! The seams will be sewn before littlenight, then I'll be on my way."

"There's just one more thing," Toller said as Vantara was turning away. "Strictly speaking, our ships were in collision and we are supposed to file incident reports. How do you feel about that?"

She met his gaze directly. "I find all that paperwork rather tiresome, don't you?"

"Very tiresome." Toller smiled and saluted. "Goodbye, captain."

He watched the countess and her junior officer walk off in the direction of

their ship, then he turned and retraced his steps to his own vessel. The great disk of the sister planet was filling the sky overhead, and the shrinkage of its sunlit crescent told him there was not much more than an hour until the daily eclipse which was known as littlenight. He was acutely aware, now that they had parted company, of the extent to which he had allowed himself to be manipulated by Vantara. Had a man been guilty of such appalling behaviour in the air and arrogance on the ground, Toller would have given him a verbal blistering so fierce that it could easily have provoked a duel, and most certainly would have indicted him in an official report. As it was, he had been unmanned and bemused by the countess's incredible physical perfection, and had conducted himself like an impressionable youth. It was true that he had conclusively defeated Vantara on the main issue, but in retrospect he could almost believe that he had been as much concerned with impressing her as with carrying out his duty.

By the time he reached his ship a crewman was standing beside each of the four anchors and making ready for departure. He went up the rungs on the side of the gondola and swung himself over the rail, then paused and stared at Vantara's grounded craft. Its crew were busy detaching the gasbag and laying it out on the grass under Vantara's supervision.

Lieutenant Feer came to his side. "Continuous thrust to Prad, sir?"

If I ever get married, Toller thought, it has to be to that woman.

"Sir, I asked you if—"

"Of course I want continuous thrust to Prad," Toller said. "And bring Steenameert to my cabin—I want to talk to him in private."

He went to his cabin at the rear of the main deck and waited for the skyman to be shown in. The ship felt alive again, its timbers and rigging emitting occasional creaks as the structure as a whole adjusted to the tensions of flying into the wind. Toller sat at his desk and toyed abstractedly with navigation instruments, unable to put the Countess Vantara out of his thoughts. How had he managed to forget meeting her as a child? He could recall being dragged against his will to the Migration Day ceremonies, at an age when he scorned the company of girls, but surely even then he would have noticed her among the giggling, gauzy creatures at play in the palace gardens...

His musings were interrupted when Steenameert tapped at the door and came into the small room, still brushing food particles from his chin. "You sent for me, sir?"

"Yes. We were interrupted at an interesting point in our conversation. Tell me more about these empty cities. Did you see no living people whatsoever?"

Steennameert shook his head. "Not one, sir! Lots of skeletons—thousands of them—but, as far as I could tell, the New Men no longer exist. Their own

pestilence seems to have turned against them and wiped them out."

"How far abroad did you travel?"

"Not far—two hundred miles at the most. As you know, we only had the three skyships ... nothing with lateral thrusters ... and had to rely on the winds to get us about. But that was enough for me, sir. After a while I had an uncanny feeling about the place—I *knew* there was nobody there.

"I mean, we first dropped down only a couple of miles out of Ro-Atabri, the old capital. We were in the heart of ancient Kolcorron itself. If there were any people living on Land, that's where they would be found. It stands to reason that's where they would be found." Steenameert spoke fervently, as though he had a personal stake in convincing Toller that his ideas were valid.

"You're probably correct," Toller said. "Unless, of course, it is something to do with the ptertha. From what I've been taught, the worst of them infested Kolcorron, while the other side of the globe was comparatively free of them."

Steennameert became even more intense. "The second great discovery we made is that the ptertha on Land are colourless—just like those on Overland. It appears that they have already reverted to their neutral state, sir. I suppose it was because the poison they developed for use against humans had done what was required of it; and now they are in a state of readiness to war against any other type of creature which threatens brakka trees."

"That's very interesting," Toller said, but—belying his words—his attention wandered as the image of Countess Vantara's face began to swim before his mind's eye. *I wonder how I can arrange to see her again. And how long will it take?*

"It seems to me," Steenameert was saying, "that the logical thing to do now is to mount a proper expedition. Lots of ships, well-equipped and carrying settlers, to reclaim the Old World—just as King Prad predicted we would."

Toller had half-consciously noted earlier that Steenameert was unusually well-spoken for a ranker, and now it came to him that the man also seemed better educated than might have been expected. He examined Steenameert with new interest.

"You've been pondering this matter, have you?" he said. "Is it your wish to go back to Land?"

"Yes, sir!" The smooth skin of Steenameert's face grew pinker. "If Queen Daseene decides to send a fleet to Land I'll be among the first to volunteer for the journey. And if you were likewise inclined, sir, I'd consider it an honour to serve under you."

Toller considered the notion and his mind conjured up a sombre-hued picture of a handful of airships roaming over landscapes of weed-shrouded ruins

wherein lay millions of human skeletons. The vision was made even more unappealing by there being no place in it for Vantara. If he went to Land, he and she would literally be worlds apart. It shocked him to find that he was already according her such a prominent place in his life scheme, and with so little justification, but it showed the extent to which she had breached his emotional defences.

"I can't help you get back to the Old World," he said to Steenameert. "I believe I have enough to keep me fully occupied right here on Overland."

Chapter 2

Lord Cassyll Maraquine breathed deeply and pleasurably as he came out to the front steps of his home on the north side of the city of Prad. There had been rain during the latter part of the night and as a result the air was sweet and invigorating, making him wish he did not have to spend the morning in the stuffy confines of the royal residence. The palace was little more than a mile away—visible as a gleam of rose-colored marble beyond serried trees. He would have enjoyed making the journey on foot, but he never seemed to have time for such simple pleasures these days. Queen Daseene had grown highly irritable in her old age, and he dared not risk annoying her by being late for his appointment.

He went to his waiting carriage, nodding to the driver as he climbed in. The vehicle moved off immediately, drawn by the four bluehorns which were a symbol of Cassyll's elevated status in Kolcorron. Until less than five years ago it had been forbidden by law to have a carriage which required more than one bluehorn, because the animals were so necessary to the developing economy of the planet, and even now teams of four were something of a rarity.

The equipage had been a gift from the Queen and it was politic for him to use it when going to visit her, even though his wife and son sometimes bantered with him about growing soft. He always took their criticism in good part, even though he had begun to suspect that he was indeed becoming too fond of luxury and pampered ways of living. The restlessness and craving for adventure which had characterized his father seemed to have skipped a generation and manifested themselves in the young Toller. On a number of occasions he had come close to falling out with the boy over his recklessness and his outmoded habit of wearing a sword, but he had never pressed matters too far. In the back of his mind there had always lurked the idea that he was acting out of jealousy of the hero worship Toller accorded his long-dead grandfather.

The thought of his son reminded Cassyll that the boy had been commander of the airship which had arrived only the previous aftday with advance dispatches from the Land expedition. In theory the contents of the dispatches were secret, but Cassyll's secretary had already been able to pass him the word that the Old World had been found to be uninhabited and free of the deadly strain of ptertha

which had forced humanity to flee across the interplanetary void. Queen Daseene had been quick to call a meeting of selected advisers, and the fact that Cassyll was required to attend was an indication of the direction in which her thoughts were turning. Manufacture was his field of expertise, and in this context the concept of manufacturing led inexorably towards skyships—which implied that Daseene wanted to reclaim the Old World and thus become the first ruler in history to extend her sway to two planets.

Cassyll had an instinctive distaste for the notion of conquest, reinforced by the fact that his father had died in a monumentally futile attempt to claim the third planet of the local system, but in this case none of the usual philosophical or humanitarian restraints applied. Overland's sister world belonged to his people by right of birth, and if there was no indigenous population to be subjugated or slaughtered he could see no moral objection to a second interplanetary migration. As far as he was concerned, the only questions would relate to scale. How many skyships would Queen Daseene want, and how soon would she need them?

Toller will want to take part in the expedition, Cassyll thought. The crossing is bound to have its dangers, but that will only serve to make him more determined to go.

The carriage soon reached the river and turned west in the direction of the Lord Glo Bridge, which was the principal crossing for the palace. In the few minutes that he was on the curving boulevard Cassyll saw two steam-driven carriages, neither of which had been produced by his own factory, and again he found himself wishing he had more time for practical experimentation with that form of transport. There were many improvements yet to be made, particularly with regard to power transmission, but all his time seemed to be taken up with the administration of the Maraquine industrial empire.

As the carriage was crossing the ornate bridge the palace came into view directly ahead, a rectangular block which was rendered asymmetrical by the east wing and tower which Daseene had recently built as a memorial to her husband. The guards at the main gate saluted as Cassyll passed through. Only a few vehicles were waiting in the main forecourt at this early hour, and at once he noticed the official Sky Service coach which was used by Bartan Drumme, senior technical adviser to the Chief of Aerial Defence. To his surprise, he saw that Bartan himself was loitering by the coach. At the age of fifty, Drumme still retained a lean and wiry figure, and only a slight stiffness in his left shoulder—the result of an old battle wound—prevented him from moving like a young man. A whisper of intuition told Cassyll that Bartan was waiting to see him in advance of the official meeting.

"Good foreday!" Cassyll called out as he stepped down from his carriage. "I wish *I* could afford the time to dawdle around and take the air."

"Cassyll!" Bartan smiled as he came forward to shake hands. The years had scarcely altered the boyishness of his round face. Its permanent expression of humorous irreverence often deceived people who were meeting him for the first time into thinking he was an intellectual lightweight, but over the years Cassyll had learned to respect him for his mental agility and toughness.

"Are you waiting to see me?" Cassyll said.

"Very good!" Bartan replied, raising his eyebrows. "How did you know?"

"You were as furtive as an urchin dallying by the bakery window. What is it, Bartan?"

"Let's walk for a minute—there is time before the meeting." Bartan led the way into an empty quarter of the forecourt where they were partially screened from view by a bed of spearblooms.

Cassyll began to chuckle. "Are we going to conspire against the throne?"

"In a way it is almost as serious as that," Bartan said, coming to a halt. "Cassyll, you know that my position is officially described as scientific adviser to the head of the Sky Service. But you also know that—simply because I survived the Farland expedition—I'm somehow expected to have a magical awareness of all that goes on in the heavens and to advise her Majesty of anything of import, anything which might constitute a threat to the realm."

"Suddenly you make me uneasy," Cassyll said. "Is this anything to do with Land?"

"No—another planet."

"Farland! Say what you've got to say, man! Out with it!" Cassyll felt a coolness on his brow as the dread thought heaved in his mind. Farland was the third planet of the local system, orbiting at roughly twice the distance from the sun as the Land-Overland pair, and throughout most of Kolcorron's history it had been nothing more than an insignificant green speck amid the splendours of the night sky. Then, twenty-six years ago, a bizarre set of circumstances had led to a single ship venturing out from Overland and crossing millions of miles of hostile vacuum to reach the outer world. The expedition had been ill-fated—Cassyll's father had not been the only one to die on that dank, rainy planet—and three of its members had returned to the home world with disturbing news.

Farland was inhabited by a race of humanoids whose technology was so advanced that they had the capability of annihilating the Overlanders' civilization at a stroke. It was fortunate indeed for the humans that the Farlanders were an insular, inward-looking race with no interest in anything beyond the perpetual cloud-cover of their own world. That attitude of mind had been difficult for the

territorially acquisitive humans to comprehend. Even after years had merged into decades with no sign of aggression from the enigmatic third planet, the fear of a sudden devastating attack from the skies had continued to lurk in some Overlanders' minds. It was, as Cassyll Maraquine had just discovered, never far beneath the surface of their thoughts...

"Farland?" Bartan gave him a strange smile. "No—I'm talking of yet *another* planet. A fourth planet."

In the silence that followed, Cassyll studied his friend's face as though it were a puzzle to be solved. "This isn't some manner of jest, is it? Are you claiming to have discovered a new planet?"

Bartan nodded unhappily. "I didn't discover it personally. It wasn't even one of my technicians. It was a woman—a copyist in the records office at the Grain Quay—who pointed it out to me."

"What does it matter who actually saw it first?" Cassyll said. "The point is that you have a really interesting scientific discovery to—" He broke off as he realized he had not yet been told the whole story. "Why do you look so glum, old friend?"

"When Divare told me about the planet she said it was blue in colour, and that made me think she could have made a mistake. You know how many blue stars there are in the sky—hundreds of them. So I asked her what size of telescope was needed to see it properly, and she said a very small one would do. In fact, she said it could be seen well with the naked eye.

"And she was right, Cassyll. She pointed it out to me last night ... a blue planet ... quite easy to see without optical aid ... low in the west soon after sunset..."

Cassyll frowned. "And you checked it with a telescope?"

"Yes. It showed an appreciable disk even with an ordinary nautical instrument. It's a planet, all right."

"But..." Cassyll's bafflement increased. "Why has it not been noticed before now?"

Bartan's strange smile returned. "The only answer I can think of is that it wasn't *there* to be observed before now."

"That goes against everything we know about astronomy, doesn't it? I have heard that new stars appear now and then, even if they don't last very long, but how can another *world* simply materialize in our skies?"

"Queen Daseene is bound to ask me that selfsame question," Bartan said. "She will also ask me how long it has been there, and I'll have to say I don't know; and she will then ask me what should be done about it, and I'll have to say I don't know that either; and then she will start wondering about the value of a

scientific adviser who doesn't know anything..."

"I think you're fretting too much on that score," Cassyll said. "The Queen is quite likely to regard it as nothing more than a mildly interesting astronomical phenomenon. What makes you think the blue planet poses any threat to us?"

Bartan blinked several times. "It's a feeling I have. An instinct. Don't tell me you're not disturbed by this thing."

"I'm deeply interested in it—and I want you to show the planet to me tonight—but why should I feel any sense of alarm?"

"Because..." Bartan glanced at the sky as though seeking inspiration. "Cassyll, it isn't *right*! It's unnatural ... an omen ... There is something afoot."

Cassyll began to laugh. "But you're the least superstitious person I know! Now you are talking as though this errant world has appeared in the firmament for the sole purpose of persecuting *you*."

"Well..." Bartan gave a reluctant smile, reclaiming his youthful appearance. "Perhaps you're right. I suppose I should have gone to you immediately. It wasn't until Berise died that I realized how much I depended on her to keep me on an even keel."

Cassyll nodded sympathetically, as always finding it difficult to accept that Berise Drumme had been dead for four years. Black-haired, vivacious, indomitable, Berise had given the impression that she would live forever, but she had been swept away within hours by one of those mysterious, sourceless ailments which brought it home to medical practitioners just how little they knew.

"It was a big blow to all of us," Cassyll said. "Are you drinking?"

"Yes." Bartan detected the concern in Cassyll's eyes and touched his arm. "But not the way I was doing when I first met your father. I wouldn't betray Berise in that way. A glass or two of wryberry in the evening is enough for me these days."

"Come to my house tonight and bring a good telescope with you. We'll have a beaker of something warming and take a look at it ... There's another job for you—we'll need a name for this mysterious world." Cassyll slapped his friend on the back and nodded towards the arched entrance of the palace, signifying that it was time to go in for their meeting with the Queen.

Once inside the shady building they went straight to the audience chamber through corridors which were almost empty. In King Chakkell's day the palace had been very much the seat of government, and it had usually been thronged with officials, but Daseene's policy had been to disperse general administration into separate buildings and to treat the palace as her private residence. Only matters such as aerial defence, in which she took a special interest, were

considered important enough to merit her personal attention.

At the door to the chamber two ostiaries, sweating under the weight of their traditional brakka armour, recognized both men and admitted them without delay. The air in the room was so hot that Cassyll had to snatch for breath. In her old age Queen Daseene continually complained of being cold, and the quarters she used were kept at a temperature which most others found unbearable.

The only person in the room was Lord Sectar, the fiscal chancellor, whose job it was to control state spending. His presence was another indication that the Queen had plans to reclaim the Old World. He was a large and top-heavy man in his sixties, with a jowled face which was florid in normal conditions and in the excessive heat of the room had turned bright crimson. He nodded at the newcomers, pointed mutely at the floor and its buried heating pipes, rolled his eyes to express consternation, dabbed perspiration from his brow and went to stand by a partially-open window.

Cassyll responded to the dumb-show with an exaggerated shrug which mimed helplessness, and sat down on one of the curved benches which faced the high-backed royal chair. At once his thoughts were drawn back to the mystery of Bartan's blue planet. It occurred to him that he had been altogether too casual in his acceptance of the reported phenomenon. How could a *world* simply materialize in the nearby regions of space? New stars had been seen to appear in the sky, and that being the case one could assume that stars sometimes disappeared, perhaps through explosion, leaving their retinues of planets behind. Cassyll could imagine such worlds blundering through the darkness of the interstellar void, but the chances of one of them joining the local system seemed vanishingly small. Perhaps the reason he did not feel the proper degree of astonishment was that in his heart he simply did not believe in the blue planet. A cloud of gas could have the semblance of solid rock, after all...

Cassyll stood up as a tipstaff opened the door and pounded the floor with his metal-shod rod to announce the arrival of the Queen. Daseene came into the room, dismissed the two ladies-in-waiting who had accompanied her as far as the door, and went to her chair. She was thin and frail-looking, seemingly burdened by the weight of her green silk robes, but there was undiminished authority in the way in which she signalled for the others to be seated.

"Thank you for your attendance here this foreday," she said in a reedy but firm voice. "I know you have many demands upon your time, so we will go straight to the business of the meeting. As you are already aware, I have received an advance dispatch from the Land expedition. Its contents may be summarized as follows." Daseene went on to describe the expedition's findings in detail, doing so without hesitation or reference to notes. When she had finished she

surveyed the group, eyes intent beneath the pearl-beaded coif without which she never appeared in public. As had happened before, it occurred to Cassyll that Daseene could if required have taken over the rulership of Kolcorron at any stage in her husband's career and coped well with the task. It was perhaps surprising that she had usually chosen to remain in the background, except in a few cases where women's rights had been concerned.

"I think you have already divined my purpose in calling this meeting," she went on, speaking in formal High Kolcorronian. "In view of the fact that I shall have a full report from the expedition commanders in only three days from now, you may consider my actions precipitate—but I have reached a stage in life at which I am loathe to waste so much as a single hour.

"I intend to send a fleet to Land without delay.

"It is my intention to establish Ro-Atabri as a *living* capital again before I die; therefore I require decisions from you this very foreday. I also expect the practical work of implementing those decisions to begin as soon as the coming littlenight has ended. So let us be about our work, gentlemen! My first question for you is: how large should the fleet be? You first, Lord Cassyll—what are your views?"

Cassyll blinked as he rose to his feet. This was the style of rulership developed by the late King Chakkell to suit the needs of pioneers on a new world, and he was not at all sure that it was apposite in the present situation.

"Your Majesty, as loyal subjects we all share your views about reclaiming the Old World, but may I respectfully point out that we are not in a state of dire emergency such as prevailed at the time of the Migration? As yet, we have no proof that the whole of Land is available to us, so the prudent course would be to follow up the first expedition with a primarily military force equipped with airships which could be reassembled on Land and used to circumnavigate and survey the planet."

Daseene shook her head. "That course is *too* prudent for me, and I have no time for it—your father would not have counselled me thus."

"My father's day has passed, Majesty," Cassyll said.

"Perhaps it has, perhaps it hasn't, but I take your point about the airships. I propose to send ... four. How does that number sound to you?"

Cassyll gave a slight bow, expressing irony. "That number sounds very good to me, Majesty."

Daseene gave him a faint twisted smile to show that she had not missed the nuance, then addressed herself to Bartan Drumme. "Do you foresee any great difficulty in transporting airships to Land aboard skyships?"

"No, Majesty," Bartan said, standing up. "We could adapt small airship

gondolas to serve as skyship gondolas for the single crossing. On arrival on Land it would simply be a matter of disconnecting the balloons and replacing them with airship gasbags."

"Excellent! That is the sort of positive attitude I like in my advisers." Daseene looked meaningfully at Cassyll. "Now, my lord, how many skyships can be made ready for the crossing within, say, fifty days?"

Before Cassyll could speak Bartan coughed and said, "Forgive me, Majesty, I have something to report ... a new development ... something I feel should be brought to your attention at this point."

"Has it any bearing on the discussions in hand?"

Bartan shot Cassyll a worried glance. "It probably has, Majesty."

"In that case," Daseene said impatiently, "you had better speak, but do it quickly."

"Majesty, I... A new world has been discovered in our own planetary system."

"A new world?" Daseene frowned. "What are you prattling about, Mister Drumme? There can't be a new world."

"I have observed it with my own eyes, Majesty. A blue planet ... a fourth world in our local system..." The normally fluent Bartan was floundering as Cassyll had never seen him do before.

"How big is it?"

"We cannot decide that until we are sure how far away it is."

"Very well then." Daseene sighed. "How far away is this infant world of yours?"

Bartan looked deeply unhappy. "We cannot calculate that until we—"

"Until you know its size," the Queen cut in. "Mister Drumme! We are all indebted to you for that little excursion into the marvellously exact science of astronomy, but it is my earnest wish that you should confine your remarks to the subject already in hand. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Majesty," Bartan mumbled, sinking down on to the bench.

"Now..." Daseene suddenly shivered, drew her robes closer together at her throat and looked about the room. "No wonder we freeze to death in here! Who opened that window? Close it immediately before we perish from the cold."

Lord Sectar, lips moving silently, got up and closed the window. His embroidered jacket was heavily stained with sweat and he was ostentatiously mopping his brow as he returned to his place.

"You don't look well," Daseene told him tersely. "You should see a doctor." She returned her attention to Cassyll and repeated her question about the number of skyships that could be available within fifty days.

"Twenty," Cassyll said at once, deciding that an optimistic estimate was called for while the Queen was in her present mood. As head of the Sky Service Supplies Board he was in a good position to judge the quantity of ships and associated materiel which could be made ready for an interplanetary crossing as well as being spared from normal function. Ever since the discovery that Farland was inhabited a number of defensive stations had been maintained in the weightless zone midway between the two sister worlds. For some years the great wooden structures had been manned, but as public fears of an attack from Farland had gradually abated the crews had been withdrawn. Now the stations and their attendant groups of fighter jets were maintained by means of regular balloon ascents to the weightless zone. The schedule of flights was undemanding, and Cassyll estimated that about half the ships in the Sky Service fleet were available for extraordinary duties.

"Twenty ships," Daseene said, looking slightly disappointed. "Still, I suppose that's enough to be getting on with."

"Yes, Majesty—especially as we are not obliged to think in terms of an invasion fleet. One can foresee continuous traffic between Overland and Land, sparse at first, but gradually building up until—"

"It's no use, Lord Cassyll," the Queen interrupted. "Again you are advocating a sedate approach to this enterprise, and again I say to you I have no time for that. The return to Land has to be decisive, forceful, triumphant ... a clear-cut statement which posterity cannot misread..."

"It may help you to gauge the strength of my feelings in the matter if I tell you that I have just given one of my granddaughters—the Countess Vantara—permission to take part in the reclamation. She is an experienced airship captain, and will be able to play a useful role in the initial survey of the planet."

Cassyll bowed in acquiescence, and there followed an intensive planning session which—in the space of a single hour—was intended to shape the future of two worlds.

On quitting the overheated atmosphere of the palace Cassyll decided against returning home immediately. A glance at the sky showed him that he had some thirty minutes in hand before the sun would slide behind the eastern rim of Land. He had time for a quiet walk in the tree-lined avenues of the city's administrative area. It would be good to get some fresh air into his system before he responded to the ever-present call of his business commitments.

Accordingly, he dismissed his coachman, strolled down to the Lord Glo Bridge and turned east along the bank of the river, a route which would take him past several governmental buildings. The streets were busy with the flurry of

activity which usually preceded the littlenight meal and the daily change of tempo in human affairs. Now that the city was half-a-century old it appeared mature to Cassyll's eyes, with a permanence which was part of his life, and he wondered if he would ever make the journey to Land to view the results of millennia of civilization. She had not said as much, but he suspected it was in Queen Daseene's heart—age-weakened though she was—to return to the world of her birth and perhaps end her days there. Cassyll could empathize with such feelings, but Overland was the only home he had ever known and he had no desire to leave it, especially as so much work remained to be done in so many different spheres. Perhaps, also, he lacked the spirit or courage to face that awesome journey.

He was drawing close to the Neldeever Plaza, which housed the headquarters of the four branches of the armed services, when he espied a familiar blond head projecting above the stream of pedestrians coming towards him. Cassyll had not seen his son for perhaps a hundred days, and he felt a pang of affection and pride as—almost with the eyes of a stranger—he noted the clear-eyed good looks, splendid physique and the easy confidence with which the young man wore his skycaptain's blue uniform.

"Toller!" he called out as their courses brought them together.

"Father!" Toller's expression had been abstracted and stern, as though something weighed heavily on his mind, but his face lit up with recognition. He extended his arms and the two men embraced while the flow of pedestrians parted around them.

"This is a happy coincidence," Cassyll said as they drew apart. "Were you on your way home?"

Toller nodded. "I'm sorry I couldn't get home last night, but it was very late before I got my ship safely berthed, and there were certain problems..."

"What manner of problems?"

"Nothing to cloud a sunny day like this," Toller said with a smile. "Let's hasten homewards. I can't tell you how much I look forward to one of mother's littlenight spreads after an eternity of shipboard rations."

"You appear to thrive on those selfsame rations."

"Not as well as you on proper food," Toller said, trying to pinch a roll of fat at Cassyll's waist as they began to walk in the direction of the family home. The two men exchanged the kind of inconsequential family talk which, better than deliberated speeches, restores a relationship after a long separation. They were nearing the Square House, named after the Maraquine residence in old Ro-Atabri, before the conversation came round to weightier affairs.

"I've just been to the palace," Cassyll said, "and have come away with news

which should interest you—we are to send a twenty-strong fleet to Land."

"Yes, we're entering a truly wondrous era—two worlds, but one nation."

Cassyll glanced at his son's nearer shoulder flash, the saffron-and-blue emblem which showed that he was qualified to pilot both skyships and airships. "There'll be a deal of work for you there."

"For *me*?" Toller gave a humourless chuckle. "No thank you, father. I admit I'd like to see the Old World some day, but at present it is one great enamel house and I don't relish the prospect of clearing away millions of skeletons."

"But the journey! The adventure! I thought you'd jump at the chance."

"I have quite enough to occupy me right here on Overland for the time being," Toller said, and for a moment the sombre expression Cassyll had noted earlier returned to his face.

"Something is troubling you," he said. "Are you going to keep it to yourself?"

"Have I that option?"

"No."

Toller shook his head in mock despair. "I thought not. You know, of course, that it was I who picked up the advance messenger from Land. Well, another ship appeared on the scene at the last moment—unwarranted—and tried to scoop up the prize from under my very nose. Naturally I refused to give way..."

"Naturally!"

"...and there was a minor collision. As there was no damage to my ship I forbore making an official entry in the log—even though the other commander was entirely to blame—but this morning I was informed that an incident report had been filed against me. I have to face Sky-commodore Tresse tomorrow."

"There's no cause for you to worry," Cassyll said, relieved to hear that nothing more serious was afoot. "I will speak to Tresse this aftday and acquaint him with the real facts."

"Thanks, but I think I am obliged to deal with this kind of thing by myself. I should have covered my flank by making an entry in the flight log, but I can call on enough witnesses to prove my case. The whole thing is really very trivial. A flea-bite..."

"But one you continue to scratch!"

"It's the sheer deceitfulness involved," Toller said angrily. "I trusted that woman, father. I *trusted* her, and this is how she repays me."

"Aha!" Cassyll almost smiled as he began to plumb beneath the surface of what he had heard. "You didn't say that this unprincipled commander was a woman."

"Didn't I?" Toller replied, his voice now casual. "It has no relevance to anything, but it so happens that she was one of the Queen's brood of

granddaughters—the Countess Vantara."

"Handsome woman, is she?"

"It is possible that some men might... What are you trying to say, father?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. Perhaps I'm a little curious about the lady because this is the second time within the span of a couple of hours that her name has been mentioned to me." From the corner of his eye Cassyll saw Toller give him a surprised glance, but—unable to resist tantalizing his son—he volunteered no further information. He walked in silence, shading his eyes from the sun in order to get a better view of a large group of ptertha which were following the course of the river. The near-invisible spheres were swooping and bounding just above the surface of the water, buoyed up by a slight breeze.

"That's quite a coincidence," Toller finally said. "What was said to you?"

"About what?"

"About Vantara. Who spoke of her?"

"No less a person than the Queen," Cassyll said, watching his son carefully. "It appears that Vantara has volunteered to serve with the fleet we are sending to Land, and it is an indication of the strength of the Queen's feelings towards the enterprise that she is giving the young woman her blessing."

There was another protracted silence from Toller before he said, "Vantara is an airship pilot—what work is there for her on the Old World?"

"Rather a lot, I'd say. We're sending four airships whose task it will be to circle the entire globe and prove there are no disputants to Queen Daseene's sovereignty. It sounds quite an adventure to me, but of course there will be all the privations of shipboard life—and you've had your fill of service rations."

"I don't care about that," Toller exclaimed. "I want to go!"

"To Land! But only a moment ago..."

Toller halted Cassyll by catching his arm and turning to face him. "No more play-acting, father, please! I want to take a ship to Land. You will see to it that my application is successful, won't you?"

"I'm not at all sure that I can," Cassyll said, suddenly uneasy at the prospect of his only son—who was still a boy in spite of all his pretensions to manhood—setting off across the perilous bridge of thin air which linked the two worlds.

Toller produced a broad smile. "Don't be so modest, father of mine. You're on so many committees, boards, tribunals, councils and panels that—in your own quiet way, of course—you practically run Kolcorron. Now, tell me that I'm going to Land."

"You're going to Land," Cassyll said compliantly.

That night, while he was waiting for Bartan Drumme to arrive with a telescope,

Cassyll thought he could identify the true cause of his misgivings about Toller's proposed flight to the Old World. Toller and he had a harmonious and satisfying relationship, but there was no denying the fact that the boy had always been unduly influenced by the stories and legends surrounding his paternal grandfather. Apart from the striking physical resemblance, the two had many mental attributes in common—impatience, courage, idealism and quickness of temper among them—but Cassyll suspected that the similarities were not as great as the younger Toller pretended. His grandfather had been much *harder*, capable of total ruthlessness when he deemed it necessary, possessed of an obduracy which would lead him to choose certain death rather than betray a principle.

Cassyll was glad that Kolcorronian society was gentler and safer than it had been even a few decades ago, that the world in general offered fewer chances for young Toller to get himself into the kind of situation where—simply through trying to live up to self-imposed standards—he might forfeit his life. But now that he was committing himself to fly to the Old World those chances were bound to increase, and it seemed to Cassyll that the ghost of the long-dead Toller was stirring into life, stimulated by the scent of dangerous adventure, preparing to exert its influence on a vulnerable young man. And even though he was thinking about his own father, Cassyll Maraquine devoutly wished that that restless spirit would confine itself to the grave, and to the past...

The welcome sounds of Bartan Drumme being admitted by a servant at the front entrance roused Cassyll from his chair. He went down the broad staircase and greeted his friend, who was carrying a wooden-tubed telescope and tripod. The servant offered to take the telescope, but Cassyll dismissed him, and he and Bartan carried the heavy instrument up to a balcony which afforded a good view to the west. The light reflected from Land was strong enough for reading, but nevertheless the dome of the sky was thronged with countless bright stars and hundreds of spirals of varying sizes and shapes, ranging from circular whirlpools to the narrowest of ellipses. No less than six major comets were visible that night, splaying fingers of radiance across the heavens, and meteors darted almost continuously, briefly linking one celestial feature to another.

"You surprised me this foreday, you know," Cassyll said. "Nobody I know can talk like you, regardless of the audience and circumstances, but you seemed flummoxed for some reason. What was the matter with you?"

"Guilt," Bartan said simply, raising his head from the task of setting up the tripod.

"Guilt!"

"Yes. It's this damned fourth planet, Cassyll. Every instinct I have tells me

that it does not bode well for us. It shouldn't *be* there. Its presence is an affront to our understanding of nature, a sign that something is going terribly amiss, and yet I am unable to convince anyone—not even you—that we have cause for alarm. I feel that I have betrayed my Queen and country through my sheer ineptness with words, and I don't know what to do about it."

Cassyll gave a reassuring chuckle. "Let me see for myself this harbinger which troubles you so much—anything which stills the famous Drumme tongue must be worthy of careful perusal."

He was still in a mood of comparative levity when, having prepared and aligned the telescope for him, Bartan stepped aside and invited him to look into the eyepiece. The first thing to meet Cassyll's gaze was a fuzzy disk of bluish brilliance which resembled a soap bubble filled with sparkling gas, but one touch on the focusing lever achieved a remarkable result.

There before him, suddenly, swimming in the indigo depths of the universe, was a *world*—complete with polar snow caps, oceans, land masses and the white curlicues of weather systems.

It had no right to exist, but it did exist, and in that moment of visual and intellectual confrontation Cassyll's first thought—with no justification he could understand—was for the future safety of his son.

Chapter 3

The height gauge consisted of a vertical scale from the top of which a small weight was suspended by a delicate coiled spring. Its operating principle was so simple and effective—as a ship rose higher and gravity lessened the weight moved upwards on the scale—that only one modification had been introduced in fifty years. The spring, which would once have been a hair-like shaving of brakka wood, was now made of fine-drawn steel. Metallurgy had made great strides in Kolcorron in recent decades, and the guaranteed consistency of steel springs made gauges easy to calibrate.

Toller studied the instrument carefully, making sure it indicated zero gravity, then floated himself out of the cabin and over to the ship's rail. The fleet had reached the weightless zone in the middle of a daylight period, which meant that the sun's rays were washing across him in a direction parallel with the deck. In one direction the universe appeared its normal dark blue, plentifully scattered with stars and silver spirals, but in the other there was a surfeit of light which made viewing difficult. Below his feet, Overland was a huge disk exactly bisected into night and day, the latter half making its own contribution to the general luminance; and over his head, although occulted by the ship's balloon, the Old World was similarly adding to the confusion of radiance.

On a level with Toller, starkly floodlit by the sun, were the three other balloons which supported airship gondolas in place of the lightweight box structures normally used by skyships. The smooth outline of each gondola had been marred by the addition of a vertically mounted engine, the exhaust cone of which projected well below the keel. Further down the sky, ranged in groups of four against the glowing complexities of Overland, were the sixteen ships making up the main part of the fleet. Seen from above, their balloons looked perfectly spherical and had the apparent solidity of planets, with load tapes and lines of stitching to represent meridians. The roar of jet exhausts filled the sky, occasionally reaching an accidental climax as a number of ships fired their pulsed bursts in unison.

Toller was using binoculars to search for the circular group of permanent defence stations, and wishing for a speedy method of finding them regardless of the disposition of sun and planets. The nub of the problem was that he had no

real idea which direction was most likely to yield results. His reading of the height gauge could be out by tens of miles, and the convection currents which helped make the air bridge between the world so cold often gave ascents lateral dispersions of the same order. Large though they were on the human scale, the stations were insignificant in the chill reaches of the central blue.

"Have you lost something, young Maraquine?" The voice was that of Commissioner Trye Kettoran, official leader of the expedition, who had chosen to fly in one of the modified ships. He was subject to low-gravity sickness and had hoped that the comfort of an enclosed cabin would lessen the severity of his attacks. His expectations had been in vain, but he was enduring his illness with great fortitude in spite of his age. At seventy-one, he was by far the oldest member of the expedition. He had been appointed by Queen Daseene precisely because he had clear recollections of the old capital of Ro-Atabri and therefore was well qualified to report on present conditions there.

"I have orders to inspect the Inner Defence Group," Toller said. "The Service was hard pressed to loft twenty ships for this expedition, and as a result we are forced to omit a fifty-day inspection—but if I see anything going seriously wrong I am empowered to divert one of the expedition's ships for as long as it takes to put things right."

"Quite a burden of responsibility for a young captain," Kettoran said, his long pale face showing faint signs of animation. "But—even with the aid of those splendid glasses—what kind of inspection can you carry out at a range of several miles?"

"A superficial one," Toller admitted. "But in truth all we have to concern ourselves with at this early stage is the general alignment of the stations. If one is seen to have separated from the others, and to be drifting towards Overland or Land, it is simply a matter of nudging it back into the datum plane."

"If one begins to fall, won't they all follow suit?"

Toller shook his head. "We are not dealing with inert pieces of rock. The stations contain many kinds of chemicals—pikon, halvell, firesalt, and so on—and a slight change in conditions can lead to the production of gases which could leak through a hull if a seal weakens. The thrust produced may have no more force than a maiden's sigh, but let it go on for a long time—then augment it with the growing attraction of gravity—and, all at once, one is confronted with an unruly leviathan which is determined to dash itself upon one world or the other. In the Sky Service we consider it prudent to take corrective action long before that stage is reached."

"You have quite a way with words, young Maraquine," Kettoran said, his breath pluming whitely through the scarf which was protecting his face from the

intense cold of the weightless zone. "Have you ever considered diplomacy as a career?"

"No, but I may have to if I fail to locate these accursed wooden sausage skins before long."

"I will help you—anything to take my mind off the fact that my stomach wants to rise into my mouth." Kettoran knuckled his watery eyes with a gloved hand, began surveying the sky and within a few seconds—to Toller's surprise—gave a satisfied exclamation.

"Is that what we're in search of?" he said, pointing horizontally to the east, past the three modified skyships. "That line of purple lights..."

"Purple lights? Where?" Toller tried in vain to see something unusual in the indicated part of the sky.

"There! *There!* Why can't you...?" Kettoran's words faded into a sigh of disappointment. "You're too late—they have gone now."

Toller gave a snort of combined amusement and exasperation. "Sir, there are no lights—purple or otherwise—on the stations. They have reflectors which shine with a steady white glow, if you happen to catch them at the right angle. Perhaps you saw a meteor."

"I know what a meteor looks like, so don't try to—" Kettoran broke off again and pointed at another part of the heavens. "There's your precious Defence Group over there. Don't try to tell me it isn't, because I can see a line of white specks. Am I right? I *am* right!"

"You're right," Toller agreed, training his binoculars on the stations and marvelling at the speed with which luck had directed the old man's gaze to the correct portion of the sky. "Well done, sir!"

"Call yourself a pilot! Why, if it hadn't been for this unruly stomach of mine I would have..." Kettoran gave a violent sneeze, retreated into the cabin and closed the door.

Toller smiled as he heard further sneezes punctuated by muffled swearing. In the five days of the ascent to the weightless zone he had grown to like the commissioner for his humorous grumpiness, and to respect him for his stoicism in the face of the severe discomforts of the flight. Most men of his age would have found some means of evading the responsibility thrust upon him by Queen Daseene, but Kettoran had accepted the charge with good grace and seemed determined to treat it as yet another in a lifetime of routine chores undertaken on behalf of the ruler.

Toller returned his attention to the defence stations and was relieved to see that they formed a perfectly straight line. When he had first qualified as a skyship pilot he had enjoyed the occasional maintenance ascents to the stations.

Entering the dark and claustrophobic hulls had been a near-mystical experience which had seemed to conjure up the spirit of his grandfather and his heroic times, but the futility of the so-called Inner Defensive Group's very existence had quickly dominated his thoughts. If there was no threat from Farland the stations were unnecessary; if the enigmatic Farlanders ever *were* to invade their technological superiority would render the stations irrelevant. The wooden shells were merely a token defence which had in some measure eased the late King Chakkell's mind, and to Toller their principal value was that maintaining them was a way of preserving the nation's interplanetary capabilities.

Having satisfied himself that there was no need to make a diversion from the vertical course, he lowered the binoculars and gazed thoughtfully at the furthestmost of the other three ships making up his echelon. It was the one commanded by Vantara. Ever since the foreday he had learned that the Countess was taking part in the expedition he had been undecided about which approach to use in future dealings with her. Would an air of aloofness and dignified reproval wring an apology from her and thus bring them together? Or would it be better to appear cheerful and unaffected, treating the incident of her report as the sort of boisterous skirmish which is bound to occur when two free spirits collide?

The fact that he, the injured party, was the one who planned reconciliation had occasioned him some unease, but all his scheming had proved redundant. Throughout the preparations for the flight Vantara had managed to keep her distance from him, and had done so with an effortless grace which denied him the consolation of feeling that he was important enough to be evaded.

One hour after the fleet had passed through the datum plane the group of defence stations had shrunk to virtual invisibility, and the pull of Land's gravity was imperceptibly adding to the ships' speed. A sunwriter message from General Ode, the fleet commander, was flashed back from the flagship instructing all pilots to carry out the inversion manoeuvre.

Glad of the break in the shipboard routine, Toller drew himself along a safety line to the midsection, to where Lieutenant Correvalte was at the engine controls. Correvalte, who was newly qualified, looked relieved when he heard that he was not expected to handle the inversion. He relinquished the controls and positioned himself a short distance away as Toller began the delicate task. The ship had four slim acceleration struts which joined the gondola to the balloon's equatorial load tape, and which gave the whole assemblage the modest degree of stiffness required for flying in the jet propulsion mode. Although the balloon itself was very light, a flimsy envelope of varnished linen, the gas within it had a mass of many tons, with inertia to match, and had to be coaxed with infinite care when

any change of direction was called for. A pilot who was too enthusiastic in his use of the ship's lateral jets would soon find that he had driven the top end of a strut through the envelope. While not necessarily serious in low-gravity conditions, that kind of damage was difficult and time-consuming to put right—and the offender was always given good cause to regret his error.

For what seemed a long time after Toller had begun firing one of the tiny cross-mounted jets it seemed that its thrust was having no effect, then with grudging slowness the great disk of Overland made its way up the sky. As it showed itself above the ship's rail, hanging before the crew in all its painted vastness, the immense convexity that was the Old World emerged from behind the balloon and drifted downwards. There was a moment during which, simply by turning his head from side to side, Toller could see two worlds laid out in their entirety for his inspection—the twin arenas in which his kind had fought all the battles of evolution and history.

Superimposed on each planet, and similarly lit from the side, were the other ships of the fleet. They were in varying attitudes—each pilot inverting at his own pace—arcs of white condensation from their lateral jets complementing the global cloud patterns thousands of miles below. And embracing the spectacle was the frozen luminous panoply of the universe—the circles and spirals and streamers of silver radiance, the fields of brilliant stars with blue and white predominant, the silent-hovering comets and the darting meteors.

It was a sight which both thrilled and chilled Toller, making him proud of his people's courage in daring to cross the interplanetary void in frail constructs of cloth and wood, and at the same time reminding him that—for all their ambitions and dreams—men were little more than microbes labouring from one grain of sand to another.

He would not have cared to admit as much to any of his peers, but it was a comfort to him when the inversion manoeuvre had been completed and the ship was sinking back into humanity's natural domain. From now on the air would grow thicker and warmer, less inimical to life, and all his preoccupations would begin to resume their normal importance.

"That's how it's done," he said, returning control of the vessel to Corvalte. "Get the mechanic to convert the engine back to burner mode, and tell him to make sure that the heaters are working properly."

Toller emphasized the final point because, although the aerial environment would indeed grow less harsh as the ship lost height, the direction of the airflow over the ship would be reversed. The considerable amount of heat lost from the balloon's surface would be borne upwards and away in the slipstream instead of bathing the gondola with an invisible balm which helped protect its occupants

from the deadly coldness of the mid-passage.

The engine had to be shut down while being converted from a thrust creator to a producer of hot gas for conventional aerostatic flight, and Toller took advantage of the period of quietude to go into the forward cabin in search of nourishment. Nobody had ever explained the baffling sensation of falling which men experienced in and close to the weightless zone, but it had been spoiling his appetite for more than a day and as a result he was in the ambivalent position of needing food while not actually wanting it. The selection of fare he found in the provision nets—strips of dried meat and fish, cereals and puckered fruit and berries—was less than seductive. He rummaged through what was available and finally settled for a slab of grain cake which he chewed upon without enthusiasm.

"Don't despair, young Maraquine!" Commissioner Kettoran, who had wedged himself into a seat at the captain's table, was feigning cheerfulness. "We'll soon be in Ro-Atabri, and once we're there I'll take you to some of the best eating places in the world. Mind you, they'll be in ruins—but I'll take you to them anyway." Kettoran winked at his secretary, Parlo Wotoorb—who was across the table from him—and both old men hunched their thin shoulders in amusement, looking strangely alike.

Still chewing, Toller nodded gravely to acknowledge the witticism. Kettoran and Wotoorb had been contemporaries of his grandfather. They had actually known him—a privilege he envied—and both had survived to quite an advanced age with no apparent erosion of their faculties. Toller doubted that he would reach his seventies with the same degree of fortitude and resilience. It had always seemed to him that there was a special quality about the men and women who had lived through the great events of recent history—the ptertha plague, the Migration, the conquest of Overland, the war between the sister worlds. It was as though their characters and spirits had been tempered in the crucible of their times, whereas he was destined to live through a fallow period, never knowing for sure if he had it within him to respond to, and as a consequence be ennobled by, a great challenge. Try as he might, he could not imagine the tamed and stable circumstances of his day yielding up adventures which were in any way comparable with those which had earned Toller the Kingslayer his place in legend. Even the journey between the worlds, which had once been the dangerous limit of men's experience, had become a routine matter...

A sudden brightness washed in through the portholes on the left side of the room—momentarily rivalling the prisms of sunlight which slanted across the table from the opposite wall—and somebody outside on the open deck gave a howl of fright.

"What was *that*?" Toller was starting for the door, hindered by the lack of gravity, when there came an appalling burst of sound, akin to the loudest thunderclap he had ever heard. The room tilted and small objects chattered noisily in their brackets.

Echoes of the thunder were still booming and surging when Toller got the door open and was able to propel himself out of the cabin. The ship was twisting in violent air currents which drew groans and creaks from the rigging. Lieutenant Correvalte and the mechanic were clinging to lines by the engine, their shocked faces turned towards the north-west. Toller looked in the same direction and saw a restless, swirling core of fiery brilliance which quickly dwindled into nothingness. All at once the sky was placid again, the silence complete except for faint cries coming from men on other ships.

"Was it a meteor?" Toller called out, aware of the question's superfluity.

Correvalte nodded. "A big one, sir. It missed us by about a mile, perhaps more, but for a moment I thought our time had come. I never want to see anything like that again."

"You probably never will," Toller said reassuringly. "Get the rigger to check the envelope for damage, particularly around the strut attachments. What is the fellow's name?"

"Getchert, sir."

"Well, tell Getchert to look lively—it's time he did something to earn his salt on this trip."

As Correvalte moved away towards the aft superstructure, where the ordinary crew members were housed, Toller gripped a transverse line and drew himself to the rail. Now that the inversion had been carried out he could see only the ships of his own echelon and, below him, the balloons of the four leading vessels, but all seemed well with the fleet in general. He had made many ascents to the weightless zone and as a result had become inured to the thought of a meteor actually striking a ship. It was one of the rare cases in which he could draw comfort from thinking about man's insignificance in the scale of cosmic events. His ships were so small and the universe so large that it would be quite unreasonable for one of the blazing cosmic bullets to find a human mark.

It was ironic that only minutes earlier he had been privately bemoaning the humdrum nature of interplanetary flight, but if there were to be dangers he wanted them to be of a type which could be challenged and overcome. There was precious little glory to be wrung from casual extermination by a blind instrument of nature, a commonplace fragment of rock speeding through the void from...

Toller raised his head, directing his gaze to the south-east, to the part of the

sky where the meteor must have originated, and was intrigued when he picked out what looked like a tiny cloud of golden fireflies. The cloud was roughly circular and was expanding rapidly, its individual components brightening with each passing second. He stared at it, bemused, unable to recall having seen anything similar amid the sky's sparkling treasures, and then—like the abrupt clarification of an image in an optical system—his sense of scale and perspective returned, and there came a terrible realization.

He was looking at a swarm of meteors which appeared to be heading directly towards the fleet!

His understanding of the spectacle transformed it, seeming to increase the tempo of events. The shower opened radially like a carnivorous blossom, silently encompassing his field of vision, and he knew then that it could be hundreds of miles across. Unable to move or even to cry out, he gripped the ship's rail and watched the blazing entities fan ever outwards, racing towards the peripheries of his vision, still in utter silence despite the awesome energies being expended.

I'm safe, Toller told himself. I'm safe for the simple reason that I'm too small a prey for these fire-monsters. Even the ships are too small...

But something new was happening. A radical change was taking place. The obsidian horsemen from the far side of the cosmos, who had pursued their courses through total vacuum for millions of years, had at last encountered a denser medium, and they were destroying themselves against barriers of air, the gaseous fortifications which protected the twin planets from cosmic intruders.

Favourable though the encounter was for any creature living on the surface of Land or Overland, it boded ill for travellers taken by surprise at the narrowest point of the bridge of air between the two worlds. The meteors, racked by intolerable stresses, began to explode, and as they shattered into thousands of diverging splinters they were bound to become less discriminatory in their choice of targets.

Toller flinched as, with a wash of light and overlapping peals of thunder, the disintegrating meteors momentarily filled the whole sky. Suddenly they were behind him. He turned and saw the entire phenomenon in reverse, the great disk of radiance contracting as it raced into the remoteness of space. The main difference in its appearance was that there was less corpuscularity—the circle was a nearly uniform area of swirling flame. On leaving the last tenuous fringes of the twin worlds' atmosphere, the fiery bullets were deprived of fuel and quickly faded from sight. A numb silence engulfed the tower of ships.

How did we survive? Toller thought. How in the name of...?

He became aware of shouting from somewhere not far above him. There came a blurry explosion, typical of the pikon-halvell reaction, and he knew that

at least one of the ships had been less fortunate than his own.

"Put us on our side," he shouted to Lieutenant Correvalte, who was frozen at the control station. Toller clung to the rail, impatiently straining to see upwards past the curvatures of the balloon, while Correvalte began the regulated intermittent firing of one of the lateral jets.

A few seconds later Toller's eyes were greeted by the bizarre spectacle of a bluehorn drifting downwards in the sunlit air, against the background of daytime stars. The explosion must have hurled it clear of the gondola in which it was being transported. It was barking in terror and lashing out with hooved feet as it imperceptibly fell towards Land.

Toller turned his attention to the stricken ship, now coming into view. Its balloon had been reduced to a formless canopy of fabric panels. All four sides of the gondola had been blasted away from the base, and were still spinning slowly as part of an irregular ring which was made up of the figures of men, boxes of stores, coils of rope and general debris. Here and there among the floating confusion were flashes and fizzlings which emitted billows of white condensation as small quantities of pikon and halvell encountered each other and, not being confined, burned harmlessly against the pastel background of Overland.

Crew members from the other three ships of the same echelon were already launching themselves out from the sides of their vessels to begin rescue work. Toller scanned the struggling human figures which were part of the central chaos, and felt a pang of relief as he reached the unexpected conclusion that none of them was dead. He guessed that the gondola had received a glancing blow from a tiny meteor fragment and had turned on its side, thereby causing some of the green and purple power crystals to mingle and ignite, perhaps in the engine hoppers.

"Are we under attack? Are we to die?" The quavering words came from Commissioner Kettoran, his long pale face appearing at the door of the cabin.

Toller was about to explain what had happened when he noticed a movement at the rail of Vantara's ship. She had come to the side, accompanied by the smaller and less impressive figure of the lieutenant who had been with her at the time of their inauspicious meeting. Even at a distance the sight of the princess was enough to disturb Toller's composure. He saw that Vantara and her officer seemed to be concentrating their attention on the still-struggling bluehorn. The animal had lost all the momentum imparted to it by the explosion, and was apparently in a fixed position roughly midway between Vantara's ship and Toller's.

He knew, however, that the permanence of the spatial relationship was an

illusion. The bluehorn and the ships were all in the grip of Land's gravity, and all were falling towards the surface thousands of miles below. The all-important difference was that the ships were receiving some degree of support from their hot air balloons, whereas the bluehorn was falling freely. This close to the weightless zone the discrepancy in speeds was hard to detect, but it was there nevertheless, and in accordance with the laws of physics was steadily increasing. Unless corrective action was taken quite quickly the bluehorn—a valuable animal—would be condemned to that fatal plunge, lasting more than a day and a night, which every skyman had experienced in bad dreams.

Vantara and the lieutenant, whose name Toller had forgotten, were busy with their hands and within seconds he realized why. They propelled themselves over the rail with weightless ease, and he saw they had donned their personal flight packs. The units, powered by miglign gas, were a far cry from the old pneumatic systems hastily invented at the time of the interplanetary war, but in spite of their advanced design they were tricky enough for the unpracticed operator.

Evidence of that fact came almost immediately when Vantara, failing to keep the thrust in line with her centre of gravity, went into a slow tumble and had to be righted and steadied by her companion. It occurred to Toller at once that the two women, obviously intent on retrieving the bluehorn, could be getting themselves into real danger. The terrified beast was still lashing out with its plate-sized hooves, one blow from which would be sufficient to pulp a human skull.

"We had a close call," he shouted over his shoulder to Kettoran as he snatched a flight unit from a nearby rack. "Ask Correvalte about it!"

He went over the rail and sprang out into the sunlit air with the unit still in his hand. The twin worlds with all their intricate detail filled most of the sky on each side of him, and the space between was largely occupied by ranks of bulbous ships, plus wreaths of smoke and condensation through which miniature humanoid figures could be seen going about their enigmatic errands. Daytime stars and the brightest of the nebulae and comets effectively completed a full sphere of visual phenomena.

Toller, who had made a point of mastering the standard flight unit, used his drift time to strap the pack securely around his torso. He brought himself into a good alignment and fired a long burst which took him directly towards the bluehorn. The fierce chill of the mid world region, enhanced by slipstream, clawed at his eyes and mouth.

Vantara and her lieutenant were now close to the bluehorn, which was still barking and crowing in terror. They edged nearer to it and were beginning to uncoil the rope they had brought when Toller used his retro jet to bring himself

to a halt close by. It was a long time since he had been within speaking distance of Vantara, and—in spite of the bizarre circumstances—he felt a tingling awareness of her physical presence. The very molecules of his body seemed to be reacting to an invisible aura which surrounded her. Her oval face, partially shaded by the cowl of her skysuit, was as lovely as he remembered it—enigmatic, utterly feminine, unnerving in its perfection.

"Why can't we meet in ordinary places, the way other people do?" Toller said.

The countess eyed him briefly, turned away with no change of expression and spoke to her lieutenant. "We'll bind the back legs first—it would be easier that way."

"I would like to try calming the beast down first," the lieutenant replied. "It's too risky to go behind it while it's so fretful."

"Nonsense!" Vantara spoke with the brisk confidence of one who had had extensive stables at her disposal since childhood. Forming a wide noose with the rope, she sailed closer to the bluehorn on a plume of miglign condensation. Toller was about to call out a warning when the animal, which was continually twisting its head around and had a full view of its surroundings, struck out with both hind legs. One of its enormous hooves grazed Vantara's hip, catching the material of her suit without impacting on her body. The imparted force put her into a spin which was checked almost at once by the cold-stiffened rope she was still holding. Had the bluehorn's hoof connected with her pelvis she would have been seriously injured, and it was apparent that she understood the fact because her face was pale when she regained a stable attitude.

"Why did you pull on the line?" she demanded of her lieutenant, her voice stinging with anger. "You drew me in! I could have been killed!"

The lieutenant's jaw sagged and she shot a scandalized glance at Toller, tacitly enlisting him as a witness. "My lady, I did no such—"

"Don't argue, lieutenant."

"I *said* we should calm the beast down before—"

"Let's not set up a court of enquiry," Vantara interrupted, her breath forming white wreaths of condensation in front of her face. "If you have suddenly become expert in animal husbandry you may retrieve this foul-tempered sack of bones. It's of pretty poor stock, anyway." She twisted in the air and propelled herself back towards her ship.

The lieutenant watched her depart, then looked at Toller, an unexpected smile plumping her already rounded cheeks. "The theory is that if this poor dumb creature had good breeding it would have known not to kick a member of the royal family."

Toller felt that the levity was misplaced. "The countess had a narrow escape."

"The countess brings these things down on herself," the lieutenant said. "The reason she took it on herself to retrieve the bluehorn—rather than leave the job to common hands—was that she wanted to demonstrate her natural control over bloodstock. She firmly believes in all the aristocracy's most cherished myths—that their males are born with an instinctive mastery of generalship; that the females are gifted in every branch of the arts and—"

"Lieutenant!" Toller's annoyance had been growing throughout the discourse and suddenly could no longer be contained. "How dare you speak thuswise to me about a superior officer! Don't you realize I could have you severely punished for that kind of talk?"

The lieutenant's eyes widened in surprise, then her expression became one of disappointment and resignation. "Not you, too. Not another one!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Every man who meets her..." The lieutenant paused, shaking her head. "I would have thought that after that business of the collision report... Do you know that the beautiful Countess Vantara did her utmost to have you deprived of your command?"

"Do you know that you are supposed to use the proper form of address when speaking to a senior officer?" Toller was vaguely aware that there was something ludicrous about his manner—especially when the two of them were poised in blue emptiness between the swirled disks of planets—but he was unable to listen passively while Vantara was subjected to such acidulous criticism.

"I'm sorry, sir." The lieutenant's face had lost all expression and her voice was neutral. "Do you want me to see what I can do about the bluehorn?"

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Jerene Pertree, sir."

Toller now felt pompous, but could see no way out of the web he had woven around himself. "There's no scarcity of experienced handlers on this flight—are you sure you won't get yourself sent flying?"

"I grew up on a farm, sir." Jerene opened the valve of her propulsion unit a short distance, producing just enough thrust to drift her towards the bluehorn's head. The animal's bulging eyes rolled as she drew near and shining strands of saliva gathered in the air around its mouth. Toller felt a stab of concern—those massive jaws could easily rend human flesh beneath the stoutest garment—but Jerene was making gentle, wordless sounds which seemed to have an immediate soothing effect on the bluehorn. She slipped one arm around its neck and began stroking the animal's brow with her free hand. It submitted to her touch, visibly becoming docile, and in a few seconds she was able to slide its eyelids down over the staring amber eyes. Jerene nodded towards Toller, signalling for him to

come in with the rope.

He jetted forward, bound the bluehorn's back feet together, paid out a short length of line and repeated the process with the forelegs. He was not accustomed to that kind of work, and all the while was half-expecting a violent response from the captive animal, but it allowed him to complete the operation without mishap.

By that time the chaos above was being brought under control. The stricken ship was being abandoned. Overland's surface was almost completely occulted by condensation trails as crewmen from other vessels began the work of salvaging supplies. They were shouting to each other, sounding almost cheerful as they realized how slight was the damage to the fleet as a whole, compared to what it could have been. It occurred to Toller that the expedition had been lucky in another respect—if the encounter with the meteor swarm had not happened so close to the weightless zone recovery from it would have been much more difficult, if not impossible. Every object he could see was falling towards Land, but the rate of descent was so leisurely that in practice it could be disregarded for the time being.

Men were also jetting upwards from the four ships of the first echelon, among them Sky-commodore Sholdde, chief executive officer for the expedition. Sholdde was a tough and laconic fifty-year-old, much favoured by the Queen because of the relish with which he tackled difficult assignments. The fact that he had lost a ship, although no blame could be laid at his door, was going to make him edgy and difficult to deal with for the rest of the flight.

"Maraquine!" he shouted at Toller. "What do you think you're doing there? Get back to your ship and see what extra stores you can take on board. You shouldn't be concerning yourself with that miserable flea-bag."

"How dare you call me a flea-bag!" Jerene murmured in Sholdde's direction, feigning indignation. "Flea-bag, yourself!"

"Look, I've already warned you about..." Toller, who had been about to admonish the lieutenant on her disrespect for senior officers, met the humorous glint in her brown eyes and his resolve foundered. He liked people who could make jokes at times of stress, and he had to admit that he would have had trouble summoning up the nerve to go as close to the frightened bluehorn's head as Jerene had done.

"You may rejoin your ship now," he said stiffly. "The farmers can collect their bluehorn when they're ready."

"Yes, sir." Jerene pushed herself clear of the quiescent animal and reached for the controls of her propulsion unit.

Toller now felt that he had been unfair. "By the way, lieutenant..."

"Sir?"

"You did well with the bluehorn."

"Why thank you, sir," Jerene said, smiling demurely in a way which left Toller almost certain that he was being mocked. He watched her jet away from him, trailing a cone of rolling white condensation, and his thoughts turned immediately to Vantara. She had narrowly escaped injury from the bluehorn's hoof and had done the right thing in retiring to her ship at once. It was unfortunate, though, that her doing so had deprived him of the opportunity to establish a better relationship between them.

But I've got time in hand, he thought, deciding to be philosophical. *There'll be all the time in the world when we get to Land.*

Chapter 4

Divivvidiv was awakened from mid-brain-sleep by a telepathic whisper from the Xa.

Look about you, Beloved Creator, the Xa said, using the mind-colour green to show that it considered the matter to be of some urgency.

What is happening? Divivvidiv responded, still not fully restored to every level of consciousness. He had been dreaming of simpler and happier times, in particular about his early childhood on Dussarra, and his high-brain had just begun devising the scenario for a fulfilling day, one which would have been fed in every detail into slumbering mid-brain and which he would have lived in full while asleep. He would, of course, be able to recreate it during his next inert period, but inevitably there would be some minor differences, and he could not help but experience a slight sense of loss. The vanished dream-day had promised to be well-nigh perfect. Nostalgia compounded...

The Primitives ascending from the surface of their planet have passed through the datum plane, the Xa went on. *They have inverted their vessels and—*

Which shows they are on their way to the sister planet, Divivvidiv interrupted. *Why did you disturb me?*

I have been able to perceive them with greater clarity, Beloved Creator, and I must inform you that their organs of sight are much superior to yours. Also, they have developed instruments which efficiently magnify optical images.

Telescopes! The idea of a primitive species having been able to devise ways of manipulating a medium as intractable as light startled Divivvidiv into full wakefulness. He sat up on the smooth, spongy block which was his bed and switched off its artificial gravity field, without which he would have been unable to enter any but the most superficial level of sleep.

Tell me, he said to the Xa, *will the Primitives be able to see us?* He had to ask the question, to rely for the moment on the Xa's senses, because his own radius of direct perception was severely curtailed by the metal walls of the habitat.

Yes, Beloved Creator. Two of them are already scanning the general area of the visual sphere in which we are located—one of them with the aid of a double telescope—and there is a strong possibility of our being detected. The heaters of the protein synthesizing station are the most likely to draw attention—they leak

radiation which is well within that part of the spectrum spanned by the Primitives' eyes. 'Purple' is the word they use for it.

I will shut down the heaters immediately. Divivvidiv floated himself out of the habitat's living quarters and into the principal operations hall. His trajectory carried him through the air to the control matrix which governed nutrient production, and he used a pencil-slim grey finger to divert the flow of power away from the row of exterior heaters.

I have done it, he said to the Xa. *Have the Primitives seen anything?*

There was a brief pause before the Xa replied. *Yes—one of them has commented on seeing 'a line of purple lights', but there is no associated emotional reaction. The event has been dismissed as insignificant, and is already being forgotten.*

I am glad of that, Divivvidiv said, using the mind-colour appropriate to relief.

Why do you experience relief, Beloved Creator? Surely a species at such an early stage of its development can pose no threat to you.

I was not concerned about my own safety, Divivvidiv said. *If the Primitives had been curious about us, and had decided to investigate, I would have been forced to destroy them.*

There was another pause before the Xa spoke. *You are reluctant to kill any of the Primitives.*

Naturally.

Because it is immoral to deprive any being of its life?

Yes.

In that case, Beloved Creator, the Xa said, *why have you decided to kill me?*

I have told you many times that nobody has decided to kill you—it is simply a matter of... The talk of killing reminded Divivvidiv of why he was there, of the awesome crime against nature being perpetrated by his own kind, and a pang of anguish and guilt stilled his thoughts.

Chapter 5

The ancient city of Ro-Atabri was *immense*.

Toller had been standing at the rail of his gondola for more than an hour, staring down at the slowly expanding patch of intricate line and colour patterns which differentiated the city from the surrounding terrain. He had been conditioned to regard Prad, Overland's capital, as an imposing metropolis, and had visualized Ro-Atabri as much larger but essentially the same. The reality of the historic seat of Kolcorronian power, however, was something for which he could not have prepared himself.

He sensed that such a huge difference in size somehow led to a difference in kind, but there was more to it than that. All the cities, towns and villages on Overland had been planned, and therefore their chief characteristics sprang from the will of their architects and builders, but from high in the air Ro-Atabri resembled a natural growth, a living organism.

It was all there, just as in the sketches his maternal grandmother—Gesalla Maraquine—used to make for him when he was a child. There was the Borann River winding into Arle Bay, which in turn opened out upon the Gulf of Tronom, and to the east was the snow-capped Mount Opelmer. Cupped in and shaped by those natural features, the city and its suburbs sprawled across the land, a vast lichen of masonry, concrete, brakka wood and clay which represented centuries of Endeavour by multitudes of human beings. The great fires which had raged on the day the Migration had begun had left a still-visible discoloration in some areas, but the durable stonework had survived intact and would serve humanity again in some future era. Flecks of orange-red and orange-brown showed where the ill-fated New Men had begun capping the shells of buildings with new tiled roofs.

"What do you think of it, young Maraquine?" Commissioner Kettoran said, appearing at Toller's side. Now that gravity was back to normal he was feeling much better and was taking a lively interest in all aspects of the ship's affairs.

"It's big," Toller said simply. "I can't take it in. It makes history ... real."

Kettoran laughed. "Did you think we'd made it up?"

"You could have done, as far as most of the present generation are concerned, but this... It hurts my brain, if you know what I mean."

"I know exactly what you mean—think how *I* feel." Kettoran leaned further across the rail and his long face became animated. "Do you see that square patch of green just to the west of the city? That's the old Skyship Quarter—the exact spot we took off from fifty years ago! Will we be able to land there?"

"It seems as good a place as any," Toller said. "The lateral dispersions on this flight have been remarkably slight, and those that did occur have cancelled each other out. The decision rests with the Sky-commodore, of course, but I'd say that's where we'll put down."

"That would make it perfect. The perfect full circle."

"Indeed yes," Toller agreed, no longer really listening, his attention captured by the realization that the ten-day flight between the worlds was all but over, and that very soon he would have unlimited opportunities to court Vantara. He had not even glimpsed her since the incident with the blue-horn, and the lack of contact had fuelled his obsession to the point where the prospect of seeing another world for the first time seemed no more of an adventure than being able to speak to the countess face to face and perhaps win her over.

"I envy you, young Maraquine," Kettoran said, gazing wistfully downwards at the natural stage upon which the half-remembered scenes of his youth had been enacted. "Everything lies before you."

"Perhaps." Toller smiled, savouring his own interpretation of the commissioner's words. "Perhaps you're right."

The village of Sty-vee contained no more than a hundred or so buildings, and even in its heyday would have housed only a few hundred people. Toller was tempted to cross it off his list and proceed on his way without even landing, but it would then have become necessary to falsify an inspection report and he could not allow himself to sink to petty dishonesty. He studied the layout of the village for a moment, noting that its central square was very small, even for such an out-of-the-way place.

"What do you think, corporal?" he said, testing the younger man's judgment. "Is it worth trying to put the ship down on those few yards of turf?"

Steennameert leaned over the rail to assess the prospects. "I wouldn't take the risk, sir—there's very little leeway and there's no telling what the eddy currents are like around that group of tall warehouses."

"That's what I was thinking—we'll make a pilot of you yet," Toller said jovially. "Head for those pastures to the east, beside the river, and drop us there."

Steennameert nodded, his naturally pink face growing even more roseate with gratification. Toller had taken a liking to Steennameert on the occasion of their first meeting, when he had parachuted down from the interplanetary void, and

had put in a special request to have him in his crew for the flight to Land. Now he was personally grooming Steenameert for a field promotion, somewhat to the annoyance of Lieutenant Correvalte, who had spent the customary year in a training squadron.

Toller turned to Correvalte, who officially should have been conducting the landing manoeuvre and was showing his discomfiture by lounging in a seat in a posture of exaggerated boredom. "Lieutenant, detail one man to guard the ship and get the others ready to inspect the village—the walk will do them good."

Correvalte saluted, very correctly, and left the bridge. Toller maintained a carefully neutral expression as he watched the lieutenant go down the short stair to the gondola's main deck. He had already decided to recompense Correvalte by recommending him for a full captaincy earlier than usual, but had decided not to let him know until the current mission had been completed.

It was the middle of foreday, and already in the equatorial region of Land the sun's heat was baking the ground. Most of the gondola was in the shadow of the ship's gasbag, a fact which made the environment beyond seem preternaturally bright and vivid. As the vessel performed a slow half-circle to face the slight breeze, sinking all the while, Toller saw that the fields surrounding the village had almost returned to their natural uniform shade of green.

With no seasons to orchestrate the cycle of maturation, individual plants in the wild state tended to follow their own timetables, with a proportion in the earliest stages of growth while others were at their peak or in the process of withering and returning their constituents to the soil. From time immemorial, Kolcorronian farmers had sorted the seeds of useful vegetables into synchronous batches—typically creating six harvests a year—and as a result areas of cultivated land presented patterns of stripes of varying colours.

Here, after decades of neglect, those patterns had all but disappeared as the edible grasses and other crop vegetables had slowly returned to botanic anarchy. The advanced stage of the reversal led Toller to suspect that the village of Sty-vee was not one of those which the New Men had reclaimed after the ptertha plague had wiped out the normal human population. If that were the case, the inspection of the village promised to be yet another in a series of unpleasant and highly depressing experiences.

The final stages of racial extinction—half a century ago—had come so swiftly that there had been no time for the dying to bury the dead...

The thought cast a pall over Toller's mood, reminding him of how wrong he had been in his supposition that the fleet's arrival on Land would give him endless opportunity to keep company with the Countess Vantara. At the heart of his mistake had been a single historical fact.

The migration from Land to Overland had been a carefully planned affair, one which should have been carried out in orderly stages, but in the event it had been essayed in circumstances of panic and chaos. With the city of Ro-Atabri burning, with mobs on the rampage and the army's discipline gone, the evacuation had been forced through with only minutes of notice for the refugees—and in that extreme *not one book* had been taken on the journey between the worlds. Jewellery and useless bundles of currency notes had been carried in plenty, but not one painting, not one written poem, not one sheet of music.

While men and women of culture were later to complain that the race had left its soul behind, King Chakkell and his heirs were to fret about a more irksome oversight. In all the turmoil and confusion nobody had thought of bringing any maps of Kolcorron, of the empire, or of Land itself. From the time of the Migration until the present day—although the Kolcorronian royal family still claimed sovereignty over the Old World—the lack of charts had proved an annoyance more than anything else, but the situation had changed entirely.

Prince Oldo, Daseene's sole remaining offspring, was now in his late fifties and had been thwarted all his life by the Queen's refusal to step down from the throne. And, just as his mother's frailty was promising to clear the way for him, he had been given an extra frustration to contend with in that he was about to become heir to a kingdom whose actual and potential wealth were almost a total mystery.

Unknown to Toller, he had prevailed on Daseene to put off the circumnavigation of Land until a detailed survey of Kolcorron itself had been carried out. Thus it was that, instead of pacing Vantara's ship on a challenging round-the-world flight, Toller had found himself committed to a seemingly endless series of aerial hops from one deserted village or town to another. He had been on Land for almost twenty days and in all that time had not even seen Vantara, who was engaged on similar duties in a different quarter of the country.

Just as the city of Ro-Atabri had impressed him with its sheer size, Kolcorron was overwhelming him with the multiplicity of centres, large and medium and small, which had once been necessary to house its population. Having lived all his life on Overland, where it was possible to fly for hours without seeing a single habitation, Toller felt oppressed, suffocated, by the extent of men's interference with the natural landscape. He had begun to visualize the old kingdom as one vast, seething hive in which any individual would have counted for very little. Even the knowledge that it was the birthplace of his grandfather did little to counteract his negative feelings about Kolcorron's tamed and overworked countryside.

He gazed moodily at the cluster of dwellings and larger buildings, apparently

tilting with the airship's movements, which made up Sty-vee. The old maps and gazetteers which had been found in Ro-Atabri showed that its chief importance arose from the fact that the village contained a pumping station which had been vital to the irrigation of a considerable area of farming land north of the local river and canal system. It was required of Toller that he should inspect the station and report on its condition.

Still keeping a watchful eye on Steenameert and his handling of the airship, Toller consulted his list and confirmed that after Sty-vee had been crossed off there would be only three further locations to check. If there were no complications he could be on his way back to base camp in the capital before littlenight of the following day. Vantara might also have returned to Ro-Atabri by that time. The thought helped to dispel some of Toller's forebodings about the task in hand, and he began to whistle as he took his sword from a locker. The steel weapon—which had once belonged to his grandfather—was too awkward to wear in the close confines of a ship, but he never ventured abroad without it strapped to his side. It enhanced his sense of kinship with that other Toller Maraquine, the one whose exploits he would never have the chance to emulate.

A minute later—to the accompaniment of short bursts from the secondary jets—the gondola's keel made contact with the ground and the four anchor cannon fired their barbs into the grassy earth. Crewmen leapt over the side immediately with extra lines and began doubly securing the ship against the possibility of the heat vortices which commonly roamed the land close to the equator.

"Closing down the engines, sir," Steenameert said, his eyes seeking Toller's as he vented the pneumatic reservoir which fed power crystals to the jets. "How was the landing?"

"Passable, passable." Toller used a tone of voice which showed that he was more pleased with the corporal's performance than his choice of words implied. "But don't stand there all day congratulating yourself—we have business in yonder metropolis. Over the side with you!"

As had happened before, during the short walk to the edge of the village Toller felt oddly self-conscious, as though hidden observers were watching every step he took. He knew how absurd the notion was, but yet he was unable to forget what easy targets he and his men would be if defenders with muskets were to appear at the blank upper windows of the nearest houses. His uneasiness, he decided, sprang from a feeling that he had no right to be doing what he was doing, that the last resting places of so many people should be left undisturbed...

An outburst of swearing from one of the crewmen a dozen paces to his left caused him to look in that direction. The man was gingerly skirting something which Toller could not see because of the long grass.

"What is it, Renko?" he said, knowing in his heart what the answer would be.

"A couple of skeletons, sir." Renko's saffron airman's shirt was already darkened with sweat in several places and he was showily limping. "I nearly fell over them, sir. Nearly broke my ankle."

"If it doesn't mend soon I'll have the incident noted in your service record," Toller said drily. "Clashed with two skeletons—came off second best." His comment brought a round of laughter from the other men and Renko's limp rapidly disappeared.

On reaching the village the group fanned out in what had become a routine procedure, with the crewmen entering houses and reporting on their condition to Lieutenant Correvalte, who was making copious notes in a dispatch book. Toller took the opportunity to find some comparative solitude, wandering separately through narrow passageways and the remains of gardens. The derelict condition of the buildings convinced him that Sty-vee had not been occupied by the New Men, that half a century had passed since human families had enlivened the crumbling stonework with their presence.

There were no skeletons visible out of doors, but that was not unusual in Toller's experience. In the final and most virulent phase of the ptertha plague victims had survived for only two hours after infection, but some instinct seemed to have prompted them to seek out places of seclusion in which to die. It was as if some lingering sense of propriety had been outraged at the thought of defiling their communities with decaying corpses. A few had made their way to favourite beauty spots or vantage points, but in general the citizens of old Kolcorron had chosen to die in the privacy of their homes, very often in bed.

Toller had lost count of the number of times he had seen pathetic family tableaux consisting of male and female skeletons still locked in a last embrace, sometimes with smaller bony frames lying between them. The sight of so many reminders of the ultimate futility of existence in such a short span had contaminated his spirit with a deep melancholia which at times overcame his natural ebullience, and now—unashamedly—he avoided entering the silent dwelling places whenever he could.

His meandering course through the village eventually brought him to a large windowless building which had been built on the bank of the river. Part of it extended down into the slow-moving water. Identifying the structure as the pumping station which was the chief item of interest in the area, he walked around it until he came to a large door in the north wall. The door had been constructed from close-grained wood well reinforced with brakka straps and appeared to have been quite unaffected by fifty years of neglect. It was locked and, as he expected, barely quivered when he threw his considerable weight

against it.

Muttering with annoyance. Toller turned away, shaded his eyes from the sun and scanned the village. More than a minute went by before he spotted the burly figure of Gabbleronn, the sergeant-artificer, who was responsible for maintenance of the airship. Gabbleronn had just emerged from what had once been a store of some kind, and was cramming a small object into his pouch. He looked startled when Toller called him, and responded to the summons with an evident lack of enthusiasm.

"I wasn't looting, sir," he protested as he drew near. "I just picked up a little candle holder fashioned from that black wood. It's of no value, sir ... a souvenir to take home to Prad for my wife ... I'll put it back if you—"

"Never mind that," Toller interrupted. "I want this door opened. Fetch whatever tools you need from the ship. Blow it off its hinges if that's what it takes."

"Yes, sir!" Looking relieved, Gabbleronn studied the door for a moment, then saluted and hurried away.

Toller sat down on the stone doorsteps and made himself as comfortable as he could while he waited for the sergeant to return. The heat was increasing as the sun climbed higher, and the sky was so bright that only a few of the normal daytime stars were visible. Directly above him, the great disk of Overland occupied the centre of the heavens, looking fresh and unsullied in his eyes, and he felt a sudden pang of homesickness for its dew-fresh open spaces. The entire planet of Land was one vast charnel house—exhausted, ghost-ridden, dusty and sad—and even the presence of Vantara somewhere over the horizon scarcely compensated for the gloominess which had begun to impose itself on his mind. It would be different if he could actually be in her company, but this business of being near to her and yet completely cut off from her was much worse than...

What am I doing to myself? he thought suddenly. *What kind of man am I becoming? Would that other Toller Maraquine have mooned around in such a manner—lovesick and homesick—like a sallow-faced adolescent?*

The questions propelled Toller to his feet and he was pacing in impatient circles, a hand on the hilt of his sword, when he saw Correvalte approaching with the rest of the crew in his wake. The lieutenant was checking his notes as he walked, looking businesslike, competent and very much at ease with himself and his surroundings. Toller felt a twinge of envy coupled with a momentary suspicion that Correvalte had the potential to be the better officer of the two.

"The report is almost complete, sir—except for an inspection of the pumping station," Correvalte said. "Have you been inside the building?"

"How could I enter the building when the accursed door is barred?" Toller

snapped. "Do I look like a wraith which can insinuate itself through cracks in the woodwork?"

The lieutenant's eyes widened and then became opaquely impersonal. "I'm sorry, sir—I didn't realize..."

"I have sent Gabbleronn for some tools," Toller cut in, already ashamed of his display of peevishness. "See if he needs any help in carrying them—I have no wish to linger in this cemetery any longer than necessary."

He turned away as Correvalte was performing one of his ultra-correct salutes and walked along the bank of the river until he came to a narrow wooden bridge. From a distance the bridge had appeared quite sound, but on close examination he saw that its structure had a grey-white spongy texture which signalled that it had been ravaged by wood-boring insects. He drew his sword and struck at one of the handrail stanchions. It severed with very little resistance to the blade and toppled into the river, taking a section of the rail with it. Half a dozen further blows were sufficient to cut through the two main beams of the bridge, sending the whole rotten edifice plunging down into the water amid puffs of powdered wood and a buzzing of minute winged creatures which had been disturbed in their appointed task.

"You have had a good meal," Toller said, whimsically addressing the multitudes of insects and their grubs which must have been still inside the fallen timbers, "now you can enjoy a drink."

The little flurry of physical activity, frivolous though it had been, helped ease the tensions in his mind and he was in a better mood as he retraced his steps to the village. He reached the pumping station just as Gabbleronn and two of his helpers had succeeded in prising the door open with the aid of large crowbars.

"Good work," Toller said. "Now let us see what marvels of engineering lie within."

Before arriving on Land he had known from his history tuition that the planet had no metals, and that brakka wood had always been employed for applications where, on Overland, the designer would have chosen iron, steel or some other suitable metal. Nevertheless, machinery whose gearwheels and other highly stressed components were carved from the black wood seemed cumbersome and quaint to his eye, relics of a primitive era.

He led the way along a short passage to a large, vaulted chamber which contained massive pumping machinery. The windows in the roof were heavily encrusted with grime, but there was enough light filtering down from them to show that the machinery, although coated with dust, was complete and in a good state of repair. Those parts not made of brakka—beams and struts—were of the same close-grained wood as the station's door, a material which evidently

resisted wood-boring insects or was not to their taste. Toller tested one of the beams with his thumbnail and was impressed by its hardness, even after fifty years without maintenance.

"I believe it's called rafter wood, sir," Steenameert said, coming to his side. "You can see why it was favoured by builders."

"How do you know what it's called?"

Steennameert blushed. "I have read descriptions of it many times in the—"

"Oh, *no!*" The voice was that of Lieutenant Correvalte, who had been walking around the perimeter of the chamber, opening the doors into side rooms as he came to them. He was backing off from a doorway, shaking his head, and Toller knew at once that he had witnessed a great obscenity. *This, Toller told himself, is what I have been expecting since we entered the village. I knew something bad was in store for us, and I have no wish to set eyes on it.*

He knew, also, that he could not avoid personally inspecting the find lest the word get about among the crewmen that he had become soft. The most he could do was to delay the grim moment. He stooped over a control lever and ratchet and brushed the dust away from them, pretending to take a special interest in the precise carving, and while doing so watched his men. Their curiosity aroused by Correvalte's reaction, they were taking turns at venturing into *the* room. None stayed longer than a few seconds, and—professionally callous though they were—each looked subdued and thoughtful as he returned to the main chamber.

I have an appointment in that room, Toller thought, *and it would be unseemly to delay any longer.*

He straightened up, hand unconsciously falling to the hilt of his sword, and walked to the waiting doorway. The room beyond resembled a prison cell. It was devoid of furniture, and was cheerlessly illuminated by a broken skylight in the sloping roof far above. Ranged around the walls, in the seated position, were perhaps twenty skeletons. The wispy remnants of dresses and skirts, plus the presence of necklaces and ceramic bangles, informed Toller that the skeletons were the remains of women.

It isn't all that bad, he thought. *It was a fact of life, a fact of death, that the plague was impartial. It struck down women just as readily as men, and since arriving on this unhappy world I have seen many, many...*

His mind seized up, chilled, as he absorbed a fact which had not been readily apparent at first glance. Curled up in the pelvic basin of each of the skeletons was another skeleton—a tiny armature of fragile bones which was all that remained of a baby whose life had ended before it had properly begun.

Yes, the plague had been very impartial.

Toller longed to turn and flee from the room, but the deadly coldness in his

mind had percolated down through his body, immobilizing his limbs. Time had become distorted, stretching seconds into eons, and he knew that he was destined to spend the rest of his life frozen to the same spot, on that threshold of pessimism and pure despair.

"The villagers must have put all their pregnant women in here, hoping these walls would protect them," Lieutenant Correvalte said from close behind Toller. "Look! One of them was having twins."

Toller chose not to seek out that refinement of horror. Breaking free of his paralysis, he turned and walked away from the room, acutely aware of being closely scrutinized by every member of his crew.

"Make a note," he said over his shoulder to Correvalte. "Say that we inspected the pumping machinery and found it to be in good condition and capable of being restored to working order in a short time."

"Is that all, sir?"

"I haven't noticed anything else that our sovereign would regard as important," Toller said in casual tones, walking slowly towards the station's entrance, disguising the anxiousness he felt, the pressing need to reassure himself that the sanity of sunshine could still be found in the outside world.

The Migration Day celebrations had taken Toller completely by surprise.

He had completed his survey mission and arrived back at the base camp in Ro-Atabri less than an hour before nightfall, having lost track of the date. Unusually for him, he felt deeply tired. The news that it was Day 226, the anniversary of the first touch-downs on Overland, had failed to strike any spark within him, and he had gone straight to bed after signing his ship over to Fleet Master Codell. Even the word that Vantara had returned to base earlier in the day had not roused him from the pervasive lethargy, the weariness of spirit which was taking the light out of everything.

Now he was lying in darkness in his room, which was part of the quarters which had once housed the guard of the Great Palace, and was quite unable to sleep. He had never been given over to introspection and soul-searching, but he understood very well that his tiredness was not physical in its origins. It was a mental tiredness, a psychic fatigue induced by a long period of doing that for which he had no taste, of going against his own nature.

Before leaving home he had visualized Land as one vast charnel house, and the reality of it had more than conformed to his expectations, culminating in the grisly find at the Sty-vee pumping station. Perhaps he was being self-indulgent. Perhaps—as one born into a privileged position in society—he was having his first taste of what life must be like for a common man who was forced to spend

all his days in a kind of toil he detested and which had been forced on him from above. Toller tried reminding himself that his grandfather, that other Toller Maraquine, would not have allowed his composure to be so quickly disturbed. No matter what fearful sights and experiences the *real* Toller Maraquine had had to contend with he would have deflected the force of them with his shield of toughness and self-sufficiency. But ... but...

How do I find room inside my head for twenty skeletons neatly ranged against a wall, with another twenty skeletons curled up inside them in the pelvic cradles? Another twenty-one skeletons, I should have said. Didn't you notice that one of the women was having twins? What are you supposed to do about two little manikins, with whitened twigs in place of bones, who kept each other company in death instead of life?

An extra-loud burst of laughter from somewhere in the palace grounds brought Toller to his feet, swearing in exasperation. Men and women were getting drunk out there, getting themselves into a state in which they could exchange handshakes with skeletons, return the grins of skeletons, and pat unborn babies on their still-bifurcated craniums. It came to Toller that his only prospect of sleep that night lay in dosing himself with large quantities of alcohol.

Welcoming the positive decision, his inner tiredness abating slightly, Toller pulled on some clothes and left the room. Finding his way through unfamiliar corridors with some difficulty, he reached the garden on the north side of the grounds which was the centre of the festivities. It had been chosen because it was mostly paved and therefore had stood up to decades of neglect better than the others. Even the parade ground at the rear of the palace was waist-high in grass and weeds. Several small fires had been lit in the garden, their orange-and-yellow rays partially obscured and softly reflected by ornamental fountains, statues and shrubs, making the place look much larger than it did in daylight.

Couples and small groups strolled through the spangled dimness, while others stood near the long table which had been set up for refreshments. Males outnumbered females by about three to one on the expedition, which meant that women who were in the opposite mood that night were enjoying a surfeit of romantic attention, while males who were redundant in such respects were concentrating on food, drink, song and the telling of bawdy stories.

Toller found Commissioner Kettoran and his secretary, Parlo Wotoorb, standing behind the table serving food and drink. The two old men were obviously enjoying the menial task, proving to all of the company that in spite of their exalted rank they still possessed the common touch.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome," Kettoran called out when he espied Toller approaching. "Come and have a drink with us, young Maraquine."

Toller thought that the commissioner was slightly overplaying his role—perhaps afraid of somebody missing the point—but it was a harmless enough foible, not one he found objectionable. "Thank you—I'll have a very large beaker of Kailian black."

Kettoran shook his head. "No wine. No ale either, for that matter. A question of useful payload on the ships, you see—you will have to settle for brandy."

"Brandy it is then."

"I'll let you have some of the good stuff, in one of my best glasses."

The commissioner sank down to his knees behind the table and a moment later stood up with a glittering crystal filled to the brim. He was handing the glass over when the jovial expression abruptly departed his face and was replaced by one of mingled surprise and pain. Toller took the glass quickly and watched with some concern as Kettoran pressed both forearms against his lower ribcage.

"Trye, are you unwell?" Wotoorb said anxiously. "I *told* you 'you should take more rest.'"

Kettoran inclined his head briefly towards the secretary, then winked knowingly at Toller. "This old fool thinks he is going to live longer than I am." He smiled, apparently no longer in distress, picked up his own glass and raised it to Toller. "I bid you good health, young Maraquine."

"Good health to you, sir," Toller said, unable to muster a reciprocal smile.

Kettoran studied his face closely. "Son—I trust you will not think me impertinent—but you no longer seem the young game-cock who captained my ship on the voyage to Land. Something seems to have taken the starch out of you."

"Out of *me*!" Toller laughed incredulously. "Put your mind at ease, sir—I don't soften up so readily. And now, if you will excuse me..."

He turned and walked away from the table, privately disturbed by the commissioner's comments. If the effects of his malaise could be discerned so quickly by one who scarcely knew him, what chance had he of keeping the respect of his own crewmen? Maintaining discipline was difficult enough at times without having the men begin to regard him as a hothouse plant who was likely to wilt at adversity's first cold breath. He sipped some brandy and walked around the garden close to the perimeter, keeping away from noisier centres of activity, until he found an unoccupied marble bench. Grateful for the solitude, he sat down.

Above him the narrowing crescent of Overland was nested near the centre of the Great Wheel, that enormous whirlpool of silver luminance which dominated the night sky in the latter part of the year. Several comets were splaying their

tails across the heavens, and myriads of stars—some of them like coloured coachlamps—added to the splendour, burning with an unwinking permanence which contrasted with the brief dartings of meteors.

Toller addressed himself to his outsized goblet, which must have contained close on a third of a bottle of brandy, downing the warming liquor in patient, regular sips. It was a night on which it would have been good to have female companionship, but even the thought that Vantara might be only a few dozen paces away in the scented gloaming failed to elicit any response from within him. It was also a night for facing up to truths, for discarding illusions, and the plain facts of the matter were that he had made an enemy of the countess on their first meeting as adults, that she despised him now and would go on doing so for as long as he stayed in her memory.

Besides, came the slithering thought, how can you even think of courting a woman when there are twenty-one miniature skeletons watching you?

Toller kept on with his methodical drinking until the goblet was empty, then assessed his condition. In spite of the tiredness he had not yet succeeded in stunning himself with alcohol. There was a perverse wakefulness at the core of his mind which told him that at least one more brimming crystal would be necessary if he were to escape the reproachful gaze of the twenty-one bone-babies and sink into unconsciousness before deepnight engulfed the world.

He stood up, as steady as a well-rooted tree, and was starting in the direction of the table to avail himself of Kettoran's generosity when he saw a woman approaching him. She was slim and dark-haired, and he knew before being able to see her face properly that she was Vantara. She was wearing full uniform—no doubt her way of distancing herself from those officers who were prepared to forget about rank for the sake of the revel—and Toller braced himself for a verbal skirmish. He did not have long to wait.

"What's this?" she said lightly. "No sword? Of course! How silly of me to forget—there aren't any kings ripe for skewering at this little gathering."

Toller nodded, acknowledging the reference to his grandfather, who had been dubbed Kingslayer by the populace of his day. "That's very funny, captain." He made to move past her, but she halted him by placing a hand on his arm.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"No." Toller was disconcerted by the unexpected physical contact. "I would add that I'm going to replenish my glass."

Vantara looked up into his face, frowning slightly as she scanned his features. "What's the matter with you?"

"I fail to understand the question."

"Where is the great warrior, Toller Maraquine the Second, who is immune to

bullets? Is he off duty tonight?"

"I was never one for riddles, captain," Toller said stonily. "Now, if I may be excused—I'm ready for another of the commissioner's sleeping potions."

Vantara transferred her grip to the hand in which he held his glass—the warmth of her touch like ambersparks playing on his flesh—and briefly bowed her head over it. "Brandy? Bring one for me, please. But not on such a gigantic scale."

"You want me to bring you a drink?" Toller said, aware of sounding slow-witted.

"Yes—if you don't mind." Vantara sat down and made herself comfortable on the bench. "I'll wait here for you."

Feeling slightly bemused, Toller made his way back to the refreshments table and obtained another huge bumper of brandy for himself and a normal-sized one for Vantara, to the accompaniment of much nodding and winking from Kettoran and Wotoorb. While he was on his way back to the bench a ptertha came drifting across the garden, its bubble-like structure glinting but scarcely visible in the uncertain light. It was ascending in the updraught from one of the fires when it was noticed by a group of the revellers. Whooping with glee, they began throwing large twigs and pebbles at it. One of the sticks flailed through the ptertha and it abruptly ceased to exist. A cheer went up from the onlookers.

"Did you see that?" Vantara said as Toller approached her. "Just listen to them! Overjoyed because they managed to kill something."

"The ptertha killed many of us in their day," Toller replied, unmoved. *Including twenty-one unborn babies.*

"So you approve of killing them for sport?"

"No, no," Toller said, sensing a return of Vantara's old antagonism and feeling unable to cope with it. "I don't approve of killing anything, for sport or any other reason. I've seen enough of the butchers' handiwork to last me a lifetime." He sat down, handed Vantara her glass and took a sip from his own.

"Is that what's wrong with you?"

"There is nothing wrong with me."

"I know—that's what is wrong with you. Having something wrong is a natural state with..." Vantara paused. "I'm sorry. As well as being too involuted, that was uncalled for."

"Did you ask for that drink merely to occupy your hands?" Toller took a gulp of his brandy, suppressing a grimace as the excessive quantity of the fiery liquid washed into his throat.

"Why are you so determined to get drunk tonight?"

"In the name of...!" Toller gave an exasperated sigh. "Is this your normal

mode of conversation? If it is I'd be grateful if you would go and sit elsewhere."

"Again, I apologize." Vantara gave him a placatory smile and sipped from her glass. "Why don't *you* lead the conversation, Toller?"

The informal and quite intimate use of his given name surprised Toller, adding to the mystery of her change of attitude towards him. He gazed thoughtfully at Vantara and found that in the half-light her face was impossibly beautiful, a concordance of perfect features which might have existed only in the mind of an inspired artist. It occurred to him that one of his fantasies had suddenly and unexpectedly been translated into reality—*she*, with all of her incredible womanliness, was close beside him. And it was a night for romance. And there was a thrilling softness in her voice. And it was the *duty* of every human to seize what happiness he could whenever he could—no matter how many tiny skeletons he had looked upon—because nature produced millions of beings of every species for the precise reason that some of them were bound to be unfortunate, and if a member of the lucky majority failed to savour life to the full that would be a betrayal of the few who had been sacrificed on his behalf. It was now up to him to make the maximum effort to win the object of all his desires by attracting her to him with his qualities of strength, courage, consideration, fortitude, knowledge, humour, generosity. Perhaps a well-turned compliment would be the best way to begin.

"Vantara, you look so..." He paused, aware of the scrutiny of eyes that no longer existed in twenty-one fist-sized skulls, and listened like a bystander to the words which were issuing from his mouth. "What is happening here? Usually when we meet you behave like an arrogant bitch, and now—all of a sudden—we're on first-name terms and the very air is suffused with warmth and friendliness. What private scheme are you about?"

Vantara laughed and gasped at the same time. "Arrogance! You talk to me about *arrogance*! You who always approach a woman with your male armour clanking and your phallic sword swinging through the air!"

"That is the most twisted and..."

Vantara silenced him by raising one hand, fingers spread out, as a barrier between their eyes and mouths. "Say no more. Toller, I beg you! Neither of us is wearing armour on this night and therefore either of us could easily be wounded. Let us accept things the way they are for this single hour; let us have this drink together; and let us *talk* to each other. Will you agree to that?"

Toller smiled. "How could any reasonable man refuse?"

"Very well! Now, tell me why you are no longer the Toller Maraquine I have always known."

"We've returned to the same subject!"

"We never left it."

"But..." Toller gazed at her in perplexity for a moment, and then the unthinkable happened—he began to speak freely about what was in his mind, to confess his newly discovered weaknesses, to admit his growing belief that he would never be able to live up to the example set for him by his grandfather. At one point, while he was describing the tragic find at the pumping station in Sty-vee, his voice faltered and he experienced a terrible fear that he would be unable to continue. When he had finished he took another drink of his brandy, but found it was no longer to his taste. He set the glass aside and sat staring down at his hands, wondering why he felt as shaky as a man who had just emerged from the most harrowing ordeal of his life.

"Poor Toller," Vantara said gently. "What has life done to you that you should be ashamed of having finer feelings?"

"You mean, of being weak."

"It isn't weakness to feel compassion, or to experience doubt, or to need human contact."

Toller thought he glimpsed a way of repairing some of the cracks in his personal facade. "I could do with *lots* of human contact," he said wryly. "Provided it's the right sort."

"Don't talk like that, Toller—there is no need for it." Vantara set her own glass down and swung one leg over the bench so that she was sitting facing him. "Very well, you may touch me if you want to."

"This is not the way I..." Toller fell silent as Vantara took his hands and guided them on to her breasts. They felt warm and firm, even through the thickly embroidered material of her captain's jupon. He moved closer.

"Pray do not misunderstand," Vantara whispered. "I am not going to share your bed—this degree of human contact is sufficient for the needs of the hour." Her lips parted slightly, inviting him to kiss, and he accepted the invitation as in a dream, scarcely able to believe what was happening. The utter femininity of her swamped his senses, reducing the sounds in the garden to a remote murmur. Vantara and he held the same position for a long but indeterminate time, perhaps ten minutes, perhaps twenty, repeating the kiss over and over again, tirelessly, feeling no need to vary or advance the act of physical communion. And when finally they separated Toller felt replenished, restored to completeness. He smiled at Vantara and she responded, his smile grew wider and suddenly they were laughing. Toller was aware of a sense of relief and relaxation akin to that which followed sexual congress, but it was more pervasive and had a component which hinted at greater permanence.

"I don't know what you did to me," he said. "An apothecary could grow rich

if he could put such a remedy in a jar."

"I didn't do anything."

"But you did! I had become so weary of this old planet that even the circumnavigation flight was beginning to pail on me. Now, all at once, I'm looking forward to it again. We will not actually be together when we take to the skies, but I'll be continuously in sight of your ship, day after day, and at night there'll be no landing in graveyard cities. I'll see to that. We can..."

"Toller!" Vantara looked oddly wary. "I told you not to misinterpret what has taken place between us."

"I am presuming nothing, I assure you," Toller said quickly and easily, knowing he was lying, filled with an exulting new certainty that in this respect he knew Vantara better than she knew herself. "All I am saying is—"

"Forgive me for interrupting," Vantara cut in, "but you *are* making one rather large presumption."

"And that is...?"

"That I will be taking part in the flight."

Toller was jolted. "How can you *not* take part? You're here because you're an air captain, and the round-the-globe flight is the most important part of the entire mission. Sky-commodore Sholdde will not excuse you from it."

Vantara smiled in a way that was almost shame-faced. "I confess that I was anticipating some difficulty in that direction, but it transpires that my beloved grandmother—the Queen—had foreseen this kind of thing happening, and had given the commodore instructions that my requests were not to be denied." She smiled again. "I have a feeling he will shed very few tears when I leave."

"Leave?" Toller understood exactly what Vantara was saying, but his lips framed the question nevertheless. "Where do you intend to go?"

"Home, of course. I despise this tired and gloomy world even more than you do, Toller—so tomorrow I will escape from it by flying to Overland, and I doubt if anything will ever persuade me to come back here." Vantara stood up, symbolically breaking the bonds of Land's gravity, putting the interplanetary chasm between herself and Toller, and when she spoke again her voice contained a note of casual insincerity which he felt like a blow to the face.

"Perhaps we will meet again in Prad—in some future year."

Chapter 6

Divivvidiv floated near the viewing post of an electronic telescope and waited until the Xa had completed all adjustments in the aim-and-focus circuits. When the image on the screen had steadied a comparatively small area of the planet below remained as background, the rest having flowed outwards and vanished. He seemed to be looking vertically downwards through a window, the view from which was crossed by swirls of cloud superimposed on ochre us land patterns.

In the exact centre of that view was a small silvery crescent, resembling a miniature moon which had somehow been frozen in place. Closer examination of the object revealed that it was a brownish sphere illuminated on one side by the sun. It appeared solid enough to be a rocky asteroid, but Divivvidiv knew he was looking at one of the fabric balloons used by the Primitives for travel between their worlds. As it was still ascending towards the weightless zone the ship's gondola was optically invisible, but the Xa could "see" the crew very well by other means.

They are five in number, Beloved Creator, the Xa said. All are female, which is unusual if our limited experience of this race is anything to go by.

Are they aware of the station? Or of you?

There was a short pause. *No, Beloved Creator. The ship, which is one of the group we saw previously, is returning to its home world for reasons which, although they are not clear to me, are obviously connected with the emotional well-being of its commander. There is no thought of observing or investigating our activities.*

The communication from the Xa was correctly and courteously formed, but it contained shadings of mind-colours which seemed inappropriate. Divivvidiv associated them with malice and gloating, and he had little trouble in identifying the most likely source.

Do you predict that we will be observed?

It is almost inevitable, the Xa replied. In fact, it is almost inevitable that there will be a collision. The Primitive ship is experiencing virtually no lateral drift, and—as you know—my body is now expanding at its maximum rate.

Divivvidiv withdrew at once into the high-brain mode so that he could ponder the problem without being overheard by the Xa. The extermination of five

uncultured bipeds would be an utterly trivial occurrence—especially when one considered the events which were soon to overtake this entire region of space—but he would have to take the decision in person. And the deaths would be *close*.

Those facts, coupled with his direct involvement, would forge a mental link between him and the five whose lives were to be brought to a close and, inescapably, he would be caught up in each reflux. The reflux was the brief, incredibly fierce and inexplicable burst of psychic activity which always occurred one or two seconds after the death of an intelligent being. Even when the physical form was instantaneously vaporized, and in theory no further mental interaction with the living could possibly take place, there always came that searing pang—excruciating, chastening, ineffable, *poignant*—that momentary spiritual refulgence which had a profoundly disturbing effect on those who felt it.

The fact that the reflux happened at all was taken by many as proof of the continuance of the personality after death. Some component of the mind-body complex was migrating to a new existence, it was claimed. Others of a more materialistic nature seized on the way in which the strength of the reflux faded with distance as an indication that there were realms of physics which Dussarran science had yet to explore.

Divivvidiv did not adhere to either school of thought, but he had been close to reflux epicentres twice in his life—when his parents had died—and he had no wish to repeat the experience if it could be avoided. Morality was powerfully reinforced by self-interest, leaving him in a dilemma which he would have to resolve quickly if he were to meet his obligations to the all-important Xa.

Part crystal, part computer, part sentient being—the Xa could only grow to the size necessary for its eventual purpose in a region where there was a complete absence of gravity, coupled with an abundance of oxygen. The Dussarrans had been fortunate in finding such an environment within reach of their original home, but the existence of a burgeoning technical society on the twin worlds was an unwelcome complication to their plans, mainly because the Xa's structure—in spite of being so huge—was comparatively fragile. The Primitives were capable of damaging it, with or without malicious intent, and therefore had to be controlled like vermin if they came near.

Divivvidiv considered the problem for a short time, then arrived at a solution which satisfied his fondness for the creative compromise. It would involve his going outside the station's pressurized living quarters so that he could communicate privately and efficiently with Director Zunnunun on the home world, Dussarra. Luckily, the series of relocations had been successfully completed and Dussarra was now part of the local system, visible as a bright

blue mote against the rich stellar background. At a range of only a few million miles it would be easy to establish mind-to-mind contact with Zunnunun with no risk of others intercepting the communication. Divivvidiv reverted to mid-brain mode and, with his eyes fixed on the image of the ship which was labouring up from the alien planet, contacted the Xa.

You have already told me that the Primitives are unaware of our presence, he said. Does that mean they are totally without means of direct communication?

There was a brief hesitation while the Xa carried out the necessary investigation. *Yes, Beloved Creator, the Primitives are completely passive in that respect.*

Divivvidiv felt a surge of mingled revulsion and pity—how could any creature endure going through its entire existence in a condition of mind-blindness? The Primitives' lack of higher sense organs made them easier to deal with in this instance, but the cautious and meticulous side of Divivvidiv's nature prompted him to ask further questions.

Are they a belligerent race?

Yes, Beloved Creator.

Do they carry weapons?

Yes, Beloved Creator.

Extract a description of the weapons for me.

Another pause followed before the Xa spoke. *Their weapons employ solid lead projectiles expelled through tubes by the force of gases compressed in metal containers.* Simultaneously the Xa conveyed to Divivvidiv exact details of the dimensions and energy transference capabilities of the types of weapons the Primitives carried both on their persons and aboard their slow-moving craft.

Divivvidiv felt a growing sense of satisfaction as he became certain there was no obstacle to the plan he had conceived for dealing with the approaching ship and its crew.

You are well pleased, Beloved Creator, the Xa said.

Yes—I shall now return to my dream and await the arrival of the Primitives in comfort.

You are pleased because it will not be necessary for you to terminate the Primitives' lives.

Yes.

In that case, Beloved Creator, why does it not trouble you that soon you will kill me?

You do not understand these things. Divivvidiv felt a sudden impatience with the Xa and its obsession with preserving its own pseudo-life. Each time it returned to the subject his own mind was clouded with dark thoughts of

genocide, and—in spite of the mental disciplines at which he was adept—the echoes of those thoughts disturbed his dreams.

Chapter 7

Toller knew it was only his imagination, but an abnormal quietness seemed to have descended over the Five Palaces area of Ro-Atabri. It was not the sort of quietness which comes when human activity is in abeyance—it was more as if an invisible blanket of soundproof material had been pressed down over everything in his vicinity. When he looked about him he could see evidence that carpenters and stonemasons were busy with their restoration work; bluehorns and wagons were sending up clouds of dust which added scumbles of yellow to the blue of the foreday sky; ground crew and airmen were going about their business of getting the ships ready for the round-the-world flight. Everywhere he looked there was purposeful movement, but the noises of it seemed to be reaching him through the filters of distance, attenuated, lacking in relevance.

The flight was due to begin within the hour, and it was *that* fact—Toller knew—which was numbing his reactions, separating him from the perceived world of the senses. Nine days had passed since Vantara's departure for Overland, and during that time he had sunk into a mood of depression and apathy which had defied all efforts to overcome it.

When he should have been preparing his men and his ship for the circumnavigation he had been lost in thought, living and reliving that strange hour with Vantara at the Migration Day festivity. What had prompted her to behave as she had? Knowing that she was on the eve of quitting the planet altogether, she had raised him to the heights—he could still *feel* her lips against his, her breasts cupped in his hands—only to dash him down again with her sudden callous aloofness. Had she been playing cat-and-mouse on a whim, passing a dull hour with a trivial game?

There were moments in which Toller believed that to be the case, and at those times he plumbed new depths of misery, hating the countess with a passion which could whiten his knuckles and rob him of speech in mid-sentence. At other times he saw clearly that she had exerted herself to break down barriers between them, that she considered him a person of value, and that she would indeed be waiting to receive him when next he set foot on Overland. In those periods of optimism Toller felt even worse, because he and his love—the finest and most desirable woman who had ever lived—were literally worlds apart, and

he was unable to imagine how he could endure the coming years without seeing her.

He would stare up at the great disk of Overland, its convex vastness crossed again and again by streamers of cloud, and wish for some means of instantaneous communication between the sister planets. There had been fanciful talk of some day building huge sunwriters, with tilting mirrors as large as rooftops, which would have been capable of sending messages between Land and Overland. If such a device had existed Toller would have used it, not so much to talk to Vantara—bridging the interworld gulf in that unsatisfactory way might have made his yearnings even more insupportable—but to get in touch with his father.

Cassyll Maraquine had the power and influence to obtain his son a special release from the Land mission. In the past, before he had been touched by the madness of love, Toller had scorned such uses of privilege, but in his present state of mind he would have seized on the favour with unashamed greed. And now, to make matters worse, he was on the point of setting out on a voyage which would take him through the Land of the Long Days, that distant side of the planet where he would not even have the spare consolation of being able to see Overland and in his mind's eye watch over Vantara while she went about her oh-so-special life...

"This will never do, young Maraquine," said Commissioner Kettoran, who had approached Toller unnoticed, making his way among piles of lumber and other supplies. He was wearing the grey robe of his office, but without the official emblems of brakka and enamel. Another man of his rank might have sequestered himself in imposing quarters or only ventured abroad with an entourage, but Kettoran liked to wander unobtrusively and alone through the various sections of the base.

"Instead of mooning around here like a maiden with the colic," he continued, "you should be checking the loading and balance of your ship."

"Lieutenant Correvalte is dealing with all that," Toller replied indifferently. "And probably making a better fist of it than I would."

Kettoran pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes, creating a prism of shade from which he regarded Toller with concern. "Listen, my boy, I know it is none of my business, but this infatuation with the Countess Vantara bodes ill for your career."

"Thank you for the advice." Toller deeply resented the elderly man's words, but he had too much respect for Kettoran to hint at his anger other than by mild sarcasm. "I'll keep your good counsel in mind."

Kettoran gave him a small, sad smile. "Believe me, son, before you know it,

these days which seem so interminable and so full of pain will be nothing more than faint memories. Not only that—they will seem joyous in comparison to what is to come. You are foolish not to make the most of them."

Something in Kettoran's voice affected Toller, drawing his thoughts away from his own circumstances. "This hardly seems credible," he said, claiming the right to intimacy he had earned on the interplanetary crossing. "I never expected to hear Trye Kettoran talk like an old man."

"And I never expected to *be* an old man—that was a fate exclusively reserved for others. Ponder on what I am telling you, son. And don't be a fool." Commissioner Kettoran squeezed Toller's shoulder with a thin hand, then turned and walked away towards the eastern flank of the Great Palace. His gait seemed to lack something of its usual jauntiness.

Toller stared after the commissioner for a moment, frowning. "Sir," he called out, prompted by a sudden unease, "is all well with you?"

Appearing not to hear, Kettoran continued on his way and was soon lost to view. Toller, now troubled by premonitions about the commissioner's well-being, somehow felt obliged to pay more heed to the advice he had just been given. He began making conscientious efforts to follow what was undoubtedly good philosophical counsel—after all, he was young and healthy and all his life lay before him—but each time he ordered himself to feel cheerful the only result was an obstinate upsurge of his misery. Something within him was antagonistic to reason.

He returned to his ship and went on board, supervising the departure arrangements with a gloomy inattentiveness which he knew was bound to communicate itself to the crew. Lieutenant Correvalte responded by becoming even more wooden and correct in his manner. The voyage was expected to take about sixty days, assuming no mishaps were to occur, and the gondola was a very small space for eight men to be cooped in for that length of time. The psychological strain would be considerable even under ideal conditions, and with a commander who was making it clear from the outset that he had no stomach for the mission there could be problems with morale and discipline.

Eventually all the formalities were completed, and the signal for departure came when a trumpet sounded on board the lead ship. The four vessels took off in unison, their jets sending flat billows of sound rolling out across the parks which surrounded the Five Palaces and into the sunlit environs of Ro-Atabri. Toller stood at the rail, hand on the hilt of his sword, leaving the control of the ship to Correvalte, and stared out at the sprawling expanse of the old city. The sun was high in the sky, nearing Overland, and the gondola was completely contained within the shadow of its elliptical gasbag, making the scenery beyond

look exceptionally bright and sharply defined. Traditional Kolcorronian architectural styles made extensive use of orange and yellow bricks laid in complex diamond patterns, with dressings of red sandstone at corners and edges, and from a low altitude the city was a glittering mosaic which shimmered confusingly on the eye. Trees at different stages of their lives provided islands of extra colour which ranged from pale green to copper and brown.

The ships made a partial circuit of the base and took a north-eastern course, seeking the trade winds which would help conserve power crystals during the voyage. Local surveys had indicated that there would be no shortage of mature brakka trees along the route, but broaching their combustion chambers to obtain the green and purple crystals would have been a time-consuming business, and it was intended that the little fleet should complete the circumnavigation using only its on-board supplies.

Toller gave an involuntary sigh as Ro-Atabri began to slide into the distance aft of his ship, its various features flattening into horizontal bands. The voyage, with all its promised tedium and privation, had begun in earnest, and it was time for him to face up to that fact. He became aware of Baten Steenameert, newly promoted to the rank of air-sergeant, eyeing him as he passed on his way to the lower deck. Steenameert's pink face was carefully impassive, but Toller knew his recent moodiness had had its effect on the youngster, who had developed an intense loyalty to him since they had left their home world. Toller halted him by raising a hand.

"There is no need for you to fret," he said. "I have no intention of hurling myself over the side."

Steennameert looked puzzled. "Sir?"

"Don't play the innocent with me, young fellow." Toller was only two years older than the sergeant, but he spoke in the same kind of fatherly tones that Trye Kettoran often used to him, consciously trying to borrow some of the commissioner's steadiness and stoicism. "I've become the butt of quite a few jests around the base, haven't I? The word has gone about that I'm so besotted with a certain lady that I scarcely know night from day."

The bloom on Steenameert's smooth cheeks deepened and he lowered his voice so as not to be overheard by Correvalte who was nearby at the airship's controls. "Sir, if anybody dared speak ill of you in my presence I would..."

"You will not be required to do battle on my behalf," Toller said firmly, addressing his wayward inner self as much as anybody else, then saw that Steenameert's attention had been drawn elsewhere.

The sergeant spoke quickly, before Toller could frame a question. "Sir, I think we are receiving a message."

Toller looked aft in the direction of Ro-Atabri and saw that a point of intense brilliance was winking amid the complex layered bands of the city. He immediately began deciphering the sunwriter code and felt a peculiar thrill, an icy mingling of excitement and apprehension, as he realized that the beamed message concerned him.

By the time Toller got back to base the balloon of the skyship was fully inflated and the craft was straining at its anchor link, ready to depart for Overland. It was swaying a little within the three timber walls of the towering enclosure, like a vast sentient creature which was becoming impatient with its enforced inactivity. A further indication of the urgency of the situation was that Sky-commodore Sholdde was waiting for Toller by the enclosure instead of in his office.

He nodded ungraciously, obviously in a foul temper, as Toller—flanked by Correvalte and Steenameert—approached him at a quick march and saluted. He ran his fingers through his cropped iron-grey hair and scowled at Toller.

"Captain Maraquine," he said, "this is a cursed inconvenience. I've already been deprived of one airship captain—and now I have to find another."

"Lieutenant Correvalte is perfectly capable of taking my place on the round-the-world flight, sir," Toller replied. "I have no hesitation in recommending him for an immediate field promotion."

"Is that so?" Sholdde turned a hard-eyed, critical gaze on Correvalte and the look of gratification which had appeared on the lieutenant's face quickly faded.

"Sir," Toller said, "is Commissioner Kettoran *very* ill?"

"He looks to me like he's already dead," Sholdde said indifferently. "Why did he particularly ask for you to fly him home?"

"I don't know, sir."

"I can't understand it either. It seems a strange choice to me. You haven't exactly distinguished yourself on this mission, Maraquine. I kept waiting for you to trip over that antiquated piece of iron you insist on wearing."

Toller unconsciously touched the haft of his sword and he felt his face grow warm. The commodore was subjecting him to unnecessary ignominy by giving him a dressing down in the presence of lesser ranks. The most Toller could do to register a protest was to hint that he viewed Sholdde's remarks as a waste of valuable time.

"Sir, if the commissioner looks as poorly as you say..."

"All right, all right, begone with you." Sholdde glanced briefly at Steenameert. "Has this man become a Maraquine family retainer, part of your personal entourage?"

"Sir, Corporal Steenameert is a first-class skyman and his services would be

invaluable to me on—"

"Take him!" Sholdde turned and strode away without any kind of salute, an action which could only be interpreted as another direct insult.

So that's it, Toller thought, alerted by the commodore's reference to the "Maraquine family". My grandfather was the most famed warrior in Kolcorronian history; my father is one of the most brilliant and most powerful men alive—and even the likes of Sholdde resent me for it. Is that because they believe I secretly make use of family influence? Or is it because, by overtly not making use of it, I proclaim a special kind of egotism? Or can it be that I shame or annoy them by refusing to grasp opportunities for which they would give...?

A prolonged blast on the skyship's burner, echoing in the huge cavity of the balloon, interrupted Toller's reverie. He touched Correvalte's shoulder in farewell, ran with Steenameert to the gondola and climbed over the side. The ground crew sergeant who was at the burner controls, keeping the ship in readiness, saluted and nodded towards the passenger compartment.

Toller went to the chest-high cane partition and looked over it. Commissioner Kettoran was lying on a pallet and, in spite of the heat, was covered with a quilt. His long face was extremely pale, with lines of age and weariness graven into it, but his eyes were alert. He winked when he saw Toller and twitched a thin hand in an attempted greeting.

"Are you travelling alone, sir?" Toller said with concern. "No physician?"

A scornful expression briefly animated Kettoran's features. "Those blood-letters will never get their hands on me."

"But if you are ill..."

"The doctor who could cure my complaint has yet to be born," Kettoran said, almost with satisfaction. "I suffer from nothing less than a dearth of time. Speaking of which, young Maraquine, I was under the impression you also were anxious to make a speedy return to Overland."

Toller mumbled an apology and turned to the sergeant, who immediately moved away from the burner controls and clambered over the gondola's side. Pausing for a few seconds on the outside ledge, he explained to Steenameert where all necessary provisions, including skysuits, had been stored. As soon as he had dropped out of sight Toller fed a plentiful charge of hot gas into the pliable dome of the balloon above him and pulled the anchor link.

The skyship surged upwards, its acceleration enhanced by the lift created as the curved upper surface of the balloon moved into the current of air flowing over the enclosure. Well aware that the extra buoyancy would be cancelled as soon as the balloon fully entered the westerly airstream and began to move with it, Toller kept the burner going. The skyship—in spite of being so much below

its maximum operating weight—performed a queasy slow-motion shimmy as it adapted to the changing aerial environment, causing Steenameert to clutch theatrically at his stomach. From Commissioner Kettoran, hidden behind his wicker partition, came a moan of complaint.

For the second time in less than an hour the sprawling panorama of Ro-Atabri began to recede from Toller, but now it was retreating downwards. *I can scarcely believe that all this is happening to me*, he thought dreamily, almost stupefied by the flux of circumstance. Only minutes earlier he had been racked by fears that he would never see Vantara Dervonai again—now he was on his way to her, keeping an appointment which had been specially arranged for him by the forces of destiny.

Soon I will be able to see Vantara again, he told himself. *For once, things are working out in my favour.*

Toller had not eaten anything for a day, and had taken only a few sips of water, barely enough to replace the bodily moisture lost by exhaling into the arid air of the middle passage. Toilet facilities on a skyship were necessarily primitive and unpleasant to use at the best of times, but in weightless conditions the disadvantages—including the sheer indignity—were so great that most people chose to suspend their natural functions as completely as possible for a day on either side of turnover. The system worked reasonably well for a healthy adult, but Commissioner Kettoran had begun the voyage in a severely weakened state, and now—much to Toller's concern—appeared to be using up the last dregs of his strength merely to stay alive.

"You can take those slops away from me," Kettoran said in a grouchy whisper. "I refuse to be suckled like a babe at my time of life—especially from a revolting dug like that."

Toller unhappily fingered the conical bag of luke-warm soup he had been proffering. "This will do you good."

"You sound just like my mother."

"Is that a reason for not taking sustenance?"

"Don't try to be clever, young Maraquine." Kettoran's breath issued in white clouds from a small opening in the mound of quilts in which he had ensconced himself.

"I was only trying to—"

"My mother could make much better food than any of the cooks we ever employed," Kettoran mused, paying no heed to Toller. "We had a house on the west side of Greenmount—not far from where your grandfather lived, incidentally—and I can still remember riding up the hill, going into our precinct

and knowing immediately, just by the aromas, whether or not my mother had chosen to prepare the evening meal. I went back there a few days after we landed in Ro-Atabri, but the entire district had been burnt out a long time ago ... during the riots ... gutted ... hardly a building left intact. It was a mistake for me to go there—I should have preserved my memories."

At the mention of his namesake Toller's interest picked up. "Did you ever see my grandfather in those days?"

"Occasionally. It would have been hard *not* to see him—a fine figure of a man, he was—but I more often saw his brother, Lain ... going back and forth between his house and the Lord Philosopher's official residence in Greenmount Peel."

"What did my grand—?" Toller broke off, alarms clamouring silently in his mind, as there was a subtle but abrupt change in his environment. He rose to his feet, holding a transverse line to keep himself from drifting clear of the deck, and looked all about him. Steenameert, muffled in his skysuit, was strapped into his seat at the control station. He was firing the main jet in the steady rhythm needed to maintain the ship's ascent, and he appeared completely unperturbed. Everything seemed absolutely as normal in the square microcosm of the gondola, and beyond its rim the familiar patterns of stars and luminous whirls shone steadily in the dark blue sky.

"Sir?" The swaddled, anonymous bulk of Steenameert moved slightly. "Is there something wrong?"

Toller had to survey his surroundings again before he was able to identify the source of his unease. "The light! There was a change in the light! Didn't you notice?"

"I must have had my eyes closed. But I still don't..."

"There was a drop in brightness—I'm sure of it—and yet we have more than an hour till nightfall." Baffled and disturbed, wishing he could have a direct view of the sun, Toller drew himself closer to the control station and looked up through the mouth of the balloon. The varnished linen of the envelope was dyed dark brown so that it would absorb heat from the sun, but it was to some extent translucent and he could see a geometrical design of panel seams and load tapes radiating from the crown, emphasizing the vastness of the flimsy dome. It was a sight he had seen many times, and on this occasion it looked exactly as it had always done. Steenameert also looked into the balloon, then lowered his gaze without comment.

"I tell you something happened," Toller said, trying to keep any hint of uncertainty out of his voice. "Something happened. There was a change in the light ... a shadow ... *something*."

"According to the height gauge we are somewhere close to the datum plane, sir," Steenameert said, obviously striving to be helpful. "Perhaps we have come up directly beneath the permanent stations and have touched their shadows."

"That is virtually impossible—there is always a certain amount of drift." Toller frowned for a moment, coming to a decision. "Rotate the ship."

"I ... I don't think I'm ready to handle an inversion."

"I don't want it turned over yet. Just make a quarter-rotation so that we can see what's above us." Realizing he was still holding the food bag he tossed it towards the passenger compartment on a descending curve. It fouled a safety line, swung round it and floated out over the gondola's side, slowly tumbling as it went.

Toller pulled himself to the rail, straining to see upwards, and waited impatiently while Steenameert fired one of the tiny lateral jets on the opposite side of the gondola. At first the jet appeared to be having no effect, except that the slim acceleration struts on each side of Toller emitted faint creaks; then, after what seemed an interminable wait, the whole universe began a ponderous downwards slide. The whorled disk of Land moved out of sight beneath Toller's feet, and above him—stealthily uncovered by the ship's balloon—there came into view a spectacle unlike anything he had ever seen.

Half the sky was occupied by a vast circular sheet of white fire.

The sun was slipping out of sight behind the eastern edge, and at that point the brilliance was intolerable, a locus of blinding radiance which sprayed billions of prismatic needles across the rest of the circle.

There was a slight falling off in the intensity of light across the disk, but even at the side farthest from the sun it was enough to sting the eyes. To Toller the effect was akin to looking upwards from the depths of a sunlit frozen lake. He had expected to see Overland filling a large area of the heavens, but the planet was hidden behind the beautiful, inexplicable, *impossible* sheet of diamond-white light, through which rainbow colours raced and danced in clashing zigzag lines.

As he stood at the rail, transfixed, he became aware that the incredible spectacle was drifting down the sky at undiminished speed. He turned and saw that Steenameert was staring out past him, jaw sagging, with eyes which had become reflective white disks—miniature versions of the phenomenon which was mesmerizing him.

"A *quarter* turn I told you," Toller bellowed. "Check the rotation."

"Sorry, sir." Steenameert stirred into action and the lateral jet mounted low down on Toller's side of the gondola began to spew miglign gas. Rings of condensation rolled away from it through the gelid air. The sound of the jet was

puny, quickly absorbed by the surrounding void, but it gradually achieved the intended effect and the skyship came to rest with its vertical axis parallel to the sea of white fire.

"What's going on out there?" The querulous voice of Trye Kettoran issuing from the passenger compartment helped bring Toller out of his own tranced condition.

"Have a look over the side," he called out for the commissioner's benefit, then turned to Steenameert. "What do you think yonder thing is? Ice?"

Steennameert nodded slowly. "Ice is the only explanation I can imagine, but..."

"But where did the water come from? There is the usual supply of drinking water in the defence stations, but that amounts to no more than a few barrels..." Toller paused as a new thought struck him. "Where are the stations, anyway? We must try to locate them. Are they embedded in the...?" His voice failed altogether as related questions geysered through his mind. How thick was the ice? How far away from the ship was it? How wide was the enormous circular sheet?

How wide is the circle?

The last question suddenly reverberated in his consciousness, excluding all others. Until that instant Toller had been overawed by the brilliant spectacle confronting him, but it had inspired no sense of danger. There had been a feeling of wonder—but no threat. Now, however, certain facts of aerial physics were beginning to assume importance. A disturbing importance. A potentially *lethal* importance...

He knew that the atmosphere which enveloped the sister planets was shaped like an hourglass, the waist of which formed a narrow bridge of air through which skyships had to pass. Old experiments had established that ships had to keep near the centre of the bridge—otherwise the air became so attenuated that the crews were bound to asphyxiate. Largely because of the difficulty of taking measurements in the region, there was some uncertainty about the thickness of that core of breathable air, but the best estimates were that it was no more than a hundred miles in diameter.

The enigmatic sea of sun-blazing ice was rendered featureless by its brilliance, and in the absence of spatial referents it could have been hovering "beside" the skyship at a distance of ten miles, or twenty, or forty, or ... Toller could think of no way to ascertain its distance, but he could see that it spanned almost one third of the visual hemisphere, and that gave him enough information to perform an elementary calculation.

Lips moving silently, he stared at the radiant disk while he dealt with the

relevant figures, and a coldness which had nothing to do with the harsh environment entered his system as he reached a conclusion. If the disk proved to be as much as sixty miles away—which it could quite easily be—then, by the immutable laws of mathematics, it was sufficiently wide to block the air bridge between Land and Overland...

"Sir?" Steenameert's voice seemed to come from another universe. "How far would you say we are from the ice?"

"That is an excellent question," Toller said grimly, taking the ship's binoculars from the control station locker. He aimed them at the disk, striving to pick out detail, but could see only a shimmering field of brightness. The sun was now fully occulted, spreading its light more evenly over the vast circle, making an estimate of its distance more difficult than before. Toller turned away from the rail, knuckling round green after-images from his eyes, and examined the height gauge. Its pointer was perhaps a hair's breadth below the zero-gravity mark.

"You can't rely much on those devices, sir," Steenameert commented, unable to resist showing off his knowledge. "They are calibrated in a workshop, with no allowance for the effect of low temperatures on the springs, and—"

"Spare me," Toller cut in. "This is a serious matter—I need to know the size of that ... *thing* out there."

"Fly towards it and take note of how it expands."

Toller shook his head. "I have a better idea. I have no intention of turning back unless all other options are denied me—therefore we will fly towards the edge of the circle. Its exact diameter in miles is not all that significant. The truly important thing is to ascertain whether or not we can fly our ship around the obstacle.

"Do you wish to remain at the controls?"

"I would value the experience, sir," Steenameert replied. "What burner rhythm do you require?"

Toller hesitated, frowning, frustrated by the fact that no practicable air speed indicator had ever been developed for use on skyships. An experienced pilot could get some idea of his speed from the slackening of the rip line as the crown of the balloon was depressed by air resistance, but the abundance of variables made accuracy impossible. It would not have been beyond Kolcorronian ingenuity to devise a reliable instrument, but the motivation had never been present. A skyship's job was to crawl up and down between the planetary surface and the weightless zone—a journey which always took roughly five days on each leg—and a difference of a few miles an hour was neither here nor there.

"Give it two and six," Toller said. "We shall pretend to ourselves that we are

making twenty miles in the hour and base all our estimates accordingly."

"But what is the *nature* of the barrier?" Commissioner Kettoran said from close behind Toller. He was in an upright position, holding the edge of the cane partition with one hand and keeping a quilt around him with the other.

Toller's first impulse was to request him to lie down again to achieve the complete rest which had been prescribed by the base physician, then it occurred to him that in the absence of weight it made no difference which attitude was adopted by a person with a heart condition. Allowing his thoughts to be diverted into irrelevancies, he visualized a new use for the pathetic little group of defence stations in the weightless zone. Properly heated and supplied with good air, they could best serve as rest centres for those with certain kinds of ailment. Even a cripple would be...

"I'm addressing you, young Maraquine," Kettoran said peevishly. "What is your opinion of that curious object?"

"I think it might be made of ice."

"But where would such a vast quantity of water come from?"

Toller shrugged. "We have had rocks and even pieces of metal descend on us from the stars—perhaps the void also contains water."

"A likely story," Kettoran grumbled. He gave a theatrical shrug and his long, solemn face—now purple with the cold—slowly sank from view as he returned to his cocoon of downy quilts.

"It's an omen," he added, his voice muffled and indistinct from behind the partition. "I know an omen when I see one."

Toller nodded, smiling thinly in scepticism, and returned to his vigil at the gondola's rail. By calling out the firing times for the various lateral jets he helped Steenameert guide the ship into a course which closed with the fire-sheet at an unknown angle, aiming it for the westernmost edge. The main jet was roaring in a steady two-six rhythm and Toller knew that the ship's speed could easily be as much as his putative twenty miles an hour—but the aspect of the sheet did not alter noticeably with the passing of the minutes.

"Our friend, the omen, appears to be a veritable giant," he said to Steenameert. "We may have some trouble in getting around him."

Wishing he had the simple navigational instruments available on the humblest airship, Toller kept his gaze on the eastern rim of the great circle, willing it to descend and thus prove that the ship was making significant progress. He was just beginning to convince himself that he could indeed see a change in the vital angle, when the glowing sheet was swept by waves of prismatic colour. They moved at breathtaking orbital speed, crossing the entire disk in mere seconds and stilling Toller's heart with their message that cosmic

events were taking place, reminding him of how unimportant the affairs of mankind were when measured against the grandeur of the universe. The sun, already hidden from his view by the icy screen, was being further occulted by Overland. As soon as the bands of colour—engendered by the refraction of the sun's light in Overland's atmosphere—had fled into infinity the disk's overall luminosity began to decrease. Night was falling in the weightless zone.

Here, so close to the datum plane, the terms "night" and "littlenight" no longer had any relevance. Each diurnal cycle was punctuated by two periods of darkness approximately equal in length, and Toller knew it would be some four hours before the sun reappeared. The hiatus could hardly have come at a more inconvenient time.

"Sir?" Steenameert, a sentient pyramid of swaddling in the fading light, had no need to voice the full question.

"Keep going, but reduce thrust to one and six," Toller ordered. "We can shut down the jet altogether if we find we can't keep a check on our course. And be sure to keep the balloon well inflated."

Grateful for Steenameert's competence, Toller remained at the rail and studied the disk. Sunlight was still being reflected from Land—which was now directly behind him—so the icy wall remained visible, and with the change in illumination he began to see hints of an internal structure. There was a tracery of the palest violet, arranged like rivers which divided and kept on dividing until they faded from the sight, lost in distant shimmers.

They're like veins, Toller thought. *Veins in a giant eye...*

As Land was gradually enveloped in Overland's shadow the disk steadily darkened to near-blackness, but its edge was still clearly defined against the cosmic background. The rest of the sky was now ablaze with its customary extravagance of galaxies—glowing whirlpools ranging from circles to slim ellipses—plus formless ribbons of light, myriads of stars, comets and darting meteors. Against that luminous richness the disk was more mysterious than ever—a featureless well of night which had no right to exist in a rational universe.

By occasionally ordering a slight pendulum movement of the ship Toller was able to look ahead and satisfy himself that it was on course for the disk's western edge. As the hours of darkness dragged by the air became progressively thinner and less satisfying to the lungs, evidence that the skyship was far from the centre of the invisible bridge that linked the two worlds. Although Commissioner Kettoran did not voice any complaint, his breathing became clearly audible. He had mixed some firesalt with water in a vellum bag and could be heard sniffing from it at frequent intervals.

When at last daylight returned, heralded by a brightening of the disk's western

rim, Toller found he could see the rim without having to tilt the ship. Perspective returned; geometry again became a useful tool.

"We're only a mile or so from the edge," he announced for the benefit of Steenameert and Kettoran. "In a few minutes we should be able to work around it and head back into the good air."

"It's about time!" Kettoran scowled face appeared above the passenger compartment partition. "How far to the side have we travelled?"

"Perpendicular to the ideal course, we must have done in the region of thirty miles—" Toller glanced at Steenameert and received a nod of confirmation—"which means we are dealing with a lake, a *sea*, of ice some sixty miles across. I find it hard to credit what I'm saying, even though I am looking straight at the thing. Nobody in Prad is going to believe what we say."

"We may have corroboration."

"By telescope?"

"By your lady friend—Countess Vantara." Kettoran dabbed a drop of moisture from the end of his nose. "Her ship departed not so many days before ours."

"You're right, of course." Toller was dully surprised to realize he had forgotten about Vantara for several hours. "The ice ... the barrier ... whatever it is ... may have been in place when she made the crossing. It is something we will have to confer over in detail."

Having derived an unexpected grain of comfort from the discussion—a readymade reason to seek out Vantara, wherever she might be—Toller gave his attention to the task of steering his ship around the edge of the disk. The manoeuvre was not a difficult one in theory. All he had to do was pass the western rim by a short distance, carry out a simple inversion and begin flying back into the thicker air at the core of the atmospheric bridge.

Leaving Steenameert at the controls, he remained by the rail in order to obtain the most advantageous viewpoint and started giving detailed handling instructions. The ship was moving very slowly as it drew level with the rim, probably at no more than walking pace, but after some minutes had passed it came to Toller that it was taking longer than he had expected to reach the limit of the ice wall. Suddenly suspicious, he trained his binoculars on the rim. The sun was close to his aiming point, hurling billions of needles of radiance into his eyes and making the viewing difficult, but he managed to get a clear look at the icy boundary. It was now less than a furlong away in reality, and the image in his glasses brought it much closer.

Toller grunted in surprise as he discovered that the rim of the ice sheet was *alive*.

In place of what he had expected—the inertness of frozen water—there was a kind of crystalline seething. Glassy prisms and spikes and branches, each as tall as a man, were sprouting outwards on the rim with unnatural rapidity. They were extending the boundary of the sheet with the speed of billowing smoke—each thrusting into the gelid air and glistening in the sunlight for a moment before being overtaken and assimilated by others in the racing, sparkling vitreous foment.

Toller stared at the phenomenon, tranced, his mind awash with the unexpected and incredible beauty of it, and it seemed a long time before the first coherent thought came to him: *The rim of the barrier is moving outwards at almost the same speed as the ship!*

"Increase speed," he shouted to Steenameert, his voice strained by the bitter coldness and the inimical nature of the thinning air. "Otherwise you'll never see home again!"

Commissioner Kettoran, who had seemed almost a well man during the passage through the weightless zone, had been struck by a fresh seizure when the ship was only a few thousand feet above the surface of Overland. In one second he had been standing with Toller at the gondola's rail and pointing out familiar features in the landscape below; in the next he was lying on his back, unable to move, eyes alert and afraid, beaconing an intelligence trapped inside a machine which no longer responded to its master's bidding. Toller had carried him to his nest of quilts, wiped the frothy saliva from the corners of his mouth, and had gone immediately for the sunwriter in its leather case.

The lateral drift had been greater than usual, bringing the ship down some twelve miles to the east of the city of Prad, but the sunwriter message had been picked up in good time. A sizeable group of coaches and mounted men—plus a sleek airboat in grey-and-blue royal livery—had been waiting in the touchdown area. Within five minutes of the landing the commissioner had been transferred to the airboat and sent on his way to an emergency audition with Queen Daseene, who was waiting in the overheated confines of her palace.

There had been no opportunity for Toller to pass on any words of reassurance or farewell to Kettoran, a man he had come to regard as a good friend in spite of the disparity in age and status. As he watched the airboat dwindle into the yellow western sky he became aware of a sense of guilt and it took him some time to identify its source. He was, of course, deeply concerned about the commissioner's health, but at the same time—and there was no getting around the fact—one part of him was thankful that the older man's misfortune had come along, like the answer to a prayer, exactly when he had needed it. No other

circumstance that he could readily think of could have placed him back on Overland and within reach of Vantara in such a short time.

What sort of monster am I? he thought, shocked by his own selfishness. *I must be the worst...*

Toller's bout of introspection was interrupted by the sight of his father and Bartan Drumme descending from a coach which had just arrived at the landing site. Both men were attired in grey trews and three-quarter-length tabards gored with blue silk, a formal style of dress which suggested they had come straight from an important meeting in the city. Toller strode eagerly to meet his father, embraced him and then shook hands with Bartan Drumme.

"This is truly an unexpected pleasure," Cassyll Maraquine said, a smile rejuvenating his pale triangular face, "it is a great shame about the commissioner, of course, but we must assume that the royal physicians—a plentiful breed in these times—will quickly put him to rights. How have you been, son?"

"I am well." Toller looked at his father for a moment in that unique gratification which springs from an harmonious relationship with a parent, and then—as extraneous matters crowded into his mind—he shifted his gaze to include Bartan Drumme in what had to follow. The latter was the only surviving member of a fabled voyage to Farland, the local system's outermost planet, and was acknowledged as Kolcorron's leading expert on astronomical matters.

"Father, Bartan," Toller said, "have you been observing the skies within the last ten or twenty days? Have you noticed anything unusual?"

The older men exchanged cautiously surprised glances. "Are you speaking of the blue planet?" Bartan said.

Toller frowned. "Blue planet? No, I'm talking about a barrier ... a wall ... a lake of ice ... call it what you will ... which has appeared at the midpoint. It is at least sixty miles across and growing wider by the hour. Has it not been observed from the ground?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary has been observed, but I'm not even sure that the Glo telescope has been in use since—" Bartan broke off and gave Toller a quizzical stare. "Toller ... Toller, you can't *have* an accretion of ice at the midpoint—there simply isn't the water. The air is too dry."

"Ice! Or crystal of some kind. I *saw* it!" The fact that he was being disbelieved did not surprise or unduly disturb Toller, but it caused an uneasy stirring in the lower levels of his consciousness. There was something wrong with the *pattern* of the conversation. It was not going as it should have gone, but some factor—perhaps a deep-seated unwillingness to face reality—was for the moment paralyzing vital mental processes.

Bartan gave him a patient smile. "Perhaps there has been a major failure in one of the permanent stations, perhaps an explosion which has scattered power crystals over a wide area. They might be drifting and combining and forming large clouds of condensation, and we both know that condensation can give the appearance of being very substantial ... like banks of snow or—"

"The Countess Vantara," Toller interrupted with a numb smile, keeping his voice steady to hide the fear that had been unleashed in him as certain doors swung open. "She made the crossing only nine days ago—had she nothing unusual to report?"

"I don't know what you mean, son," Cassyll Maraquine said, speaking the words which Toller had already prepared for him on a parchment of the mind. "Yours is the first and only ship to have returned from Land. Countess Vantara has not been seen since the expedition departed."

PART II
Strategies of Despair

Chapter 8

Divivvidiv had had a very good dream, one in which he had savoured every diamond-sharp second of a day in his childhood. The day chosen had been the eighty-first of the Clear Sky Cycle. His high-brain had taken his memories of the actual day as the basis of the dream, then had discarded those which were less than perfect and replaced them with invented sequences. The content of the fabricated sections had been excellent, as had been the merging of their boundaries with the rest of the dreamscape, and Divivvidiv had awakened with intense feelings of happiness and fulfilment. For once there had been no undertones, no stains of guilt seeping in from the present, and he knew he would return to the dream—perhaps with minor variations—many times in the years to come.

He lay for a moment in the weak artificial gravity field of his bed, enjoying a mental afterglow, then became aware that the Xa was waiting to communicate with him. *What is it?* he said, raising himself to an upright position.

Nothing of great urgency, Beloved Creator—that is why I waited until you had achieved a natural return to consciousness, the Xa replied at once, using a mind-colour similar to yellow for reassurance.

That was very considerate of you. Divivvidiv massaged the muscles of his arms in preparation for a return to activity. *I sense you have good news for me. What is it?*

The Primitives' ship is returning, with two males on board, and this time they will not pass beyond my perimeter.

Divivvidiv was immediately on the alert. *You are quite positive about this?*

Yes, Beloved Creator. One of the males is emotionally linked to one of the females. He believes that she and her companions have damaged their ship in a collision with my body during the hours of darkness, and that they have taken refuge in one of the habitats we found in the datum plane. It is his intention to find and retrieve the female.

How interesting! Divivvidiv said. *These beings must have an unusually strong inclination towards single-partner reproduction. First we learn of their mind-blindness, and now this —how many handicaps can a race endure and yet remain viable?*

Stated in those terms, Beloved Creator, the question is meaningless.

I expect so. Divivvidiv turned his attention to matters of a more practical nature. Tell me, are the male Primitives becoming aware that you belong to a class of object totally outside their previous experience?

Object? Object?

Being. I should have referred to you as a being, of course. How do they perceive you?

As a natural phenomenon, the Xa said. An accretion of ice or some other crystalline form of matter.

That is good—it reduces their potential for causing damage and at the same time makes them easier for us to capture. Divivvidiv shifted his thinking to the high-brain mode to exclude the Xa from his deliberations. Obtaining specimens of the Primitives for Director Zunnunun's personal study was in a way a frivolity, something quite extraneous to the great project, and if the Xa were to be damaged in the course of it the penalties would be dire. He, Divivvidiv, would almost certainly be subjected to personality modification as a punishment for allowing himself to be diverted from his duties. After all, the project was the single most important undertaking in the history of his people. The future of the entire race...

Beloved Creator! The Xa's call was an unexpected intrusion. I have a question for you.

What is it? Divivvidiv demanded, hoping the Xa was not about to make more of the increasingly tiresome enquiries about its own future. The Xa would not have been able to build itself had it not been provided with a powerful artificial intelligence, but its designers—in the remote high floors of the Palace of Numbers—had not anticipated the development of self-awareness.

Tell me, Beloved Creator, the Xa said, what is a Rope?

The shock of the question was so sudden, so forceful, that Divivvidiv experienced a momentary giddiness and a dangerous weakening of mental control. For one perilous instant he almost gave the Xa access to all high-brain networks, and the effort of closing off hundreds of neural highways left him feeling chilled and sick.

Practicing eye-of-the-hurricane rituals to induce a state of calmness, he said, *Who told you about Ropes?*

There was a slight delay before the Xa responded. *Not you, Beloved Creator. Not anybody. The word has lately begun to exist all around me. It must be continually in the minds of millions of intelligent beings, but the concepts behind it are too elusive to be captured. All I know is that the word is associated with fear ... a terrible fear of ceasing to exist...*

It is nothing for you to be concerned about, Divivvidiv said, using every mental reinforcement technique he knew to give strength to the lie. *The word is little more than a sound. Its origins lie in certain aberrations of the human mind—logical lesions, you might say—metaphysics, religion, superstition...*

But why has it begun to impinge on my consciousness?

For no particular reason. A tide, a current, an eddy. You trouble yourself with things that do not concern you. I command you to be at peace and concentrate on your given task.

Yes, Beloved Creator.

Grateful for the Xa's compliant attitude, Divivvidiv severed the telepathic link and floated to the airlock which was closest to his living quarters. As he pulled on the suit which would enable him to survive the outer cold he pondered, with some disquiet, on the Xa's acquisition of the term "Rope". Did it simply mean that the Xa's direct communication capability had increased? Or was there a new degree of alarm on the home world, a heightening of fear which had driven telepathic ripples through the surrounding regions of space?

Divivvidiv entered the airlock and completed the inner seal. As soon as he opened the outer door the bitter coldness stung his face and eyes, and breathing became so painful that he almost gasped aloud. The metallic plazas of the station stretched away before him, flat and bare in some places, replete with engineered complexities in others. The antennae of the teleportation unit projected into the sunlit air—slim and delicately curved sculptures—and occasional flickers of green fire at their tips showed that a consignment of the Xa's nutrients was currently being received. Beyond the angular boundaries of the station the Xa's body, now grown huge, formed a sea of white crystalline brilliance stretching into remoteness on all sides.

Divivvidiv's eyes were not able to focus on infinity without artificial aid, and so the universe beyond the white horizon was simplified into a vision of the sun and one of the local planets on a background washed and speckled with blurs of luminance. He was, nevertheless, able to gaze directly at the mote of blue light which was his home world of Dussarra, and within seconds was in contact with Director Zunnunun.

What is it? Zunnunun said. *Why do you interrupt my work?*

I have good news, Divivvidiv replied. *It was an unfortunate and freakish circumstance that the sampling of Primitives I supplied to you consisted entirely of females. Also, we were unlucky in that the second ship—containing Primitive males—became aware of the Xa in time to guide their ship successfully past its perimeter.*

You said you had good news. Zunnunun tinted the words with the mind-

colours of growing irritability.

Yes! The same Primitive ship is now ascending towards the datum plane, and those on board believe—or hope—that the lost females have taken refuge within the habitats I found here. This time, Director, there is no doubt at all that I will be able to send them to you, because—as a simple consequence of previous physical contact—the sole purpose of the males in making the new ascent is to retrieve the females. They will come directly to me.

This is quite incredible, Zunnunun said. Are you sure of your facts?

Absolutely.

You bring me good news indeed—I had no idea that such powerful bonding could exist between individuals of any species. I look forward to receiving the Primitive males and to carrying out appropriate experiments.

It is my pleasure to serve you, Divivvidiv said, pleased that he had regained the Director's approval. While we are in private discourse, may I raise another matter?

Proceed.

The Xa's consciousness continues to reach new levels, and it has just made an initial enquiry about the Ropes.

Does it have any understanding? Any insight?

No. Divivvidiv paused, qualifying the statement. But I sensed undertones... Has there been a new development?

I have to say—yes. There was a brief silence, and when Director Zunnunun spoke again his words were clouded with strange colours indicative of doubt and apprehension. As you know, a powerful faction in society has forced those in the Palace of Numbers to carry out a new assessment of the local situation, and the latest data have strengthened the opinion that the Ropes really do exist. It also seems highly probable that as many as twelve Ropes once intersected near our galaxy—compared with the original estimate of seven.

And if that is truly the case, not only will our own galaxy cease to exist—as many as a hundred other galaxies in the cosmic region will be annihilated.

I see. The surrounding cold seemed to invade Divivvidiv's clothing with relentless force as he broke the mental contact. This is strange, he thought. Why should a force which promises to annihilate a million other galaxies be feared more than a force which threatens to destroy only this one—when my personal fate will be exactly the same in either case? And why should I trouble myself over my people's plan to obliterate a pair of undeveloped and sparsely populated minor worlds when the cosmos itself is bent on such monstrous feats of destruction?

Chapter 9

During the last fifty miles of the ascent Toller and Steenameert had turned the ship on its side at frequent intervals. The purpose had been to get an early view of the small line of wooden stations and spaceships so that they could steer directly towards them by countering lateral drift. Even in good viewing conditions the artifacts would have been hard to find, but with a sea of crystal spanning the sky and diffusing the sunlight into a uniform white brilliance Toller had expected his task to be doubly difficult. He had therefore been surprised when, at a range of some thirty miles, he had begun discerning a mote of solid darkness at the centre of the translucent disk. As the ship crept closer to it, binoculars revealed that the object—although irregular in its general outline—was bounded by straight lines and square corners. Its silhouette resembled the plan of a very large building to which numerous extensions had been added in quite a haphazard manner.

For a time Toller was able to reject the implication—there simply was no room for it in his scheme of reality—but eventually the painful mental *shift* took place...

"Whatever that thing is," he said to Steenameert, "I cannot visualize it growing there by itself like a crystal of ice. It has to be a midpoint station of some kind, but..."

"Not built by the likes of us," Steenameert supplied.

"You speak truly. The size... We could be looking at a palace in the sky."

"Or a fortress." Steenameert's voice was low, almost furtive, in spite of the fact that he and Toller were alone on the ship in the vast reaches of the weightless zone. "Could it be that the Farlanders have at last decided on conquest?"

"They are going about it in an odd way, if they have," Toller replied, frowning, instinctively rejecting the idea of a military invasion from the third planet. Bartan Drumme was one of the two men still alive who had been on the single epic voyage to Farland many years ago, and Toller had often heard him declare that its inhabitants were insular in their outlook, totally lacking in the colonial urge. Besides, the enigmatic sea of living crystal and the gigantic midpoint station were obviously connected in some respect, and what military

commander—no matter how alien his mind—would set about an invasion in such a pointless manner?

"No, this is something new to us," Toller went on. "We know there are many other worlds circling distant stars, and we also know that on some of those worlds there are civilizations much further advanced than ours. Perhaps, my friend Baten, what we see above us is ... is ... but one of many far-flung palaces belonging to some unimaginable king of kings. Perhaps those reaches of ice are his hunting grounds ... his deer parks..." Toller paused, lost for the moment in the exotic grandeur of his vision, but was recalled when Steenameert posed a crucial question.

"Sir, do we go on?"

"Of course!" Toller pulled his scarf down from over his nose and mouth so that his words could be heard with perfect clarity. "I continue to assume that the Countess and her crew have taken refuge in one of our stations, but if we fail to find them there... Why, we now have one other place to look!"

"Yes, sir."

Steennameert's eyes, peering from the horizontal slit between his scarf and the edge of his hood, gave no indication that anything out of the ordinary was happening, but Toller was suddenly struck by the fantastic import of his own words. His hand dropped of its own accord to the hilt of his sword as he realized that his entire being was awash with dread.

Even as he was first hearing of Vantara's disappearance there had been born in him the sickening fear that she was dead. He had refused to acknowledge that fear, driving it out of his mind with manufactured optimism and the demanding activities of the hurriedly-mounted rescue expedition. But new elements had been added to the situation—bizarre, monstrous and inexplicable new elements—and it was impossible to see how they could bode anything but ill.

The six wooden structures were known collectively as the Inner Defence Group—a name which had clung to them since the days of the interplanetary war although it had long since lost all relevance.

Toller and Steenameert had located the group on the Overland side of the ice barrier and about two miles out from the alien station. Taking his ship in a wide curve, Toller had approached the wooden cylinders very cautiously from an outer direction, keeping them between him and the mysterious angular outline. He had chosen the course with a tenuous hope of avoiding detection by alien eyes, although it was purely an assumption that the metallic construct housed living beings. It appeared to be embedded in the crystalline barrier, and when viewed through his powerful glasses had something of the look of a vast and

lifeless machine—an incomprehensible engine which had been placed in the weightless zone to carry out some incomprehensible task on behalf of equally incomprehensible builders.

And now, as his ship nudged to within a furlong of the cylinders, Toller was developing the conviction that they were empty. They were nestling against the underside of the frozen sea, apparently held in place by slim girdles of crystal which had grown around them. Four of the cylinders were habitats and stores, and two longer versions were functional copies of the spaceship which had once flown to Farland, but they all had one thing in common—the appearance of lifelessness.

If Vantara and her crew had been waiting within any of the wooden shells they would surely have been maintaining a watch and by this time would have signalled to the approaching skyship. But there was no sign of activity. All the portholes remained uniformly dark, and the hulls obstinately remained what they had been since Toller first saw them—inert relics of years long gone.

"Are we going to go inside?" Steenameert said.

Toller nodded. "We have to—it is expected of us—but..." His throat closed up painfully, forcing him to pause for a moment. "You can see for yourself that nobody is there."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Thanks." Toller glanced at the strange alien edifice which projected from the icecap far to his left. "If that had been an aerial palace—as I so foolishly surmised—or even a fortress, I could have clung to some shred of hope that they had taken refuge in it. I would even have preferred to imagine them as the captives of invaders from another star—but the thing looks like nothing more than a great block of iron ... an *engine* ... Vantara could have seen no prospect of a haven there."

"Except..."

"Go on, Baten."

"Except in a case of the utmost desperation." Steenameert had begun to speak quickly, as though fearful of having his ideas dismissed. "We don't know how wide the ice barrier was when the Countess reached it, but if she did so in the hours of darkness—and there was a collision which disabled her ship—she would have been on the Land side of the barrier. The *wrong* side, sir. It would have been impossible to locate or reach our own vessels, and under those circumstances the ... engine could have seemed a likely place to shelter. After all, sir, it is certainly large enough, and there may be hatches or doors leading to its interior, and—"

"That's good!" Toller cut in as the darkness in his mind suddenly began to

abate. "And I'll tell you something else! I have been treating this whole affair as though the Countess were an ordinary woman, but nothing could be further from the truth. We have been talking about an accidental collision, but there may not have been one. If Vantara had chanced to see the alien engine from afar she would have taken it upon herself to investigate it!

"She and her crew could be watching us through some vent at this very minute. Or ... they might have spent some days exploring the machine and then have decided to return to Land. They could have passed us unseen as we were ascending with the commissioner—such things can easily happen. Don't you agree that such things can easily happen?"

The tentative way in which Steenameert nodded in assent told Toller something he already knew—that he was allowing the pendulum of his emotions to swing too far—but the black despair he had begun to feel had to be staved off as long as possible, and by any means available. In the unexpected upsurge of hope it mattered little to him that his reactions were immature, that the *real* Toller Maraquine would have acted differently—he had been restored to the universe of light and was determined to remain in it as long as possible.

Now keyed up to a state in which he had to undertake some physical action, his system thrumming with emotional energy. Toller grinned fiercely at Steenameert. "Don't just sit there fiddling with the controls—we have work to do!"

They fully inverted the ship and shut down the jet, letting the vessel coast to a gentle halt only fifty yards from the nearest of the wooden cylinders. The gondola's landing legs actually came in contact with the barrier's glowing surface, which at close range proved to be highly uneven—a haphazard mass of man-sized crystals. Most of them appeared to be hexagonal in cross-section, but others were circular or square, and many displayed feathery interior patterns of pale violet. The overall effect was visually stunning—a seemingly endless vista of unearthly beauty and brilliance.

Toller and Steenameert strapped on their personal propulsion units and made an inspection tour of the six cylinders. As expected, they were empty except for the provisions which had been stored against an emergency which had never come. The shells, with their varnished timbers and reinforcement bands of black iron, were colder and more silent than tombs. Toller was glad he had satisfied himself in advance that Vantara and her crew were elsewhere, otherwise the opening and investigating of each darkly brooding hull would have been an unbearable experience.

Towards the end of the tour he was struck by the fact that, although the crystals of the barrier had indeed extended themselves downwards to encompass

the cylinders, they had done so in a very sparing fashion. Instead of completely engulfing the wooden hulls, as would have seemed natural to Toller, they had encircled each with only a narrow and spiky growth. It was something he might have puzzled over had his thoughts not been fully occupied with what lay ahead.

When the formal search had been completed, he and Steenameert—riding on plumes of white condensation—returned to their ship and collected from it seven parachutes and seven fallbags, which they stored in the nearest of the habitats. Toller had insisted on bringing the survival equipment in case something catastrophic should happen to the skyship's balloon while manoeuvring close to the crystalline spikes of the barrier.

With the bags and parachutes at hand he and Steenameert, and any others they might rescue, were rendered independent of their skyship as far as descending to Overland was concerned. Protected from slipstream's deadly chill by the fleecy wombs of the fallbags, they could drop for more than a day and a night towards the planetary surface, only deploying the parachutes for the last few thousand feet of the descent. Daunting though the prospect might seem to die uninitiated, in all the years it had been in use the system had resulted in only one death—that of an experienced messenger who, it was thought, had fallen so deeply asleep that he had not roused himself in time to emerge from the fallbag and open his parachute.

Leaving their ship hanging in the inverted position, Toller and Steenameert began the strange two-mile flight to the huge alien artifact. Their jet units carried them at walking pace below a fantastic, glittering ceiling of giant crystals which appeared to have grown at random, except that at widely spaced intervals there were flatter areas in which the crystals were packed in what looked like orderly ranks, and in which the faint violet patterns within were more evident.

As the structure ahead expanded to fill more of his vision Toller began to revise his opinion that it was merely a lifeless engine. Here and there on the metallic surface he could see what seemed to be portholes, and there were hatches which had the size and proportions of doorways. The thought that Vantara might be at one of the portholes and watching his approach added to the heady excitement which suffused his system. At last, after a lifetime of waiting, he was taking part in an adventure which could stand comparison with the exploits which had studded his grandfather's career.

On reaching the nearest edge of the artifact he saw that it was rimmed with a single metal rail supported by slim posts which could easily have been made in a foundry on Overland. The sea of crystals abutted the perimeter of the artifact with no discernible gap. Toller shut down his jet and brought himself to a halt by gripping the rail. Steenameert arrived at his side a moment later.

"This is obviously a handrail," Toller said. "I fancy we are about to meet travellers from another star."

Steennameert's face was all but hidden by his scarf, but his eyes were wide with wonder. "I hope they bear no ill will towards trespassers. Anybody who can loft a redoubt like this into the sky..."

Toller nodded thoughtfully as he surveyed the structure and saw that it was at least half a mile across. He and Steennameert were perched at the edge of a flat area the size of a large parade ground, beyond which a central tower-like extrusion projected a hundred feet or more into the chilled air. As Toller studied it his senses made an adjustment and suddenly he was no longer "beneath" a fantastic landscape. In his new orientation he was looking across a plain towards a strange castle, and the great disk of Overland was directly overhead. Far off to his right was a cluster of curved, tapering poles—like giant reeds sculpted in steel—and as he watched a cold green fire began to flicker around their tips. The phenomenon served as a reminder that he was venturing far beyond the limits of his people's understanding.

"We have nothing to gain by waiting here," he said briskly, fending off an unwelcome surge of doubt and timidity. "Are you ready to...?"

He broke off, shocked into silence, as from behind him came a sudden and unexpected sound. It was a hissing noise and a continuous crackling noise merged into one, like dried leaves and twigs being consumed in a fierce blaze. Toller tried to spin around, but panic and the absence of gravity combined to thwart his intention. He only succeeded in thrashing helplessly for a few seconds, and by the time he had used the handrail to steady himself it was too late—the trap had been sprung.

A sparkling globe composed of fist-sized crystals had grown up around him and his companion with breath-stopping speed, enclosing them in a spherical prison some six paces in diameter.

It had extruded itself from the greater crystals of the frozen sea and part of its lower edge was moulded and attached to the metal of the alien station. The glittering material of it encompassed a section of the handrail to which the two men were clinging. Toller and Steennameert gaped at each other for a moment, faces contorted with shock, then Toller pulled off one of his gloves and touched the inner surface of the sphere. It was as cold as ice, and yet remained dry under his fingertips.

"Glass!" He pointed at the pistol slung on Steennameert's equipment belt. "Blow a few holes in it and we'll soon be out of here."

"Yes, yes..." Steennameert unclipped the weapon and at the same time removed a pressure sphere from his carrier net. He was feverishly screwing it to

the pistol's underside when a silent voice—cool, all-knowing and totally convincing—reverberated inside Toller's head.

I advise you not to fire the weapon. The material with which you are surrounded is protected by a reciprocal energy layer. The layer's prime function is to deflect meteors away from the parent construction, but it is effective against any kind of projectile. If the weapon is fired the bullet will ricochet around the interior of the sphere with undiminished velocity until its energy is absorbed by one of your bodies. If the weapon is discharged the sphere will not be weakened in any way, but one of you may be killed.

Toller knew at once, without being able to explain why, that both he and Steenameert had been party to the same communication. The non-voice, modulations of silence, had addressed itself directly to their inner selves ... mind had spoken to mind ... which meant that...

He glanced to his left and flinched as he saw that there was a figure just outside the sphere. The glass honeycomb surface of the sphere was distorting and fragmenting the outline, but the figure was man-sized, human in its general appearance, and was holding itself in place by gripping the handrail as any man would have done. Toller had no doubt that it was the source of the mentally-heard voice, but he was unable to understand how the alien newcomer had crossed the metallic plain so quickly and without being seen.

He also felt afraid. His fear was unlike anything he had experienced before—a compound of xenophobia, shock and simple concern for his own safety which rendered him speechless and almost unable to move. He saw that Steenameert was equally stricken, equally immobilized, and had stopped attaching the pressure sphere to his pistol. The voiceless communication had not merely been a statement—it had passed on pure knowledge and now both men *understood* that a bullet striking the inside of the sphere would be repelled by a force whose magnitude was directly influenced by its speed.

There is no reason for you to be alarmed. The non-voice conveyed assurance and something which might have been mistaken for kindness but for its underlying condescension and lack of warmth.

We are not afraid ... of... Toller's unspoken challenge was lost in the chaos of his mind as he began to wonder if he could communicate with his captor.

Speaking in your normal way will organize your thoughts sufficiently for us to exchange ideas, the alien told him. *But do not waste time on untruths, empty boasts or threats. You were about to assert that you are not afraid of me, and that is manifestly untrue. What you must do now is compose yourselves and avoid the mistake of trying to offer me any form of resistance.*

The utter confidence with which the alien spoke, the sheer smugness of the

assumption of superiority, triggered in Toller a response—inherited from his grandfather—which he had never been able to control. A surge of red-clouded anger erupted through his system, freeing him from the stasis which had affected his mind and body.

"You are the one in danger of making a mistake," he cried out. "I don't know what your design is, but I will resist it to the death—and the death I have in mind is yours!"

This is quite interesting. The alien's thought was tinged with amusement. *One of your females reacted with exactly the same kind of irrational belligerence, Toller Maraquine—and I am almost certain she was the one to which you are emotionally bonded.*

The reply jolted Toller into a wider frame of awareness. "Have you taken our women?" he bellowed, suddenly forgetful of his own situation. "Where are they? If they have come to any harm..."

They have not been harmed in any way. I have simply transported them to a place of safety far from here—as I am about to do with you. I shall now inject a sedative gas into the confine. Do not be alarmed by it. The gas will cause you to enter a deep sleep, and when you recover consciousness you will be in comfortable surroundings. And although it will be necessary to detain you there indefinitely, you will be adequately provisioned.

"We are not animals to be penned and provisioned," Toller snapped, his anger further fuelled. "We will go with you to the place to where the women are imprisoned, but of our own free will and with our eyes wide open. Those are my terms, and if you consent to them I give you my word that neither of us will cause you any injury."

Your arrogance is quite astonishing—and equalled only by your ignorance, came the reply, calm and amused. *Beings at your primitive stage of development could never injure me, but I will sedate you, nevertheless, to prevent your causing any minor inconvenience while you are being transported.*

The figure beyond the crystal wall made a slight movement—which was translated into flowing colour transformations of icy facets—and then a particular darkening of one of the hexagonals showed that something was being placed against its outer surface. Steenameert completed his arming of the pistol, raised it and aimed at the focus of activity.

Suicide, Baten Steenameert? The non-voice held something of the detached pity of a naturalist watching a delicate fly drift closer to a spider's web. *Surely not!*

Steennameert glanced at Toller, his eyes unfathomable in the narrow space between scarf and cowl, and lowered the pistol. Toller nodded to him in evident

approval of his prudence and—with a deliberate abandonment of conscious intention—drew his sword and in a single swift movement drove the point of it into the crystal wall. He had clamped his left forearm around the handrail, turning his body into a closed system of forces, and the tip of the steel blade buried itself in the shining cells with a power which sent vitreous fragments spinning outwards from the point of impact.

The crystal sphere screamed.

The scream was noiseless, but had no other resemblance to the type of precisely shaped and controlled mental communication employed by the alien. Toller knew, without understanding how, that it was emanating from the walls of the sphere and also from the frozen lake beyond—a multiplied shriek of agony in which chance harmonics and discordant echoes clashed again and again until they hid away and a strange, whimpering non-voice made itself heard...

I have been hurt, Beloved Creator! You did not tell me that the Primitives would be able to damage my body.

Toller, obeying warrior's instinct, did not allow the unexpected voice to inhibit him or blunt his attack. He had hurt an enemy and that was the signal to press forward with renewed vigour, to go for a kill. His sword seemed to be meeting a peculiar resistance, as though passing through a layer of invisible sponge, but his repeated thrusts were retaining enough force to damage and dislodge glassy cells. In only a few seconds he had shattered an adjacent pair and created a small hole in the sphere.

Changing the style of attack, he used the haft of his sword to strike the damaged area, and in spite of the unseen resistance he succeeded in dislodging the two cells entirely, sending them tumbling away into the outer void. Feverishly inspired, he transferred the sword to his other hand and punched the same area of wall with his gauntleted fist. This time there was no magical barrier to soften the blow and several more of the hexagonal cells, their structural unity weakened, went spinning out of sight, greatly enlarging the hole in the sphere.

The silent, inhuman screaming began again.

Steennameert followed Toller's example and—bracing himself against the handrail—began raining blows on the irregular edge of the hole, adding to the destructive effect.

In the roaring furnace of Toller's mind virtually no time passed until the way ahead of him had been cleared and he was outside the sphere and, in weightless flight, closing on a silver-suited figure which was turning to flee. His left arm clamped around the alien's neck in the instant of collision, and he whipped the sword—which seemed to have returned to his right hand of its own accord—into position for a thrust into the alien's side.

How did you achieve this? The alien's words were tinged with revulsion because of the physical contact, but Toller was unable to feel any fear.

You had fully coordinated control of all your muscles, the voice went on, *but there was no coherent mental activity that I could detect. It was impossible for me to anticipate your actions. How was it done?*

"Be silent," Toller snarled, hooking a leg around the handrail to prevent himself and his captive drifting free of the metal surface of the station. "Where are the women?"

All you need to know, the alien said imperturbably, *is that they are in a place of safety.* Again, and to Toller's bafflement, the mental contact revealed no shadings of alarm.

"Listen to me!" Toller gripped the alien by the shoulder and thrust him to arm's length, a movement which brought them face to face for the first time. In one searching, wondering, dismayed moment Toller took in every detail of a face which was surprisingly human in the disposition of its features. The principal differences were that the skin was grey; the eyes, lacking pupils, were white orbs drilled with black holes; and the small upturned nose had no central division. Toller could see far back into the nasal cavity, where red-veined orange membranes fluttered back and forth or clung together in tune with the alien's breathing.

"You haven't been *listening*," Toller, repressing an urge to push himself away from the hideous caricature of a human being, leaned harder on his sword and forced it deep into the reflective material of the other's suit. "You will tell me what I need to know—*immediately*—or I will kill you."

The alien's charcoal lips slackened into what could have been a smile. *At this range? So close? While we are in actual physical contact? No member of a humanoid species could possibly...*

Toller's head filled with crimson thunder. His mind blurred, became a montage of smeared visions of Vantara and death-hued alien predators; and the rage, a special rage—beguiling and repugnant, shameful and joyous—took hold of his being. He pulled the alien towards him, at the same time going in hard with the sword, and it was only a startled cry from Steenameert which returned him to sanity.

You hurt me! The alien's silent words were shaded with astonishment and the beginnings of fearful comprehension. *You could have done it! You were prepared to kill me!*

"That's what I have been telling you, greyface," Toller ground out.

My name is Divivvidiv.

"You resemble a corpse to begin with, greyface," Toller went on, "and it

would occasion me not the slightest qualm of conscience were I forced to reconcile appearance with reality. I repeat, if you do not tell me—"

He broke off, disconcerted, as the alien's face rippled with muscular convulsions, and the frail shoulder gripped in his left hand began to vibrate in tune with internal tremors. The black-rimmed mouth underwent asymmetrical changes, flowing in one direction and then another like a sea anemone pulled by conflicting currents, sending threads of discharged saliva snaking weightlessly through the air. Blurred mental echoes picked up by Toller told him that his captive had never been directly threatened with death before. At first it had been impossible for Divivvidiv even to believe that his life was in danger, and now he was undergoing an extremely violent emotional reaction.

Toiler, receiving his first insight into a culture totally dissimilar to his own, responded by renewing the pressure of his sword point. "The women, greyface ... the women! Where are they?"

They have been transported to my home world. Divivvidiv was regaining some physical control, but his words reeked with fear, revulsion and barely contained hysteria. *They are in a secure place—millions of miles from here—in the capital city of the most advanced civilization in this galaxy. I can assure you that it is far beyond the abilities of a Primitive like you to alter those circumstances in any way, therefore the logical thing for you to do is—*

"Your logic is not my logic," Toller cut in, hardening his voice in the hope of concealing the dismay which was washing through him. "If the women are not brought back unharmed, I will send *you* to another world—one from which no man has ever returned. I trust my meaning is clear..."

Chapter 10

The room was large and almost bare, its principal item of furniture being a blue oblong which looked like a bed except that it lacked restraint nets. Ranged around the walls were rectangular and circular panels which continuously changed colour, slowly in some cases, rapidly in others. The floor was of a grey-green seamless material closely perforated with small holes. Toller noticed that his feet tended to stick to the floor, obviating the need for zero-gravity lines, and he guessed the holes formed part of a vacuum system.

He was, however, giving little thought to his surroundings—his attention being concentrated on Divivvidiv, who was busy removing his skysuit. The silvery garment had seams which opened readily when a toggle was drawn along them, an intriguing feature which enabled Divivvidiv to shed the suit in only a few seconds, revealing a frail-looking body of humanoid form and proportions. The alien's thin frame was clad in a one-piece suit made up of dozens of sections of black material which overlapped like birds' feathers.

The outlandishness of the costume; the bald grey cranium; the virtually noseless, corpselike face—all of these combined to inspire in Toller a powerful xenophobia which was augmented by the discovery that the alien had a smell. The odour was not unpleasant in itself—it was sweet and soupy, like a rich beef broth—but the incongruity of the source rendered it highly distasteful to Toller. He glanced at Steenameert and wrinkled his nose. Steenameert, who had been surveying the strange room, did likewise.

You may be interested to learn that you also have an objectionable smell, Divivvidiv commented. Though I suspect that yours is much to do with inadequate hygiene and would draw complaints from members of your own species.

Toller smiled coldly. "Recovering from your little bout of the shakes, are you? Backbone beginning to stiffen again? Let me remind you that I can still end your life at any second and am quite prepared to do so."

You are a blusterer, Toller Maraquine. At heart you doubt your ability to fulfil the role you have assumed in society, and you try to disguise that fact in various ways—one of which is the issuing of flamboyant threats.

"Take care, greyface!" Toller was disconcerted at having a ghoulish figure

from some distant region of the universe so casually penetrate the innermost recesses of his mind and then blurt out its findings, revealing secrets which he scarcely ever admitted to himself. He glanced at Steenameert, but the younger man had resumed his scanning of the room, almost certainly being diplomatic.

I advise you to divest yourselves of those clumsy insulated suits, Divivvidiv replied unconcernedly. *Crude though they look, they are probably quite efficient and will soon make you highly uncomfortable at these temperatures.*

Toller, who was already sweating, gazed suspiciously at Divivvidiv. "If you are hoping to surprise me while I am entangled with—"

Nothing could be further from my thoughts. Divivvidiv was now free of his silver suit and was standing close to Toller, swaying slightly above anchored feet. *You know that.*

The multiplex levels of communication inherent in mental contact left Toller with no doubt about the alien's truthfulness. But, he wondered, could that be a telepathic technique? Could super-speech be a vehicle for a super-lie, one which carried total conviction for the listener?

"Keep the pistol on him while I get out of this suit," he said to Steenameert. "If he moves ... if he even blinks ... put a ball in him."

Your thought processes are unusually complicated for a Primitive. Divivvidiv seemed increasingly at his ease, and his silent words might have been shaded with amusement.

"I'm glad you realize you are not dealing with simpletons," Toller said as he struggled out of his skysuit. "And why are you becoming so satisfied with yourself, greyface? What reason is there for it?"

Reason is the reason. An incongruously human chuckle escaped Divivvidiv's black-rimmed mouth. *Now that I have had the opportunity to appraise your mental structure more thoroughly—and find you fairly amenable to reason—I realize that I can protect myself and my interests simply by making your position clear to you. The more information I impart to you, the more stable our relationship will be. That is why I suggested moving to these more comfortable surroundings, where we can converse without so many distractions.*

"Nothing can distract me in this matter," Toller said, wondering if the full extent of the lie would be apparent to Divivvidiv. The mode of communication alone was enough to swamp his mind with wonder, and when the outlandish nature and appearance of the alien—to say nothing of the bizarre circumstances of the meeting—were taken into consideration it was a matter of some surprise to him that his brain was able to function at all. He would have to keep Vantara in the forefront of his thoughts at all times. Nothing else mattered but the need to find and rescue her, and return her to the safety of Overland...

There is no need to keep pointing that barbaric weapon at me, Divivvidiv said as Toller got free of his skysuit and took the pistol from Steenameert to enable him to strip down as well. *I told you that logic will prevail over force.*

"In that case you have nothing to be alarmed about," Toller replied comfortably, "if it comes to a falling out, you can fire syllogisms at me and I will have to make do with firing mere bullets at you."

You grow complacent.

"And you grow tiresome, greyface. Tell me how you plan to retrieve the women and thus preserve your own life."

Divivvidiv projected feelings of exasperation. *I have a question for you, Toller Maraquine. It may seem irrelevant to our circumstances, but if you will control your impatience for a short time understanding will come. Is that reasonable?*

Toller nodded reluctantly, with an uneasy suspicion that he was being manipulated.

Good! Now, how many worlds are in your planetary system?

"Three," Toller said. "Land, Overland and Farland. My paternal grandfather—whose name I am proud to bear—died on Farland."

Your knowledge of astronomy is deficient. Has it not come to your attention that there are now four worlds in the local system?

"Four worlds?" Toller stared at Divivvidiv, frowning, as he half-remembered someone having spoken to him in recent days about a blue planet. "Now four worlds? You speak as if a new world had been added to our little flock by magic."

That is exactly what has happened—although no magic was involved. Divivvidiv leaned forward. My people have transported their home planet—which is called Dussarra—across hundreds of light years. They plucked it from its ancient orbit about a distant sun, and they placed it in a new orbit about your sun. Does that suggest anything to you about their powers?

"Yes—powers of imagination," Toller said with a show of scorn in spite of a dreadful conviction that the alien was presenting the unvarnished truth. "Even if you could move an entire world, how could its inhabitants survive in the coldness and darkness between the stars? How long would such a journey take?"

No time at all! Interstellar travel has to be accomplished instantaneously. The concepts are far beyond your grasp—through no fault of your own—but I will try to implant analogies which will give you some measure of understanding.

Divivvidiv's inhuman eyes closed for a second. Toller felt a wrenching sensation within his head, disturbing and yet curiously pleasurable, and he

gasped as—like a slewing beam from a lighthouse—a flaring intellectual luminance swept through his mind. For one tantalizing instant he seemed on the verge of knowing everything that a complete being ought to know, then there came a wavering, an accelerating slippage, followed by an aching sense of loss as the light moved away from him. The philosophical darkness which rolled in to take its place was, however, less oppressive, less monolithic than before. There were twilight areas. Toller had a fleeting glimpse of vacuums within vacuums; of interstellar space as a spongy nothingness riddled with tubes and tunnels of a greater nothingness; of insubstantial galactic highways whose entrances coincided with their exits...

"I believe, I *believe*," he breathed. "But—between us—nothing has changed."

You disappoint me, Toller Maraquine. Divivvidiv stepped over his discarded suit, which had been drawn to the floor by air currents, and moved closer to Toller. *Where is your curiosity? Where is your spirit of scientific enquiry? Do you not wish to know why my people embarked upon such a mammoth venture? Do you think it is a commonplace thing for the members of an intelligent species to transport their home world from one part of a galaxy to another?*

"I have already told you—those things are no concern of mine."

Oh, but they are! They are also the concern of every living creature on every planet of this system. Divivvidiv's mouth underwent further asymmetrical changes, tugged by the invisible tides of emotion. *You see, my people are fleeing for their lives. We are fugitives from the greatest catastrophe in the recent history of the universe. Does that fact not make you the least bit inquisitive?*

Toller glanced at Steenameert, who appeared to have frozen halfway through the task of removing his skysuit, and for the first time in days his preoccupation with Vantara and her fate began to loosen its hold on his mind.

"Catastrophe!" he said. "But the stars are billions upon billions of miles apart! Are you talking about some manner of great explosion? If it ever happens I cannot see how—"

It has already happened, Divivvidiv cut in. *And it matters little that stars are billions of miles apart—the scale of the explosion was such that upwards of a hundred galaxies will be destroyed by it!*

Toller tried to conjure up a mental image to go with the alien's words, but his imagination balked. "What could cause such an explo...? And if it has already happened why are we still here? How can you know about it?"

Divivvidiv was now very close to Toller, and his sweet body odour was thick in Toller's nostrils. *Again, the concepts are beyond you, but...*

The slewing beam from the lighthouse was fiercer this time, and Toller's instinct was to shrink away from it, but there was nothing he could do to protect

himself. He shuddered as, within a tiny fraction of a second, his inner model of reality was torn apart and rebuilt, and he found that his newly vouchsafed vision of space as an emptiness riddled with transient wormholes of greater emptiness was a simplification. The cosmos—he now knew, or almost knew—was born in an explosion which was inconceivable in its ferocity, and within a minute its entire volume was permeated by seething masses of *ropes*. The ropes—comparatively ancient and decaying relics of a period of cosmic history which had spanned a length of time equal to one human breath—had a diameter approximating one millionth of that of a human hair, and were so massive that a single inch weighed as much as an average-sized planet. They writhed and twisted and oscillated, and in their blind contortions they decided nothing less than the disposition of matter throughout the universe: the patterns of galaxies, the patterns of clusters of galaxies, the patterns of sheets of clusters of galaxies.

As the universe grew older—and intelligent life made its first appearance—the ropes grew fewer in number. Their incredible stores of energy squandered by their frenzied threshings and twistings, by the propagation of gravitational waves, they became more of a cosmic rarity. As they slowly erased themselves from existence the universe became more stable, a safer place for frail biological constructs such as human beings—but it was not homogenous. There were anomalous regions in which ropes remained plentiful, so plentiful that interactions and collisions were bound to occur, with consequences beyond the descriptive powers of any system of mathematics.

At one location no less than twelve ropes had intersected and yielded up their total energy in an explosion which was destined to annihilate perhaps a hundred galaxies, and to have a profound effect on a further thousand. No living creature would ever see the explosion, so close was the speed of its fronts to that of light, but intelligent beings—using data gathered by subspace probes—could deduce its existence. And once the deduction had been made there was only one thing left to do.

Flee!

Flee far and fast...

Toller blinked vigorously, momentarily certain that a watery ripple had passed across his vision, but he realized almost at once that the effect had been subjective and illusory. His internal model of the universe had been torn asunder and rebuilt in drastically different form, and now he, too, was different. A quick glance at Steenameert's pale face and blanked-out eyes confirmed that he also had undergone a similar chastening metamorphosis.

A voice from Toller's distant past whispered a warning: *Your defences have been breached! Should he choose to do so, grey face could overwhelm you in*

this very instant!

Responding to the warning, Toller alerted himself. He triangulated his gaze on the alien's face and saw nothing there but a growing display of relaxation and satisfaction. There was no sense of physical threat, but that in itself might have constituted another kind of menace. They were in Divivvidiv's stronghold and there was no telling what semi-magical forces the alien might be able to summon to do his bidding without so much as having to raise a finger.

Striving to assimilate all that he had learned, Toller shook his head as though recovering from a blow. His mind had been swamped in the influx of pure knowledge—to the extent that all normal thought processes were being prorogued—but, even so, he had a dim awareness that one great question remained unanswered. What could it be? He had been told too much in too short a time, and yet he was troubled by a nagging conviction that he had been told too little. And, all the while, the hideous alien in his costume of wafting black rags gave the impression of being more and more content with the situation...

"Why do you seem so pleased with yourself, greyface?" Toller growled. "After all, nothing has changed between us."

Oh, but it has, Divivvidiv assured him, shading his words with a kind of glee. You are not immune to reason, and therefore in this situation logic has to work for me and against you. Without admitting as much to yourself you have already begun to realize how pointless it would be for you to pit yourself against representatives of the greatest civilization in the galaxy.

"I refuse to..."

And now that you have come so far, Divivvidiv went on relentlessly, I will complete the edifice of logic which to me is an impregnable defence and to you an insurmountable barrier. You were on the verge of asking why your insignificant pair of little worlds had to become involved with Dussarra's flight from annihilation.

The answer is that binary planets sharing a common atmosphere are extremely rare. Dussarran astronomers are aware of only three other examples in this galaxy—all of them very distant and less well matched than Land and Overland. As you already know, we can move our home world instantaneously from star to star, but energy limitations prevent us from leaping more than a few light years at a time. That fact means that the annihilation front, which even now is roiling outwards through this region of the galaxy, would always have been at our heels ... unless ... unless, Toller Maraquine ... we found the way to make the leap to another galaxy.

Toller became aware of his own breathing, a regular and impersonal sound, like waves subsiding on a distant beach.

We designed a machine which was capable of transporting the home world across the required distance, but for its construction the machine required a very special physical environment. There had, of course, to be freedom from gravity to prevent the machine from distorting under its own weight—a factor which posed us no problems. There also had to be a limitless supply of oxygen and helium to facilitate accretive growth of the machine—and that is why we chose to position the Xa at the very centre of your two worlds.

In addition to all the other knowledge which I have impressed on your mind, Toller Maraquine, it is necessary for you to appreciate that the Xa is almost complete. It will be activated in approximately six days from now, and when that happens the planet Dussarra will simply vanish from your sight. It will have been instantaneously relocated in another galaxy—one which is nine million light years from here.

Absorb what I am telling you, Toller Maraquine—for your own sake, for your own peace of mind.

There is nothing you can do to retrieve your females. The massed resources of a thousand civilizations like yours would be powerless in this situation. I urge you—accept what I say and return to your home world in peace and with no qualms of conscience, knowing that you have done all that any individual could possibly do...

Toller stared into the black-drilled orbs of the alien's eyes, tranced, communing with himself and with another—that heroic figure from heroic times past whose example and counsel, although inferred, he prized above all else. "What would the real Toller have done?" he asked himself, silently moving his lips to frame the words. He remained immobile for several seconds, half-seduced by the blandishments of the alien logic, then he recoiled, eyes widening, like a man evading the jaws of a steel trap.

"Take this pistol from me," he said to Steenameert. "And give me my sword."

I have lost you again. Divivvidiv cowered back from him. *You are acting without thinking. What are you going to do?*

Toller accepted the weapon from Steenameert, closing his fingers around the familiar mouldings of the haft, and pressed the tip of the blade to the alien's throat. Crimson stars sparkled across his vision.

"What am I going to do, greyface?" he whispered. "Why, I am going to part your head from your foul body unless you stop telling me what you want me to hear and start telling me what I want to hear. Has your wonderful intellect absorbed that message? Tell me—*now!*—how I can rescue our women." He bored with the steel blade into Divivvidiv's throat.

The alien's black-rimmed mouth distorted and his frail body began its

convulsive trembling, but this time the threat of instant death did not entirely destroy his self-control. *I have told you all there is to tell. You have to understand the situation—there is nothing you can do.*

"I could kill you!"

Yes, but what would that achieve? Nothing! Nothing!

"I..." Toller refused to be diverted. "You said the women were transported to your world ... instantaneously ... by one of your machines..."

Yes?

"In that case, we will pursue them by the same mode of transport," Toller ground out, shocked by his own words.

The quaking of Divivvidiv's body grew less severe. *Is there no end to your obtuseness, Toller Maraquine? You ask to be transported to the heart of a Dussarran mega-city, the population of which is in excess of thirty millions! What do you think you and your companion could achieve there?*

"I would have you as a hostage. I will bargain with your miserable life."

The tremors in Divivvidiv's frame ceased altogether. *This is quite incredible, but there is just a chance—infinitesimal though it may be—that in your blind and primitive stubbornness you could succeed where vastly superior beings would have been doomed to failure. What an intriguing concept! This could even form a major topic for discussion at the next meeting of the...*

"Enough!" Still gripping the alien's shoulder with his left hand, Toller lowered his sword slightly. "You will do as I command? You will take us to Dussarra?"

You leave me no choice. We will go immediately.

"This is more to my liking." Toller released his grip on Divivvidiv's shoulder, then tightened his fingers again, so fiercely that the alien winced. "Or is it less to my liking?"

I do not understand you! What has happened?

"You ceased your shivering, greyface. You ceased being afraid."

But that was a natural reaction to your new proposal.

"Was it? I don't trust you, greyface." Toller produced a cold smile. "This is the way we Primitives conduct ourselves when negotiating with an enemy. We rely to a great extent on our brute instincts—the instincts which are so despised by an advanced being like you—and mine are telling me that you would *like* us to proceed to Dussarra by way of your magical machine. I suspect that were we to do so I would be immediately overwhelmed, or rendered unconscious, or disadvantaged in some other way which would put me at your mercy."

There would be no point in my pitting reason against your wild and uninformed imaginings. A note of challenge had begun to insinuate

itself into Divivvidiv's manner. *May I therefore be informed as to what fresh proposals you are going to put forward under the aegis of your treasured primitive instincts?*

"Certainly!" Toller thought of his grandfather and smiled again. "I am taking you to Dussarra as my hostage—exactly as planned—but the journey will be completed without resort to geometrical sorceries. Two good Kolcorronian spaceships—built of the finest wood and fully provisioned—are waiting close by.

"One of them will carry the three of us to Dussarra."

Chapter 11

The Primitive's words, coming at Divivvidiv out of shifting and formless blurs of emotional activity, were so unexpected—so ludicrous in their content—that at first he felt little sense of shock or alarm. It had been disconcerting to find that the Primitives were capable of coordinated, purposeful action while their neural systems were emitting no coherent signals, but he had put that down as a transient condition brought about by rage or fear. Surely an accidental sequence of words, with only a superficial resemblance to a rational sentence, would be abandoned by the larger Primitive as soon as the storms subsided in his mind.

"What do you think of that idea?" the Primitive said, his disgustingly pink and thick-lipped mouth widening.

Divivvidiv gazed at him for a moment and felt the beginnings of terror as he observed alien mental processes slowly taking place. The Primitive had heard his own words as if they were being uttered by another being. He had been almost as surprised as Divivvidiv by their content, but now he was returning to what passed for his rational mode of cerebration and was actually assuming responsibility for the words and the preposterous notion they embodied.

The idea is insane, Divivvidiv projected. You do not have to try putting it into practice merely because you verbalized it in a moment of stress. Be sensible, Toller Maraquine—protect your modern self from your ancient self!

Divivvidiv forced an understanding of his thoughts into the Primitive's mind, fully expecting the odiferous giant to modify his mental stance. To Divivvidiv's dismay the Primitive reacted with a blend of contempt, amusement, pride and sheerest blind obstinacy.

"Stiffen your backbone, greyface," he boomed. "And try to show proper gratitude to me! You have tested my patience with your boasts about your kind's space-faring prowess—if that word can be applied to your geometrical sorceries—but now I am going to acquaint you with the *realities* of going into the black.

"My paternal grandfather—whose name I am proud to bear—was the first man to take one of our spaceships to another world, and I feel privileged that destiny has called upon me to emulate his exploits. Get back into your silver fineries, greyface—we have work ahead of us."

But this is suicidal! It is madness! Divivvidiv felt himself begin to quiver at

the prospect of having to risk his life in one of the barbaric wooden shells he had examined so briefly in the preliminary phase of the Xa's development. He had preserved the flimsy artifacts on the chance that the Director might show some interest in their origins. Why had he not had the foresight to destroy them? And why had the designers of the station—those autocrats in the high levels of the Palace of Numbers—not allowed for the possibility of alien intruders?

"Suicidal, you say? Not as suicidal as allowing you to ... teleport ... me into the centre of one of your cities." The larger Primitive slackened his grip on Divivvidiv's shoulder a little, lessening the pain.

The giant was swelling in confidence with every second, but Divivvidiv was aware of a growing disquiet in the mind of his companion. He could not analyze the feeling for the present, because too much of his mental capacity was being taken up in dealing with his predicament, but he hoped that Steenameert was going to put forward a rational argument against using one of the wooden spaceships. At the low-brain level of communication, Divivvidiv could hear the Xa calling to him, a distracting undertone which added to an already dangerous degree of stress.

You have no astrogational instruments of any kind, therefore the journey you contemplate is impossible. A new thought occurred to Divivvidiv. I know you actually believe that your grandfather flew one of your ships to another world, but without-a precise knowledge of the vessel's speed and...

"He had help with the various computations." The giant pressed harder with the tip of his sword, the weapon with which he appeared to compensate for his mental inadequacies. "You will provide me with the same assistance. You are equal to the task, aren't you, greyface? I mean, you have already spoken at length about your immeasurable superiority in all the sciences."

I still say the risks are unjustifiable. Your so-called spaceship could have deteriorated beyond... Divivvidiv left the thought uncompleted as the second barbarian suddenly gave voice to his anxieties.

"Can I have a word, sir?" His worried gaze was fixed on the giant's face. "Just a brief word?"

"What is it, Baten?"

Divivvidiv gained access to what was coming and was disappointed when he realized that Steenameert's concern was less with immediate practicalities than with the cosmological overview he had been given earlier. Nevertheless, his intervention diverted most of the giant's crude mindforce away from Divivvidiv and gave him a welcome opportunity to take stock of his situation.

What is happening, Beloved Creator? The Xa found its way into Divivvidiv's mind on the instant. *I have repaired the damage to my body, but I still feel some*

pain. I wish I had sense organs capable of seeing and hearing within the station. Are the Primitives with you?

That is no concern of yours.

But there has been talk of ropes, Beloved Creator! From you? Are you capable of issuing words which do not correspond to reality?

No ethical being has that capability, Divivvidiv replied irritably. Be calm!

Are you an ethical being, Beloved Creator?

Be calm, I tell you! Divivvidiv closed all his low-brain channels in an effort to end the Xa's pestering.

"The scarecrow told us of a vast explosion, sir," Steenameert said to the giant. "We have to take note of what he said. Entire galaxies will be annihilated! According to him Overland and Land will soon be destroyed in one great flash!"

"Baten, why do you plague me with all this talk of galaxies and explosions at this time?"

The smaller Primitive's repulsive features showed signs of agitation. "He said it would happen soon, sir."

"Soon? How soon is soon?"

"That is what we must find out."

Beloved Creator! Divivvidiv was shocked to find that the Xa had regained access to his mind, apparently with little effort. *Did you say to the Primitives that I am to be killed only six days from now?*

The way in which the question was framed revealed to Divivvidiv that a communications leakage had developed somewhere in the station's heavy shielding, enabling the Xa to pick up wisps of mental interactions which should have been denied to it. Useful though the discovery would have been at another time, it now served only to aggravate his feelings of anger and alarm.

I command you! He projected the words at the Xa with all the force he could gather. *Go into general quiescence and remain in that condition until I recall you.*

"...asking you, greyface," the giant was shouting, "how long will it be until my home world is affected by the explosion of which you spoke?"

I cannot be precise—but two hundred of your years is a likely figure.

"Two hundred years." The giant glanced at his companion. "It seems a short span for a world, but for me—at this very moment—it seems an eternity. There is much to do, Baten, and we must act quickly."

More quickly than you realize, Divivvidiv added, encircling the thought with all the defences of his high-brain so that not even the Xa could gain a hint of what was going on in his mind. The guilt which had formerly troubled him each time he remembered the fate his kind was planning for the inhabitants of the

twin worlds had been erased, for the present anyway. The raw emotions of contempt, disgust and fear engendered in him by his gigantic captor had seen to that.

In only ten days, Toller Maraquine, he thought, your insignificant little home world will cease to exist.

Chapter 12

When Cassyll Maraquine emerged from the palace he was perspiring freely. Regardless of the impropriety for one of his station, he immediately took off his formal tabard and opened his blouse at the neck, allowing heat to escape from his body. He breathed deeply of the fresh morning air and looked around for Bartan Drumme.

"You look like a boiled lobster," Bartan commented jovially, emerging from behind the base of the heroic statue of King Chakkell which dominated the forecourt as Chakkell had once dominated the entire planet.

"It was like a baker's oven in there." Cassyll dabbed his brow with a handkerchief. "Daseene is killing herself, living in conditions like that, but when I try to advise her to take the air..."

"What is the point of being the ruler if you can't make death the subject of royal edicts?"

"This is not a fit topic for jests," Cassyll said. "I fear that Daseene has only a little time left to her—and this astonishing business of the barrier, plus her worries about the well-being of Countess Vantara, can only make matters worse."

"You must be concerned for Toller's safety. Is there a scale upon which such emotions are balanced? Upon which your feelings weigh less heavily on the pan than those of Daseene?"

"Toller can take care of himself."

Bartan nodded. "Yes, but he isn't his grandfather."

"What does that mean? What manner of convoluted family tree would I have if my father and my son were one and the same?" Cassyll demanded, not hiding his vexation.

"I'm sorry, old friend. I love young Toller almost as much as..." Bartan raised his shoulders to a level with his ears, a way of agreeing that they should talk about other things. "Shall we find a comfortable seat?"

"It would be preferable to an uncomfortable seat."

The two men, forcibly nudging each other to show that their friendship was still intact, walked in the direction of the Lain River. They reached it near the Lord Glo Bridge, turned east along the embankment and sat down on a marble

bench. The air was quiet and balmy, pervaded by the kind of privileged mid-morning calmness which is typical of administrative districts in capital cities. Ptertha were plentiful that morning, glistening like glass spheres as they followed the course of the river, darting and swooping a few feet above the surface of the breeze-ruffled water.

Bartan waited only a few seconds and said, "What is the verdict?"

"She wants to send a fleet."

"Did you tell her there aren't any ships available?"

"She told me not to vex her with minor details." Cassyll gave a humourless laugh. "Details!"

"What are you going to do?"

"I have promised to find out exactly how many ships can be made airworthy, by cannibalizing others if necessary, and report the situation to her. Many engine parts will need to be repaired or replaced, and there is a dearth of balloon fabric. It could take as long as twenty days before we can send anybody aloft, and..." Cassyll fell silent, twisting the gold ring he wore on the sixth finger of his left hand.

"And you were hoping Toller would have returned long before then," Bartan said sympathetically. "He probably *will* be back ... with that countess hanging around his neck ... It takes a lot to deflect that young man from his course."

"Excellent choice of words—I took some fresh readings early this foreday and I'd say that the barrier is now almost a hundred miles across. It means that no ship could possibly fly around it."

"There you are then!" Bartan said with a display of cheerfulness. "Toller *has* to come back soon!"

"You're a good friend," Cassyll replied, trying to smile. "I love you, Bartan, but I would love you even more if you could tell me why that blue world appeared in our system and caused a crystal wall to be built between us and our ancestral planet."

"You think the two are related?"

"I'm *sure* they are related." Cassyll glanced up at the sky, at the enigmatic disk of white light which hovered at the zenith. "Just as I'm sure that neither bodes us any good."

Chapter 13

"I am going to have much to occupy my mind in the hours to come," Toller said to Divivvidiv, omitting the now-ritual insult about the colour of the alien's face as a sign that he was speaking unemotionally, dealing in cold facts.

"Therefore I take this opportunity to make your position absolutely clear to you," he went on. "it is incumbent on *you* to preserve your own life, and you can best do that by giving me your full support in our venture. If I find you lying to me, or giving me tricky answers to questions, or allowing me to blunder into a danger of which you could have given me a warning—I will kill you. Your execution may not be instantaneous—because you are valuable to me—but, if I believe that you have gone against me in any of the ways I have just mentioned ... and if subsequently there is a move against us from any quarter ... you will die immediately.

"You know how readily I act in such matters. At all times I will keep myself prepared to lop your head from your shoulders, and may be so keyed up to do so that any sudden disturbance—even as little as a sneeze from you—could precipitate your demise. I know how great the odds are against me. As far as I am concerned I am practically dead already, so do not delude yourself that you can exert leverage on me in any circumstance. If you want to remain alive you must make yourself an unquestioning instrument of my will.

"Have I made myself clear?"

Very clear, Divivvidiv replied. *Your tendency to belabour the point shows no sign of fading.*

Toller frowned at the alien, wondering if such a craven creature could summon up the nerve to be insolent while in a position of extreme danger. He finished tying all the thongs on his own skysuit, then took the pistol from Steenameert to allow him to do likewise. Divivvidiv had already encased himself in his silver garment, making his general appearance more acceptable to human eyes, and now there was nothing to prevent the small group setting out on the journey to the alien's home planet. Toller tried not to think about what lay ahead. The future he had engineered for himself was filled with inconceivable menace, but he dared not try to anticipate the dangers in case he should become prey to self-doubts which might weaken his hold over Divivvidiv.

"A question before we leave, and before you reply think of the warnings I gave you," he said to the alien, glancing around the strange and inhospitable room. "Will the very fact of your quitting this place alert or in any way give advantage to those who will oppose us?"

It is most unlikely, the alien replied. *The entire facility is operating automatically. It is most unlikely, at this stage, that anybody on Dussarra will try to communicate with me in person.*

"Most unlikely? Is that all the assurance you can give?"

You demanded the truth.

"Fair enough." Toller nodded to Steenameert and the trio moved towards the door by which they had entered the room. The alien progressed confidently, sliding his feet on the perforated floor, while Toller and Steenameert walked with a top-heavy roll as though balancing on narrow beams. When they reached the pressure lock Divivvidiv unclipped the grey metallic box of his personal propulsion unit from the wall. He began to fasten it to his waist with gleaming clamps.

"Leave that," Toller ordered.

But you have seen it before. Divivvidiv spread his hands in an oddly human gesture. *It is only my transporter.*

"A device which gives you the speed of an arrow—I seem to remember that you approached with uncanny speed when Baten and I were trapped in your glass cage." Toller prodded the box with his sword, sending it drifting away from the alien. "It would be quite pointless for you to burden yourself with the temptation to try escaping—especially as I intend to escort you to my ship in regal style."

Toller unfastened a coil of thin rope from his belt, passed the free end around Divivvidiv's body and tied it with a hard-drawn knot. He pulled Divivvidiv into the pressure lock with him and Steenameert, and signalled the alien to operate the controls, which resembled blue tablets set in the seamless grey wall. The inner door slid shut in magical silence, and a few seconds later the outer hatch opened to give a view of the metallic grey plain and glittering crystal sea beyond it. Icy air billowed inwards. Toller drew his scarf up over his mouth and nose, glad to be escaping from the oppressive architecture of the station's interior, and went forward into the familiar skylscapes of the weightless zone.

The sun had moved closer to Overland, and in doing so had crossed the datum plane, rising above the artificial horizon created by the vast disk which Toller now knew to be an incomprehensible machine. Rays of sunlight, striking billions of crystals at a shallow angle, created barricades of prismatic fire which dazzled the eye. So great was the brilliance that even Overland, a semicircle of

luminance which spanned the sky directly above, was dim and ghostly in comparison.

Toller paid out his line a short distance, activated his propulsion unit and set off for the Inner Defence Group with Divivdiv being dragged in an undignified slow spin in his wake. The trio flew out over the rim of the alien station, the sound of their exhausts greedily absorbed by the surrounding void. Toller kept silent during the flight and concentrated on remembering all the steps involved in taking a spaceship outside the air bridge. During his two obligatory training sessions everything had seemed very simple and obvious, but that had been years in the past and now the complexities appeared enormous.

The group of wooden vessels eventually showed up in the brilliance ahead as small yellow, orange and tan silhouettes which did not assume any proper coloration until Toller had swung in a curve past them and got the sun behind him. Close by was the skyship in which he had made the ascent, its balloon beginning to look puffy and wrinkled as the gas inside it contracted through loss of heat. At the planetary surface the weight of the collapsing envelope would have expelled the gas, but in the absence of gravity the balloon simply puckered like the skin of some moribund creature of the deeps.

Toller shut down his microjet and coasted to rest, twitching the line to bring his silent prisoner into place beside him. Steenameert expertly drifted himself to a halt nearby, a few yards above the fantastic conglomeration of huge crystals. Two miles away across the burning sea the alien station was outlined like a castle against the darkest part of the sky, where occasional meteors made furtive dashes to oblivion.

"A rare sight, Baten," Toller said. "One that not many can claim to have seen. One that you will no doubt remember."

"I expect I will, sir," Baten replied, a puzzled expression appearing in his eyes.

"I want you to take two messages back with you—one for my father and one for Queen Daseene. I have no time to write them out, so I want you to listen carefully and—" Toller broke off as Steenameert violently crossed and uncrossed his arms in a gesture of disagreement.

"What are you saying to me?" the younger man cried out. "Have I not served you well?"

It was Toller's turn to be puzzled. "Nobody could have done better. I intend to include a citation in my message to the Queen so that you..."

"Then why are you dismissing me at this most crucial moment in the venture?"

Toller pulled down his scarf and smiled. "I am moved by your loyalty, Baten,

but things have reached a pass at which I have no right to expect anything further from you. The voyage to the intruders' home world will almost certainly result in my death—I am not deluding myself on that score—but that is an acceptable prospect to me because it is a matter of my personal honour. Having set out with the avowed intention of rescuing the Countess Vantara, I could never return to Prad and admit that I had abandoned the attempt simply because —"

"And what about *my* personal honour?" Steenameert demanded, his voice trembling with emotion. "Do you think that honour is a prerogative of the aristocracy? Do you imagine that I could ever hold my head up again, knowing that I had cravenly forsaken my duty at the first whiff of danger?"

"Baten, this goes beyond duty."

"Not for me." Steenameert's voice had a new edge of hardness which made it almost unrecognizable. "Not for *me*!"

Toller paused for a few seconds, his eyes prickling painfully. "You may accompany me to Dussarra on one condition."

"You have but to name it, sir!"

"The condition is that you cease addressing me as 'sir'. We will go into this thing as private citizens, leaving the Sky Service and all its ways behind us. We will undertake the venture as friends and equals—is that understood?"

"I..." Steenameert's new-found assertiveness seemed to have deserted him. "That would be difficult for me ... for one of my upbringing..."

"Your upbringing counted for little a moment ago," Toller interrupted, grinning. "It is a long time since I have been chastised so vigorously."

Steennameert gave a sheepish grin. "I fear I may have lost my temper."

"Keep hold of it until we reach Dussarra—then you may say good riddance to it forever." Toller turned his attention to his alien captive. "What do you say, greyface?"

I say it is not too late for you to abandon this pointless exercise, Divivvidiv replied, breaking a long silence. *Why don't you try to use what little intelligence you have?*

"He hasn't understood a word of our discourse," Toller said to Steenameert. "And *he* calls *us* Primitives!"

Without speaking further Toller activated his propulsion unit and manoeuvred himself and the alien close to the nearer of the spaceships. The varnished, straight-grained timbers of the hull glowed in the sunlight with warm shades of brown. The ship had been assembled in the weightless zone from five cylindrical sections hauled up from Overland by skyship. It was four yards in diameter—and in the past had been regarded by Toller as a massive structure—but now, in

comparison with the alien station, it seemed totally inadequate for its purpose. Reminding himself that his grandfather had successfully crossed the interplanetary void in a similar vessel, Toller thrust his doubts aside.

He examined the circlet of crystal which bound the ship to the glassy plain, and turned again to Divivvidiv. "Is there any strength in that manacle? Is there likely to be any damage to the ship if I simply blast off?"

The crystal will fracture easily.

"Are you sure? Perhaps it would be better if you were to instruct the being in the machine to release its hold."

It is best if I do not communicate with the Xa at this time. The alien's face was hidden behind a reflective visor, but to Toller his words carried conviction. *Remember that I will be with you inside that barbaric contraption—it is in my interests to see that no harm befalls it.*

"Very well," Toller said, unfastening from his belt the coil of rope which tethered the alien and allowing the end to drift free. "My fellow Primitive and I have certain chores to carry out which demand our uninterrupted attention. I am going to leave you here for a short time—with a request that you do not stray. You will comply?"

I promise not to move an inch.

Toller had made his request with mock courtesy, knowing that the alien was incapable of changing his position, and had not expected a reply which seemed to match his own style of humour. It occurred to him, fleetingly, that the little exchange might have had some significance for the future if there had been any prospect of normal contact between the Dussarran and Kolcorronian cultures. As it was, he had more pressing concerns on his mind.

The rear section of the vessel was actually a specially designed skyship in which the customary square gondola had been replaced by a cylindrical spaceship section. Folded within it was a full-size balloon which gave crewmen the capability of taking the section down to a planetary surface and of rejoining the mother ship while it waited aloft. Toller had no use for the detachable module in the forthcoming mission because descent by balloon was both conspicuous and painfully slow.

"What do you think, Baten?" he said as they drifted in the thin cold air. "Is it worth trying to rid ourselves of the tail section? We have plenty of jacks, and I have no relish for the idea of lugging an extra engine and all those extra control mechanisms."

"The sealing mastic has been there a long time," Steenameert said doubtfully. "It will have worked its way into the leather seals, the wood, the pegs, the lashings... It will be like basalt. Even with jacks it could take four or five men to

separate the section from the main hull, and there's no telling what damage would be done in the process. On top of that, we would have to shorten all the control rods and reconnect them to the permanent engine..."

"To cut a long story short," Toller put in, "we should take the ship as it is. Very well! If you will be so kind as to retrieve our supply of parachutes and fallbags, I will inspect the ship—and then we will be on our way."

The flight to Dussarra produced little in the way of surprises for Toller.

Practically all that was known about the business of travelling to destinations beyond the Land/Overland pair came from notes made by liven Zavotle, who had been a member of the single historic expedition to Farland. Toller had studied abstracts from the notes during his training and was relieved to find them corresponding well with practical experience. He had enough to occupy his thoughts without any waywardness on the part of the ship or the cosmic environment.

The surrounding sky became black, exactly as predicted, and a short time later the ship warmed up, making it necessary for those on board to remove their insulated suits. According to the long-dead Zavotle, the bitter coldness of the weightless zone between the twin worlds was caused by atmospheric convection, and when a ship escaped into vacuum it was free to accept the sun's bountiful heat. Also as predicted, the meteor display—a permanent feature of the home worlds' night skies—could no longer be seen. Zavotle's explanation was that the meteors were still present, hurtling through space at unimaginable velocities, and that they only became visible on encountering a planet's atmosphere. The possibility of the ship being destroyed between heartbeats by an unseen rocky projectile was one that Toller did not care to dwell on.

He discovered that the steering of the spaceship was the single most demanding task, somewhat akin to balancing a pole on the end of a finger. The pilot's station on the topmost deck was equipped with a low-power telescope mounted parallel to the ship's longitudinal axis. It was necessary to keep the instrument's crosshairs fixed on a reference star, and doing so required close concentration and skilful balancing with the lateral jets.

Steennameert, in spite of his lack of experience, soon proved himself better at the job than Toller and, furthermore, claimed to enjoy long spells at the controls. That arrangement suited Toller quite well, giving him what he needed most—time in which to try assimilating all that had happened in a few crowded hours. He would lounge for lengthy periods in a restraint net on the circular top deck, sometimes half-asleep, sometimes watching Steennameert and Divivvidiv.

The latter had been highly apprehensive during the first hours of the flight, but had gradually regained his composure as it became evident that the ship was

not going to explode. He, too, spent much of his time in a restraint net, but not in repose. Dussarra, he had explained, was only eight million miles away from the twin worlds and preceding them in a closely matching orbit. Those facts simplified the parameters of the flight, but nevertheless the relevant calculations were arduous for one who was not a professional mathematician and working without computational aids.

At times Divivvidiv, using a pencil held oddly in slim grey fingers, made notes on a pad supplied to him by Toller. He gave frequent instructions to Steenameert about firing or closing down the main engine, or centring the astrogational crosshairs on a new target. Intermittently he went into a trance-like condition in which, Toller assumed, he was using telepathy or unknown senses to monitor the ship's spatial relationship with its destination. Another necessary assumption was that the alien was not communing with others of his species and setting up a trap for his captors.

It was in the interests of all concerned to complete the flight as quickly as possible, but Toller had been astonished when Divivvidiv—after less than an hour of assessing the ship's performance—had predicted a transit time of three to four days, with an allowance for certain variables. When Toller tried analyzing the figures he found himself having to accept the notion of travelling at speeds of well over 100,000 miles an hour, and he promptly abandoned the calculations. The bars of sunlight coming into the ship through the portholes seemed unmoving; the whorled and spangled universe outside was as serene and changeless as ever—so it was better to forget about the chilling dreamworld of mathematics and imagine himself gently drifting from one island to another in a glassy black sea.

One of the traits Toller shared with his grandfather was impatience—even a few days of forced inactivity being enough to unsettle him. He had read liven Zavotle's log of the Farland flight in its entirety and could recall a related passage word for word. *Our captain has taken to quitting the control deck for long periods. He spends hours at a time in the middle sections, wedged in place at a porthole, and seems to find some kind of solace in these reveries in which he does nothing but stare into the depths of the universe.*

Feeling oddly furtive and self-conscious. Toller occasionally emulated his grandfather, going down into the strange netherworld of the ship where the narrow rays of light from the ports created confusing patterns of shadow among the internal struts and the bins which housed supplies of power crystals, firesalt, food and water. He would position himself in a narrow space between two storage lockers, and simply allow his thoughts to drift while he gazed through the nearby porthole. The sound of the main engine was stronger there, the smell

of the hull's tarred canvas lining more noticeable, but he could think better in the solitude.

Inevitably, his thoughts often turned to the mysteries and dangers of the near future. It seemed incredible that not very long ago he had bemoaned the dearth of adventure in his life, the lack of any opportunity to prove himself worthy of his illustrious name. Now he was engaged in a venture which, although honourable, was so desperate that even the old Toller Maraquine might have counselled against it, one for which—try though he might—it was almost impossible to foresee a successful outcome.

The idea had come to him in an instant of total despair and he had seized on it gratefully and with manic certitude, seeing a clear-cut way through all the barriers and pitfalls of circumstance. It had all seemed so perfect. He could not be teleported to the alien planet in pursuit of his loved one—therefore he would fly there in a Kolcorronian ship and take the whole of Dussarra by surprise. Divivvidiv averred he was an unimportant member of his society and consequently without value as a hostage, but his claim was belied by his being in sole command of the great midpoint station. The stage was all set for a hero—armed with naught but daring, imagination and a trusty blade—to astound and confound the might of an alien world. There would be the swift, unseen descent by fallbag and parachute to a point near the enemy capital ... the clandestine penetration of the alien leader's citadel ... the bargaining sessions in which Toller held the upper hand ... the reunion with Vantara ... the return to Overland by way of teleporter and skyship or parachute ... the idyllic, aureate future with Vantara by his side...

You *fool!* The recriminations would sometimes come with the same devastating psychic force as the original preposterous idea, and in those moments Toller would writhe and almost moan aloud with self-loathing. Only one element of the bizarre situation remained changeless amidst the turmoil of his thoughts, giving him the resolve he needed to see the matter through. He had vowed to himself and to others that he would make his way to Vantara's side, and—that being the case—he had no option but to press forward, regardless of how slight the chances of success might be, even if it transpired that certain death lay ahead...

Viewed from a height of more than four thousand miles, the home world of the alien intruders looked remarkably similar to Land and Overland. The cloud cover consisted of the same patterns of broad flowing rivers breaking up into vortex streams or isolated whirlpools. It was only when Toller made his eyes refocus that he saw through the filigrees of shining vapour to the planetary

surface and realized that the proportion of land masses to oceans was lower than he would have expected. The predominant colour was blue, with only occasional patches of subdued ochres to indicate land.

"It looks as though we could all end up with wet arses," he said sombrely, gazing down through a porthole at the great convex shield of the planet.

It is not too late to abandon your insane scheme. Divivvidiv turned his black-drilled eyes towards Toller. *There is nothing at all to prevent you from going home and living out your life in security and comfort.*

"Are you trying to undermine our resolve?"

I am doing what you told me I must do in order to preserve my life—giving you sound information and advice.

"Do not become over-zealous," Toller said. "The only information I require from you at this stage concerns the drop to the surface. Are you positive you have made the due allowance for crosswinds? While I have no wish to descend in the sea, I have an equally strong aversion to the idea of landing in the heart of the city."

You can trust me—all relevant factors have been taken into consideration.

Divivvidiv had scarcely left his restraint net since the ship had been turned over at the midpoint of the flight, his time being spent in hushed meditation and the issuing of numerous demands for course and speed adjustments. Toller had formed the opinion that the alien, even with his awesome talents, had found it much more taxing to guide the ship while it was travelling "backwards" and he was referring to marker stars which were opposed to the direction of flight.

Now, however, with the ship in orbit at the fringes of Dussarra's atmosphere Divivvidiv was in a much more relaxed and accessible mood. It was obvious that he feared the descent through the planet's atmosphere, but—for some reason peculiar to his kind—the fact that it involved no hand-to-hand *killing* enabled him to face the ordeal with much the same fortitude as a reasonably courageous human.

He had already donned his silver skysuit in preparation for quitting the ship—an event due in less than one hour—and was concerning himself with his food supplies. When told that Kolcorronian rations consisted largely of strips of desiccated beef and fish, augmented by disks of compressed grain and dried fruit, he had insisted on bringing provisions of his own. The alien food seemed to consist mainly of varicoloured cubes of tough jelly which had been wrapped in gold foil. Divivvidiv had taken a number of them from a pocket and was carefully scrutinizing the gleaming blocks, possibly in search of a tidbit.

Toller was again struck by his composure and, doing his utmost to foresee adverse factors, wondered if Divivvidiv was in possession of whole realms of

knowledge of a kind which had not even been hinted at in all their telepathic exchanges. As an exercise in practical strategies, Toller tried to project his mind thousands of years into the future of the Kolcorronian civilization, with emphasis on the technology of warfare, and on the instant an alarming vision blossomed behind his eyes.

"Tell me something, greyface," he said. "That *thing* you call the Xa... It is a mere machine, isn't it?"

Basically—yes.

"And you have endowed it with the ability to see, with utmost clarity, objects which are thousands of miles away?"

Yes.

"It therefore seems eminently logical to me that your home world, the cradle of your civilization, would be plentifully provided with similar machines." Toller paused to let his words have effect and the alien was able to follow his line of thought unaided by speech.

You are quite wrong! Divivvidiv injected amusement into his reply. There are no devices detecting this ship and giving warning of its presence. We do not keep a watch on our skies. Why should we?

"To warn you of invading armies ... enemy forces."

But where would such invaders come from? And why should another culture act in a hostile manner towards Dussarra?

"Conquest," Toller said, beginning to wish he had never started the exchange. "The desire to conquer and rule..."

That is tribal thinking, Toller Maraquine—it has no place among civilized communities. Divivvidiv returned his attention to the sorting of his food cubes.

"Complacency is the enemy of..." Toller, to his annoyance, found himself unable to complete what he had hoped would be an aphorism. Becoming restless, he operated the handle of the air machine, mixing a fresh charge of firesalt with the water in its wire mesh reservoir. Divivvidiv had shown an interest in the device at the start of the flight, and had explained that air was made up of a mixture of gases, one of which—oxygen—supported life, fed fires and led to the rusting of iron. When firesalt came into contact with water it gave off copious quantities of oxygen, thus enabling the ship's crew to survive long journeys through interplanetary vacuum. Toller had made a written note of the new scientific knowledge for the benefit of interested parties back in Prad, even though he did not care to speculate on their chances of receiving it.

It would have been a simple matter to bring the ship down to a level where the surrounding air was breathable, shut down the main engine and bail out. That

way they would have been quitting a vessel which appeared to be at rest, and the whole business of getting into the fallbags and linking them together would have been comparatively easy. However, Divivvidiv had objected that the inert ship would then follow roughly the same path down through the atmosphere as the three parachutists, arriving at the surface like a bomb which could possibly claim Dussarran lives.

Toller had not been unduly alarmed at that prospect—he regarded the entire alien population as sworn enemies—but he had accepted the argument that his bargaining position could be compromised by the unnecessary loss of life. There was also the consideration that he wanted to land stealthily, and not to the accompaniment of a huge explosion.

For those reasons the ship had been turned on its side after being brought into the atmosphere and had been aimed in a direction which, according to Divivvidiv, would allow it to fall harmlessly into the sea. The main engine was still firing, with the controls lashed at the minimum thrust setting, and now Toller and Steenameert were faced with the problem of keeping hold of their prisoner while abandoning a ship which was building up a respectable speed. Divivvidiv, being much lighter than the other two, would fall through the air at a lesser rate. He had only to get free once and the laws of physics would see to it that his escape was made good as the vertical separation between him and the humans increased.

Toller had been very much aware of the problem and had insisted on all three being connected by a single strong line before emerging from the ship. There was only one exit, which was located in the middle section, and it had been kept as small as possible to preserve the structural integrity of the hull. In consequence, the three had been forced to cling to one another in a kind of distasteful intimacy while Toller pulled back the greased bolts. The door was a truncated cone, so that interior pressure would force it tighter into the seals of the frame, and it took all the power of his free arm to wrench the crafted wooden disk backwards into the ship.

A howling blast of icy air battered at Toller's skysuit. Tightening his grip on Divivvidiv's slight figure and Steenameert's encircling arm, he launched all of them out into cold white sunlight. They tumbled in the ship's slipstream. An instant later their ears were assailed by a stuttering roar and the universe turned a blinding white as they were engulfed in the choking gases of the condensation trail.

The roiling dazzlement went on for a matter of seconds, and then they were adrift in the sterile sunlit air, hundreds of miles above the surface of Dussarra. All about them was a panoply of stars, galaxies and frozen comets in which the

ship's exhaust formed a glowing cloud as, holding to a freakishly steady course, the vessel dwindled from their perceptions. The only way now in which Toller could return to his home world was by using the alien magic of a matter transmitter, but he had little time at that stage to ruminate over the situation.

Being adrift in a planet's upper atmosphere, with nothing but thousands of miles of empty air yawning below, was a harrowing experience even for a veteran Kolcorronian skyman, and Toller knew it had to be correspondingly worse for Divivvidiv. The alien was not quaking, but the movements of his arms and legs seemed aimless, and there were no wisps of mental communication from him.

"Let's get him into his fallbag before we all freeze to death," Toller said. Steenameert nodded and they drew themselves close to Divivvidiv on the common line. The alien's bulky parachute hampered them in the task of drawing the fleece-lined sack up over his head and adjusting the various closures and ventilation ring.

This is more comfortable than I had expected, Divivvidiv told them. I may be able to sleep and dream during the fall—but what will happen if I have difficulty in getting out of the bag when it is time to use the parachutes?

"Put your mind at ease," Toller called into the neck of the bag. "We will not allow you to bounce."

The scarf covering most of his face was already stiff with frozen exhalations and in spite of the protection of his skysuit he was beginning to shiver. He separated from the alien and struggled into his own fallbag, a job he accomplished slowly because of the awkward presence of his sword. He began to feel oddly guilty as he realized he was in a way looking forward to a spell in the bag's snug and undemanding warmth.

As soon as he had cocooned himself he closed his eyes and prepared to doze. He was falling towards the planet, but it was going to be quite some time before his speed built up enough to produce slipstream sounds. For the present all was quiet, and he was very tired, and nothing was required of him...

Toller awoke an indeterminate time later and knew at once that there was darkness outside. Dussarra's shadow had swung round to encompass the three specks of life which, having surrendered themselves to the planet's gravity, were making the long pilgrimage from the fringes of space. Suddenly curious about how the alien world would look at night, Toller roused himself, opened the neck of the fallbag and peered out.

He could see the featureless shapes representing Steenameert and Divivvidiv close by, outlined against the silver blazes of the universe, but his gaze was captured and held by the spectacle of the enigmatic planet laid out below him.

The visible hemisphere was mostly in darkness, with only a slim line of blue-white radiance adorning its eastern edge. Toller had seen Land and Overland in similar conditions many times, but there the areas where night held sway had always been dominated by a slumberous blackness which was only relieved by astronomical reflection. He was unprepared for his first glimpse of the night side of a world which was the home of an advanced technical civilization.

The major land masses, which had appeared insignificant in daytime, were glittering networks of yellow light. Islands appeared brighter in contrast to the surrounding darkness, but even the oceans were plentifully speckled with points of brilliance which conjured in Toller's mind visions of gargantuan ships, as large as cities, engaged in global commerce. The planet might have been a vast metal sphere pierced in a million places to emit light from an interior source.

Toller gazed down at it for a long time and then, feeling subdued and chastened, pulled the neck of the fallbag up over his head and closed it to shut out the intrusive cold.

He knew he had been deceived and trapped the instant his feet touched the ground.

The three parachutes had opened almost in unison above a night-black landscape in which the only sign of habitation was a thin line of lights, several miles away to the west. There had been no wind to complicate the touchdown for the inexperienced Divivdiviv, and Toller had felt a resurgence of his old optimism as the trio sank into a starlit expanse of grassland. He had prepared himself for a gentle impact, the sensation of his boots going into yielding turf, the feel and smell of grass...

All visual indicators had remained unchanged. As far as the evidence of his eyes was concerned, Toller had touched down in what could have been the rolling savannahs of his home world. Steenameert and Divivdiviv were not far away to his left. They too were standing in grass—and yet Toller could feel flat masonry beneath his feet. He and his two companions were alone in an open stretch of empty pasture—and yet he could hear movement all around, sense the pressure of minds.

"Defend yourself, Baten," he shouted, drawing his sword. "We are betrayed!"

He turned towards Divivdiviv, snorting in his rage, but the swaddled figure of the alien was nowhere to be seen. It was as if he had ceased to exist.

Put the weapon down, Toller Maraquine. Divivdiviv's tone was both kindly and contemptuous. *You are surrounded by more than a thousand stability officers—many of them armed—and any hostile action on your part will most surely result in your death.*

Toller shook his head and spoke in a growl. "I can take many of them with me."

Possibly, but if that were the way of it you would never see your female again. She is only a few miles from here and within a matter of minutes you could be in her company. Alive you might, possibly, be of some comfort or service to her; but if you are dead...

Toller allowed his sword to fall, heard it ringing on stone pavement, and his eyes filled with tears of frustration.

Chapter 14

It was not until Toller and Steenameert had submitted to the pressure of many hands, and to having their wrists bound together behind their backs, that the alien scales were lifted from their eyes. Retinal communications were permitted to pass to the brain, unaffected by external forces, and suddenly the two Kolcorronians could see normally again.

Night still reigned, but the perceived starlit meadows had been replaced by a complex diorama of dimly lit buildings in the middle distance and ranks of shadowy Dussarran figures in the foreground. Toller guessed he was near the centre of an enormous plaza. The surrounding buildings were delineated by gentle curves, in contrast to the rectangular architecture of his home world, and their outlines were punctuated by slim trees which swayed continuously although the humid night air was perfectly still. The only familiar element Toller could find was the face of Steenameert, turned towards him above a sea of industrious, seething, black-clad alien figures.

"It seems that you have won," Toller said, fighting to keep his voice steady. "Sorcery prevails over strength."

Divivvidiv moved a little closer through the crush of odorous bodies. *For your own good, Toller Maraquine, put behind you all your primitive ideas about sorcery. There are no unfair advantages in nature. What is commonplace to my people seems magical to yours, but that is simply because we are more advanced in every branch of learning.*

"It is as good as magic when men are deceived by their own eyes."

That was simply done. When I was close enough to the ground I was able to enlist the telepathic aid of some of my fellow Dussarrans. As soon as you and your companion were sufficiently outnumbered we were able to dictate what you could see, in the same way that a crowd can drown out a single voice. Nothing magical about it!

"But you cannot deny that luck was on your side," Toller grumbled, feeling himself being pushed towards a vehicle which had arrived in the vicinity. "For us to land where we did—so close to a city, in the midst of your lackeys... That had to be magic or blind luck."

Neither! Divivvidiv and Toller were losing sight of each other in the press of

bodies, but the alien's silent words were clear. *As soon as I had given warning of what was happening my people took control of the local wind cells and guided us to this spot. I told you at the outset, Toller Maraquine—your mission had NO chance of succeeding.*

I am now returning to my post, so it is unlikely that we will ever see each other again, but you have no need to fear for your life. Unlike you Primitives, we Dussarrans do not...

Uncharacteristically for Divivvidiv, the incisive quality of his thought processes faded. There was a moment of woolliness, shadings of what Toller half-identified as guilt, and then the psychic contact was broken. The concept of telepathy was so new to Toller that he felt a dull amazement at even being able to think in such terms, but he was left with the conviction that the alien had suffered an unexpected crisis of conscience, perhaps triggered by the stresses of the fall from the edge of space.

Guilt! The word was a spiteful mosquito hovering and dipping in Toller's confused consciousness. *Is greyface lying to me? Are Baten and I being tricked? Are we being led meekly to our deaths?*

Clumsily and inexpertly, he tried to reach out with his mind to the one Dussarran he knew, but there was only an echoing mental silence. Divivvidiv had withdrawn, was lost behind the palisades of his previous existence, and there was no time for retrospection. The vehicle which had nuzzled through the nocturnal ferment of the alien cityscape looked like nothing so much as a huge black egg. It floated a hand's breadth above the seamless pavement. An opening appeared in its side with no apparent aid from mechanisms that Toller could visualize—in one instant the shell was complete, in the next there was a circular entrance to a redly glowing interior. Dozens of hands were pushing him and Steenameert towards it.

Toller's first instinct was to resist with all the power he could muster, but one part of him had somehow come to hope that Divivvidiv was not entirely his enemy. It was a slim hope—based on little more than certain nuances of thought and the notion that the alien might have a sense of humour—but it was the only dim guide star remaining to him.

With Steenameert jostling against him he clambered into the vehicle, feeling it rock slightly under the shifting of their weight. The door flowed itself out of existence, like molten metal closing in response to surface tension, and a sudden pressure under foot told them the vehicle was rising into the night sky. There were no seats, but that was of no importance in the cramped interior because the thickly quilted skysuits of the two Kolcorronians largely filled the available space. It was easier to remain standing. Toller had been too hot for some time,

but was only becoming aware of it as stealthy rivulets of sweat darted down his back.

"Well, Baten," he said dispiritedly, "I gave you ample warning about what might happen."

Steenameert mustered a smile. "I have no complaints. I am going to see sights the like of which I had never imagined, and my life is in no danger."

"That's if we can believe what greyface said—he has already lied to us."

"For a reason! This time he has nothing to gain by telling us an untruth."

"I suppose you are right." Toller was reminded of the odd wavering, the telepathic stains of guilt and self-reproach in Divivvidiv's last communication, but he had no time to pursue the line of thought. He and Steenameert swayed against each other as the direction of their weight shifted. There was a barely perceptible jolt as the vehicle came to rest. A small hole appeared in the side and rippled outwards in the dull metal to become a circular doorway.

Beyond it was a kind of short corridor which seemed to be fashioned from a mottled glassy tube of elliptical cross-section. The material was blurrily streaked with grey, yellow and orange, and was either lit from behind or was giving off an even glow of its own. Toller looked to his left and right and saw that the near end of the tube met the outer shell of the transporter in a curved seam so neat that it would have been impossible to slide a strip of finest paper into it. He transferred his attention to the far end of the corridor. It terminated in an ovoidal wall at the centre of which was a small circular aperture which continuously opened and shrank in a manner which for Toller, exhausted and emotionally drained though he was, had to have biological implications.

"Is somebody trying to make us feel welcome?" he said to Steenameert as he started forward, moving clumsily in his voluminous skysuit, hands still tied behind his back. As he and Steenameert reached the end of the corridor the aperture in the wall rolled back to give them clear access to a large and complicated enclosed space, a circular hall rimmed with stairs and galleries. Imposing though the alien cathedral might have been to Toller in his normal state of mind, its architectural vistas now flowed outwards in his vision, centring all of his attention on the small group of women who were running in his direction.

And foremost among them was the Countess Vantara!

"Toller!" she screamed, her beautiful features transformed into a mask of inhumanly enhanced desire. "Toller, my love! You came, you came, you came... I should have known it would be you!"

She hurled herself against him with such force that he was almost driven backwards. Her arms went around his neck and she kissed him with wet lips and

urgently probing tongue. Toller was both thrilled and gratified, senses overwhelmed to the extent that he scarcely noticed the stockier form of Lieutenant Pertree moving behind him. The lieutenant began to untie his hands, while the three remaining members of the crew converged on Steenameert with similar intent. Vantara pushed Toller back to arm's length, still clasping his neck, and it was only then that her eyes began to take stock of the true situation.

"You're a prisoner!" she accused. "You have been captured, just like us!" She recoiled from Toller, her expression changing to one of disappointment and anger. "Did your ship also blunder into that strange reef?"

"No. I approached it in daylight and managed to get by. On reaching Prad and being told that your ship had failed to arrive, I immediately set out to find you."

"Where are your forces?"

Toller rubbed his newly freed wrists. "There are no forces—Baten is my only companion."

Vantara's jaw sagged as she shot an incredulous glance to her lieutenant. "You set out—a general commanding an army of one—to challenge an invader!"

"At that time I had no way of knowing there was an enemy presence," Toller said stiffly. "My only thought was of your safety. Besides, two men or a thousand—what difference would it have made?"

"Can this be the *real* Toller Maraquine who preaches defeatism, or is it an impostor conjured up by those foul beings who deny us our freedom?" Vantara turned away before Toller could protest and walked quickly towards the nearest stair.

First I'm too foolhardy—then I'm too timid, Toller thought, feeling both wounded and baffled. In his confusion he stared at the three young women in ranker uniforms who were attending to Steenameert. They were helping him out of his cumbersome skysuit, and at the same time—their welcome to him apparently undiminished—were smiling and plying him with questions. Steenameert looked embarrassed but gratified.

"You must excuse my aristocratic commander," Lieutenant Pertree said, gazing up at Toller with a wry glint in her eye. "The terms of our detention here could hardly be described as onerous, but the countess—being of royal blood, and therefore possessing an exquisite degree of sensitivity—finds the life much more harrowing than would a commoner."

Toller was almost grateful for the flicker of anger which brought reality into sharp focus. "I remember you, lieutenant, and I see that you are as insubordinate and disloyal as ever."

Pertree sighed. "I remember you, captain, and I see that you are as besotted and calf-eyed as ever."

"Lieutenant, I will not tolerate that kind of..." Toller allowed the sentence to die, suddenly recalling that he had only permitted Steenameert to accompany him into the unknown on condition that they discard all the stultifying appurtenances of rank and class. He smiled apologetically and began ridding himself of the stifling swaddles of his skysuit.

"I'm sorry," he said. "The old ways die hard. I have heard your given name more than once, but confess to having forgotten it..."

"Jerene."

He smiled. "My name is Toller. May we pledge friendship and in consequence present a united front against the common enemy?" He had expected the sturdy lieutenant to appear mollified to some extent, and therefore he was surprised when a look of alarm manifested itself on her rounded features.

"It must be true," she breathed, suddenly losing her air of case-hardened composure. "You would never have spoken that way in normal circumstances. Tell me, *Toller*, have we been transported to another world? Are we lost forever? Is this prison on a strange planet millions of miles from Overland?"

"Yes." Toller saw that the three other women had begun listening intently to his words. "How could you fail to know such things?"

"Night came upon us when we were two hours below the datum plane," Jerene said in a small, reflective voice. "It was decided that we would continue at reduced speed through the hours of darkness and carry out the inversion manoeuvre at first light..."

She went on to describe how the crew, most of them sleeping, had been thrown into a panic by a great shuddering groan from the balloon. It had been accompanied by the sound of the four acceleration struts breaking and ripping into the material of the envelope. Almost at once choking billows of mignon gas had spewed downwards around the crew from the balloon mouth as the flimsy structure collapsed inwards. Finally, to add to the terror and confusion, the gondola had coasted into the writhing folds of the ruined envelope and had been swallowed by them.

It had taken fear-protracted minutes for the bewildered astronauts to fight clear of the wreckage. Enough light was being reflected from Land for them to make the incredible discovery that their ship had collided with a crystalline barricade which appeared to span the horizons like a dull-glowing frozen sea. And only furlongs away—wonder piled upon wonder—had been the outline of a fantastic castle, exotic and enigmatic, silhouetted against the silvered cosmos.

Somehow they had managed to retrieve enough personal propulsion units to enable them to fly to the castle. Somehow they had managed to locate a door in its metallic surface.

They had entered, and—*somehow*—had found themselves, with no perceptible lapse of time, prisoners in a grey-and-yellow cathedral...

"It is much as I suspected," Toller said when the lieutenant had finished. "Something told me that she ... that all of you were still alive."

"But what *happened* to us?"

"The Dussarrans employ a gas which quickly renders those who breathe it insensible. It must have—"

"We deduced that much for ourselves," Jerene interrupted, "but what happened after that? We have been told that we were magically transported to another world, but we have only the monsters' word for that. We believe we are somewhere inside the castle. It is true that we have normal weight—as though standing on solid ground—but that could be more magic."

Toller shook his head. "I'm sorry, but what you have been told is true. Our captors have the ability to travel through the space between the stars at the speed of thought. You have indeed been transported, in the blink of an eye, to their home world of Dussarra."

His words drew cries of mingled concern and disbelief from the listening women. A tall, snub-nosed blonde in the uniform of a skycorporal laughed and whispered something to the woman next to her. It came to Toller that the lessons in cosmology and galactic history that he and Steenameert had received from Divivvidiv had brought about fundamental changes in their inner selves, separating them from the rest of their kind. He got a slight but uncomfortable insight into how he, while steeped in ignorance, must have appeared to Divivvidiv.

"How do *you* know that all the humbug about being magicked through the heavens is true?" Jerene challenged. "You have to go by what you have been told, just like the rest of us."

"Far from it!" Toller replied, beginning to divest himself of his own skysuit. "When Baten and I entered the castle, as you call it, we took its corpse-faced master prisoner at swordpoint. And we brought him here as a hostage in a good Kolcorronian ship—therefore we can testify that all of us, at this very moment, are millions of miles away from Overland. We are on the home planet of the invaders."

Jerene's eyes widened and as she gazed up at Toller her face became tinged with pink. "You did all that for:..." She glanced towards the stair by which Vantara had departed the company. "You took one of those ancient ships from the Defence Group ... and flew it to another world ... all because..."

"We bagged and parachuted all the way to the ground with our prisoner," Steenameert put in, breaking a lengthy silence. "It was only then that the cursed

scarecrows overwhelmed our senses and blinded us to the forces which lay in ambush. Had it been a fair and honourable contest things would have been very different. We would have walked in here with our hostage—who would have been quaking and in fear of his life because of the blade that lay across his throat—and then we would have bartered him for your freedom."

"I must report this to the captain." Jerene had become slightly breathless, and the pupils of her eyes seemed to have distended as they hunted over Toller's face. "She should be apprised of all the facts."

"She believes us still to be in our own weightless zone!" Toller sighed with relief and smiled as he realized why Vantara's attitude towards him had shifted so rapidly. "It was only natural that she should have expected me to arrive at the head of an armada. It was only natural that she should have felt a certain disappointment."

"Yes, but had she been a little less impatient..." Steenameert abandoned his comment and lowered his head.

Toller glared at him. "What are you saying, Baten?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all!"

"Sir?" The tall blonde stepped forward as she addressed Toller. "Can you tell us how long we have been here?"

"Why? Can't you count the days?"

"There is no day or night within this dome. The light never changes."

Toller, who had been trying to reconcile himself to the idea of being imprisoned for a long time, found the prospect of living in continuous even light strangely depressing. "I would say you have been here some twenty-five days. But what about your meals? Do they not mark the days?"

"*Meals!*" the blonde gave a wry smile. "Each cell has a basket which the monsters constantly replenish with cubes of... Well, each of us has a different opinion about what we are forced to eat."

"Spiced bluehorn hoof," another tall woman—a swarthy, brown-eyed skyprivate—suggested in aggrieved tones.

"Spiced bluehorn *shit*" the remaining flier put in with an exaggerated scowl, bringing snorts of amusement from her companions. She had cropped brown hair which made an ill match for her conventionally pretty face.

"These are Tradlo, Mistekka and Arvand," Jerene said, indicating the three rankers in turn. "And, as you will have noticed, they have already forgotten how to conduct themselves in the presence of an officer."

"Rank no longer means anything to me." Toller nodded an informal greeting to the women. "Speak as you will; do as you will."

"In that case..." Arvand shimmied to Steenameert's side, clasped his arm and

gave him a warm smile. "It is difficult to sleep in a lonely bed—don't you agree?"

"Not fair!" the blonde Tradlo cried, disconcerting Steenameert further by gripping his other arm. "All rations must be shared equally!"

Toller had an urge to move off in pursuit of Vantara, but it was obvious from Jerene's manner that she was eager to go on speaking to him. He acquiesced when she turned away from the others, implicitly creating a space in which they could converse discreetly about matters of consequence.

"Toller, I am sorry that I have shown a tendency to make little of you," she began hesitantly. "You always seemed to bluster so much ... and there was that sword ... You made it so obvious that you longed to emulate your grandfather that—the logic of it now escapes me—all who met you assumed your ambitions to be in vain.

"But for anyone to do what you have done ... for you to have flown one of those antiquated wooden barrels through the black deeps of space to another world ... for you simply to *be* here...

"All I can say is that Vantara is the luckiest woman in all of history, and that you will have no need, *ever again*, to stand in the shadow of your grandfather. There can never be any doubt that you and he were peers."

Toller blinked to ease a sudden smarting in his eyes. "I value what you say, but all I did..."

"Tell me something." Jerene switched to a tone of practicality rather sooner than Toller might have liked. "Have the monsters cast a spell over us? How is it that we can hear what they say, even when they are not in our presence, even when there is no sound? Is it magic?"

"There is no magic," Toller explained, again aware of the gulf which had opened between him and his kind. "It is the Dussarran way. They have progressed far beyond the need for shaping words with their mouths. They speak mind-to-mind, no matter how great the distance involved. Have these things not been explained to you?"

"Not a word. We are animals in a zoo as far as they are concerned."

"I suppose I received my education because the scarecrow I dealt with was buying time, preserving his life." Toller looked around the galleried dome with distaste. "When do the Dussarrans communicate with you?"

"There is one who seems to be known as the Director," Jerene replied. "He will speak to us for hours at a time—always asking questions about our lives on Overland, about our families, about our food, farming methods, the differences between men's clothing and women's clothing... Nothing is too trivial for him.

"Then there is another one—possibly a female—who gives us our orders."

"What manner of orders?"

Jerene shrugged. "When to leave our cells and come down here to the main floor ... that sort of thing. We stay here while the food and water is being replenished up there by one of the monsters."

"Does this so-called Director ever visit you in person? Do you ever get Dussarrans who seem to be important figures in their own society making close inspections?"

"It is difficult for us to tell. We sometimes see groups of the monsters behind that partition, but..." Jerene indicated a glazed, box-like structure which enclosed one of the entrances to the dome, then she gave Toller a thoughtful look. "Why do you enquire of such things, Toller?"

He gave her a thin smile. "I have lost one perfectly good hostage—now I am in the market for another."

"But after what you have told us... It is impossible to escape from here."

"You are wrong on that point," Toller said quietly, his expression becoming sombre. "It is possible to escape from *any* stronghold ... provided that one's heart is sufficiently set on it ... provided that one is prepared to risk making the ultimate escape..."

Toller and Steenameert were arguing about traditional and modern methods of constructing furniture, with emphasis on the design of chairs.

"Don't forget that we have had iron for only fifty years or so," Toller said. "The design of brackets and angle braces will improve; the design of woodscrews will improve."

"That is of little import," Steenameert countered. "Furniture should be regarded as a form of art. A chair should be regarded as a sculpture as much as a contrivance for supporting fat arses. Any artist will tell you that wood should only be mated to wood. Tenons and dovetails are *natural*, Toller, and not only are they much stronger than your wood-and-metal hybrids, they have a *rightness* which..."

He continued speaking as Toller knelt and tested the gallery flooring with a heavy webbing-repair needle taken from his emergency pouch. Toller looked up at him and shook his head, signifying that the floor construction was too strong to be ripped upwards in a surprise raid on anybody who happened to be underneath. They were in the part of the first gallery directly above the enclosure where, according to Lieutenant Pertree, groups of Dussarrans sometimes gathered to observe their captives.

"Yes, but ever since the Migration only the rich have been able to employ the services of competent joiners," Toller said as he straightened up. "Surely it is

better for the ordinary citizen and his family to have *something* to plank their arses on—and I doubt if many of the said arses are fat—than for them to squat on the floor."

Toller and Steenameert were openly talking about furniture design—a subject which evoked mental images of joints and frames—and at the same time were searching for weak points in the structure of their prison. They continued the contrived discussion as they made their way downstairs to the enclosure itself. They were novices, true primitives, in the darkly glimmering and bottomless world of telepathic communication, but they had gleaned enough from their encounter with Divivdiviv to believe that the aliens were fallible and could be deceived. It was likely that attempts were being made to eavesdrop on their innermost thought processes, but Kolcorronians were warriors by instinct and had a talent for misleading enemies.

"You can't deny that doors have been improved by the addition of iron hinges and fittings," Toller said as he reached the enclosure. In general it was surprisingly similar to what an artisan from Land or Overland would have built for the same purpose. It was a rectangular three-element structure with one edge attached to the wall on each side of an entrance to the dome. The three faces ran from the floor to the underside of the first gallery, and were glazed from waist-level upwards.

Still arguing about historical developments in his home world's carpentry, Toller casually leaned against a corner of the enclosure and felt it shift slightly. He stood head and shoulders above all the aliens he had seen, and furthermore was built in much bulkier proportions, from which facts he estimated that his body weight was at least three times that of the average Dussarran. His physical power could be factorized upwards again, because of differences in muscle density, making him a force that Divivdiviv and his kind were unaccustomed to dealing with. There was a good possibility that a structure which a Dussarran saw as a formidable barrier could be breached by a single charge from Toller and Steenameert.

The alien captors had many undeniable advantages over the handful of Kolcorronians, but—Toller hoped—they were too sure of themselves, too complacent. Their best thinkers seemed to be expending their energies on remote abstracts, such as the dissolution of galaxies, while dismissing more immediate threats from close at hand. They were like high kings preparing defences against global enemies, and all the while ignoring the body servant with the phial of poison or the smiling concubine with the slim dagger...

"I concede the point about doors and door furniture, but that is. a special case," Steenameert said, nodding significantly as he tested a panel with his foot.

"Metal has a natural function there, but it will always be out of place when you come to chairs and tables."

"We shall see what we shall see," Toller replied as they continued their leisurely circuit of the dome.

They had been imprisoned for an indeterminate time, only a few hours, but already Toller's impatient and turbulent nature was rebelling against the monotony of confinement. A telepathic voice with indefinable female undertones had directed him and Steenameert to particular cells on the first gallery. Toller had inspected his briefly and then, being uncooperative on principle, had announced that he did not like it and was going to use another. As the cells were identical, and did not even have doors, there was no reason to prefer one above any other, but the reaction he had hoped to provoke did not occur.

He had lain for a while on the spongy oblong that was his bed, but had quickly become bored and had tried to visit Vantara in her cell. His hope had been that her attitude towards him would have improved once she had learned from Jerene that it had been impossible for him to have arrived at the head of an army of rescuers. She had, however, remained aloof and uncommunicative in her little enclave—her cell was flanked by those of the other women. Trying to be philosophical about it, Toller had decided that being informed she was a prisoner millions of miles from home—instead of only a few thousand—was good enough grounds for any woman to lapse into a spell of depression.

Becoming even more restless, he had explored every gallery of the dome. It was big enough to accommodate twenty times as many captives as at present, but none of the featureless compartments showed any sign of previous occupation. Had the place been designed as a prison? Did the Dussarrans have such things as prisons? Or was the dome, with its sterile shadowless illumination, more the equivalent of a zoo? A birdcage?

The torrent of questions caused a stirring in Toller's memory. Just before he and Divivvidiv had parted company, possibly forever, the little alien's mental presence seemed to have been disturbed by a dark emotion. Toller had intuitively recognized it as guilt—and in retrospect that identification appeared more and more accurate. At the time Toller had wondered if he and Steenameert were being led away to be slaughtered, but his suspicions had been ill founded—so what had been causing the turmoil in Divivvidiv's alien soul?

There was also the matter of the Xa—that fantastic sea of living crystal—and the reason for its presence in the weightless zone between Land and Overland. Now that Toller's consciousness had been saturated with exotic concepts, now that strangeness had in a way become the norm, he could accept the notion that

the Xa's function was to hurl an entire world into the heart of a galaxy which was millions of light years distant.

When he had first encountered the proposition it had been remote from the realities of life on the sister planets. It had been a conceptual soap bubble; a gossamer palace constructed from pale-tinted abstracts—*but now everything was different!*

He and Vantara and some loyal companions were imprisoned on that ill-fated world, and ... and...

Toller's brow wrinkled as other pertinent memories began to flicker behind his eyes. During his first antagonistic meeting with Divivvidiv the alien had told him that the intergalactic leap was due to take place in about six days' time. Had it been *six* days? Yes, that memory held true ... and the flight to Dussarra had taken roughly four days ... and more precious time had slipped away during the long fall from the edge of space...

Icy sweat prickled through Toller's skin as he realized that the time available to the small band of lost Kolcorronians could conveniently be reckoned in hours.

Or perhaps only minutes...

Chapter 15

The sight of black-clad, corpse-faced figures assembling behind the metal-and-glass screen came like the answer to a prayer.

Toller froze in mid-stride—trying to control the tumult in his mind, trying to think and at the same time not to think. His realization that the stupendous leap to a remote part of the universe had to take place in the very near future had filled him with pessimism. He needed a new hostage to give him even the faintest hope of escaping from Dussarra, but his off-hand way of mentioning the subject to Jerene had been a disguise for despair. His own society had faced its fair share of crises, and, although there were no real parallels, he could not imagine any official or scientific group on Overland deciding to visit a zoo at a comparable time.

And yet—in the aseptic and cheerless luminance of the dome—a few of the enemy were gathering, perhaps incautiously, perhaps making themselves vulnerable to a determined assault. The odds against a Kolcorronian success were vanishingly small, but the mere existence of odds—no matter how infinitesimal—was the only spur that Toller needed...

He strode across the open floor to where Steenameert and two of the rankers—Mistekka and Arvand—were sitting cross-legged and engaged in discussion. The women looked up at him without moving, but Baten hurriedly got his feet as soon as he saw Toller's expression.

"Come on, Baten," Toller said in a low voice. "Keep your mind on whatever it was, but follow me—this may be our only chance." He looked down at the women. "Go at once and tell Vantara and Jerene to make ready to leave. We may have to move quickly."

He turned and walked towards the enclosure, which now held about ten Dussarrans, with Steenameert at his side. "We will take the right hand edge of the box ... yes, the Kailian black grape does make the most distinctive wine ... I think we can hit hardest coming from the right ... but it contains too much acid for my taste..."

Blanking all structured thought from his mind, surrendering himself to a crimson rage, Toller broke into a fast, loping run. The side of the enclosure expanded in his vision and he saw white-orbed, grey faces turning in his

direction. He was moving at high speed now and could hear Steenameert snorting as he strove to keep pace. The metal-and-glass structure filled his view, and the voice of instinct was screaming at him to halt or risk terrible injury.

Snarling like an animal, Toller hit the enclosure with his shoulder and felt the edge of it tear free from the wall of the dome. Steenameert impacted with it at almost the same instant, having chosen to launch himself feet first at a lower panel. The side of the enclosure crumpled and was driven inwards, trapping several Dussarrans in the narrowing angle between it and the front wall. A huge pane of glass fell on Steenameert as he was scrambling to his feet, chilling Toller with images of brittle daggers, but the sheet remained intact and bounced harmlessly to the floor. Some of the Dussarrans were emitting thin mewling cries—the first sounds Toller had heard these aliens make with their mouths—as they backed away in obvious panic.

"Do not be in such haste about leaving," Toller shouted, his shoulder hard against the metal panel, keeping pressure on the trapped Dussarrans. "We have three of your number here and they may require medical attention."

He examined the haphazardly acquired captives. Two of them were still on their feet, held upright and immobile by the compressive force that he was exerting, their livid faces regarding him from a distance of inches. The third alien had dropped down to a crouching position inside the metal sandwich, possibly unconscious or dead. As Toller glared ferociously at the pair who were standing, he made no attempt to disguise the revulsion inspired in him by their noseless faces and tremulous, black-lipped mouths. They maintained a petrified silence, but Toller's head was filled with a confused telepathic yammering. It was a mental distillation of pure fear—an exhilarating reminder that the Dussarrans were not a warrior breed—and therefore Toller saw it as a favourable omen as far as the hopes of his compatriots were concerned.

"See if the women are ready to proceed," he called out to Steenameert. "In the meantime I will persuade the scarecrows to listen to reason."

Steennameert nodded and darted away to where the female astronauts—Vantara among them—were clustered at the foot of a stair. Toller returned his attention to the scene within the enclosure. The aliens, all of them identical to his gaze in their scrappy dark garments, were poised near the doorway which led out of the dome. Their soupy body odour pervaded the confined space.

"Which of you is the leader?" Toller demanded. "Which of you nightmares can speak for the others?"

The aliens made no response. Seconds dragged by in which they did nothing but stare at Toller with eyes which were like black-holed chips of white porcelain. Although no telepathic voices were ranging words in his mind, he had

no doubt that silent alarms were being transmitted to other Dussarrans—a thought which prompted him to reinforce his words with action.

"I see that a little firmness is called for," he said giving the aliens the peaceful smile with which he often prefaced an act of violence. It was a trait he had inherited from his grandfather, he had been told, and he had half-consciously cultivated it since his youth. Without further warning he changed his stance and abruptly redoubled the force he was exerting on the wall panel. The aliens caught between it and the front of the enclosure gasped aloud, their ashen faces contorting with pain, and Toller was almost sure he heard the fracturing of a fragile bone.

Stop that, you savage! One of the group by the exit took a step forward. *There can be no excuse for such barbarism!*

"Perhaps not," Toller replied, giving a slight bow, "but if you and your loathsome kin had not abducted my friends and penned them like beasts—which is *your* kind of barbarism—you would never have been exposed to *my* kind of barbarism. Do you see the principle involved? Or is the concept of natural justice cherished only by untutored Primitives?"

Primitive is an appropriate word for you, Toller Maraquine, came the alien's voiceless reply. *Can you not understand that it is impossible for you to leave this world?*

"And can you not understand that I *will* leave this world—one way or another? And if it should transpire that death is my only escape, I will take some of your kind along the same road." Toller glanced to his left and saw that the rest of the humans had reached the enclosure. To his surprise, Vantara was at the rear of the group and was looking at him with uncertain, troubled eyes.

"We are with you. Toller," Steenameert called out.

"Excellent!" Toller returned his attention to the alien speaker. "You were elected spokesman, so I am going to assume that you possess some degree of some importance. You therefore will have the honour of being my principal hostage. Come to my side!"

What if I refuse?

"I have scarcely begun to squeeze these fine specimens of Dussarran manhood, and already their puny bones are beginning to crack." Toller's two upright captives moved their heads anxiously as he shifted his weight.

If you kill my deputies you will lose what little advantage you have at this moment.

"That would only be the start of the killing," Toller said, longing for the reassurance of his sword. He had judged the Dussarrans to be lacking in physical courage, but to his growing unease the alien confronting him was proving to be

unexpectedly stubborn. In appearance he was not distinguished from his fellows—the multiplex costume of pendant dark-hued scraps seemed to be universal among the aliens—but this individual conveyed the impression of being much more resolute than Divivvidiv.

Perhaps... An incredible idea began to flicker far back in Toller's consciousness. *Can it be that fortune has delivered into my hands the best hostage of all? Could this unremarkable and unprepossessing figure be the King of all the Dussarrans? What was the title Divivvidiv had accorded him? Director! And what name? Zunnunun!*

"Tell me, scarecrow," he said in a gentle voice, "what is your name?"

My name is of no relevance, the alien replied. I shall make one last appeal to your powers of reason. Your plan—if such an insane vision can be dignified with that word—is to force us to send you back whence you came by way of an instantaneous relocation unit. You and your followers would then return to one of your home planets, either by balloon or parachute. Is that a fair summation of your ambitions?

"I congratulate you, corpse-face!" The alien's refusal to divulge his name was a fresh inspiration and encouragement for Toller.

The plan can never succeed! The more rational members of your group have severe doubts about attempting it, and in that respect they display considerable wisdom.

Toller's eyes were again drawn to Vantara, but she lowered her head, refusing to meet his gaze.

I am not at liberty to go into details at this time, Toller Maraquine, the alien went on, but the fact is that all of you are very fortunate to be here on Dussarra. You must believe what I...

"I believe that you are the King of all the Dussarrans," Toller shouted, giving way to a rage which was fuelled by subtle new fears. "This thing is going on far too long! Tell me your name right now, or—and I swear by my honour—I will crush these three until the blood spurts from their eyes!"

The alien figure brought a hand up to its concave chest. *My name is Zunnunun.*

"I thought so!" Toller glanced triumphantly at Vantara, Steenameert and the others. "I will now give..."

You will do precisely nothing, Zunnunun cut in, silencing Toller with a curious ease. I had planned to study the psychological relationship between you and your chosen female, but I have come to realize that in an unmodified state you will either kill yourself or continue to cause more trouble than you are worth. Accordingly, I have made the decision to bring your existence to an end.

Toller shook his head and his voice was no longer human. "It would take more than you and the likes of you to kill me.

Oh, I have no intention of killing you. The Dussarran's psychic tone was now light, amused and confident. *Your body will remain in perfect health—and will be useful to me in breeding experiments—but it will be inhabited by a different and more docile personality.*

"You cannot do that!"

But I can! In fact, the process has already begun—as you will realize if you try to move. Zunnunun's mouth flowed into a ghastly parody of a smile. *You were right when you began to suspect that our confrontation was going on too long. I was then assembling sufficient of my people to form a telepathic lens. That lens is now focused on your brain, and in a few seconds you will cease to exist.*

Goodbye, Toller Maraquine!

Toller tried to hurl himself at the alien, but—as had been predicted—he found himself unable to move. And something was happening within his mind. There was an invasion, a loosening, a shameful but joyous sense of yielding, an acceptance of the fact that life as Toller Maraquine II had always been wearisome, and the time had come when he could—gladly—lay that burden down...

Chapter 16

"Twelve ships! Is that all?" Daseene gave Cassyll Maraquine a reproving stare. "I was sure we could have done much better than that."

"I am sorry, Majesty, but the factory is hard-pressed even to prepare that number," Cassyll said, concealing his impatience over being required to repeat the same statements for the third time in an hour. "One of the major problems is the lack of reliable engines and parts."

"But I have seen hundreds of engines stacked in the old parade ground at Kandell. With my own eyes I have seen them. *Stacked!*"

"Yes, but they are the old-style brakka wood units, and they have been replaced by steel engines."

"Well, *un*-replace them in that case!" Daseene snapped, adjusting her coif of pearls.

"They won't fit into the new mountings." A veteran of many similar interviews with the Queen, Cassyll spoke in tones which were the embodiment of cool reasonableness. "It would take an excessive time to adapt one to the other, and many auxiliary components of the old engines are missing."

Daseene narrowed her eyes and leaned forward in her high-backed chair. "Sometimes, my dear Maraquine, you remind me of your father."

Cassyll smiled in spite of the oppressive heat in the audience room. "I appreciate the compliment, Majesty."

"It wasn't meant as a compliment, and well you know it," Daseene said. "Your father performed some small service for my husband during the Migration, and—"

"If I may jog your Majesty's memory to just the slightest extent," Cassyll put in drily, "he saved the lives of your entire family."

"I'm not sure if it was as dramatic as all that—but, no matter... He made himself useful on *one* occasion, and then proceeded to spend the rest of his life reminding my husband of the incident and demanding royal favours."

"I am honoured to serve your Majesty at all times," Cassyll said, easily negotiating familiar territory, "and would never dream of asking for indulgence in return."

"No, you have no need—you simply go ahead and arrange everything to suit

yourself—and that is precisely my point! Your father had a way of pretending to do what the King wanted and all the time he was doing what *he* wanted. You have exactly the same way with you, Cassyll Maraquine. Sometimes I suspect that it is you, and not I, who rules this..."

Daseene leaned forward again, her rheumy eyes intent. "You do not look at all well, my dear fellow. Your face is quite crimson and your brow glistens with sweat. Are you suffering from an ague?"

"No, Majesty."

"Well, *something* ails you. You do not look well. It is my opinion that you should consult your physician."

"I shall do so without delay," Cassyll said. He was yearning for the moment he could escape the intolerable heat of the room, but he had not yet achieved the purpose of his visit. Contrary to what Daseene had just said, he was not the complete master of his own affairs. He gazed into her fragile face, wondering if she was playing games with him. Perhaps she knew perfectly well that he was being tortured by the excessive warmth, and was waiting for him either to faint or give in and plead for respite.

"Why are you occupying so much of my time anyway?" she said. "You must want something."

"As it so happens, Majesty, there is one—"

"Hah!"

"It is quite a routine matter ... well within my normal areas of jurisdiction ... but I thought, more or less in passing, that I should mention it to your Majesty ... not that there is any..."

"Out with it, Maraquine!" Daseene glanced at the ceiling in exasperation. "What are you up to?"

Cassyll swallowed, trying to relieve the dryness in his throat. "The barrier which has appeared between Land and Overland is a matter of great scientific interest. I and Bartan Drumme have the privilege of serving as your Majesty's principal scientific advisers, and—after sober consideration of all the facts—we feel that we should accompany the fleet which is to—"

"Never!" Suddenly Daseene's face was an alabaster mask upon which a skilled artist had painted a likeness of the woman who used to be. "You will stay where I need you, Maraquine—right here on the ground! The same goes for your bosom friend, the eternal stripling, Bartan Drumme. Do I make myself clear?"

"Very clear, Majesty."

"I am well aware that you are concerned for your son—just as I fear for the safety of my granddaughter—but there are times when one must turn a deaf ear to all appeals from the heart," Daseene said in a voice which surprised Cassyll

with its vigour.

"I understand, Majesty." Cassyll bowed, and was turning to leave when Daseene halted him by raising one hand.

"And before you depart," she said, "let me remind you of what I said earlier—be sure to see a doctor."

Chapter 17

The startled cry from Steenameert reached Toller across dark distances of the soul, shadowy distances, where unseen worlds prowled their orbital paths. Each world was the embodiment of a new personality, one of which was destined to be his, and he had little concern for the trivialities of his old existence. Aloof and vaguely irritated, he asked himself why the young man was calling his name. What in all the black reaches of the cosmos could be important enough to justify distracting him at a time like this, just when momentous decisions were being made about his destiny?

But something else was happening! A battle was beginning in the stygian landscapes which surrounded him. Powerful external forces were being brought to bear on the psychic lens whose curvatures governed every aspect of his future...

The lens shattered! Released from his mental and physical paralysis, Toller was reborn into a world of tumult. Dozens of black-clad and ragged-edged Dussarran figures were running across the floor of the dome towards the enclosure. A woman was screaming. The aliens Toller had been crushing behind the panel were now free and were staggering towards their leader. Other aliens who had been clustered behind Zunnunun were fleeing through the exit to unknown parts of the building.

Come with us! A Dussarran appeared at Toller's side and tugged his arm. *We are your friends!*

Toller shook himself free of the grey-fingered hand. The alien seemed no different from any of those he had already encountered, except that the ubiquitous piecemeal costume dangling around his spindly form featured a few diamond-shapes of drab green.

"Friends?" Toller made as if to thrust the newcomer away, then—accepting urgent telepathic guidance—realized the alien was one of a group which had recalled him to his own existence with no time to spare. The choice was not a difficult one in any case—stay and face the quietly invincible Director Zunnunun, or seize the unexpected offer of salvation.

"Baten!" Toller saw that Steenameert was staring at him with concern. "We have to trust these people!"

Steennameert nodded, as did some of the women behind him. The entire group of humans began to run in the company of their alien rescuers, but their escape route was being blocked by other Dussarrans who were spilling through the dome's multiple entrances. The opposing forces converged and the scene quickly became chaotic as black-clad bodies locked with each other in all the grotesqueries of spontaneous physical combat.

Toller's perception of the scene underwent rapid shifts as he saw that the Dussarrans' idea of hand-to-hand struggle was to throw themselves at each other, lock arms and legs with opponents and bring them to the ground. Once that had happened they lay in ineffectual pairs, like copulating insects, each cancelling the other's contribution to the battle. The advantage from the humans' point of view was that no weapons were being used—the aliens fought like angry children, and although hostile enough were manifestly lacking in the ability to incapacitate an enemy. Toller was comforted when he realized that he and his new allies would not be annihilated in a few bloody seconds; but then the negative aspect of the situation came to him. The struggle was too democratic, too much like casting votes. In this style of combat the numerically superior force was bound to win.

Again longing for his sword, Toller turned on one of the group of unfriendly aliens who were closing on him with arms outspread. Toller clubbed him to the ground with one diagonal blow of his fist, and then—with murder in his heart—drove his heel down on the alien's neck, while at the same time hurling away two more attackers.

The feeling of living firmness crunching into inert mush told him immediately that the Dussarran was dead, but a more dramatic confirmation came from the surrounding melee. The mass of black-ragged aliens—friend and foe alike—underwent a convulsive spasm as though some powerful unseen force had torn through them. Their various pairings were dissolved and the air was filled with wordless keenings of anguish. All at once Toller and the other humans were the only mobile and concerted force on the bizarre battle ground.

"What happened?" Jerene shouted, her round face and clear eyes beaconing at Toller from the confusion.

"The scarecrows all suffer when one of their number dies near at hand," Toller replied, remembering what Divivdiviv had told him about the strange telepathic backlash which accompanied the death of a Dussarran. "The trouble is that those who are favourably disposed to us are not spared. Get them on their feet and keep them moving—otherwise we are lost."

The other six Kolcorronians responded at once, snatching suitably emblazoned aliens to their feet and urging them to run. They had to be dragged

or pushed for some yards before their limbs began to pick up the motive rhythms. The ill-sorted band passed through an archway, entered a corridor and continued their awkward progress towards double-leafed doors at its far end. Other Dussarrans, shown to be friendly by their green-dappled clothing, were waiting at the door and making urgent beckoning signals.

My name is Greturk. The alien that Toller was propelling forwards looked up at him and his silent words were charged with fear and loathing. *You deliberately ended a life! You behaved like a Vadavak! Have you no feelings?*

"Yes—I have a powerful feeling that I want to get out of this place."

That is not what I meant.

"I know! You were talking about the reflux." Toller pushed the alien harder to emphasize his words. "You had better understand that I would quite happily break a *thousand* Dussarran necks to obtain my goal—so prepare yourself for a few more refluxes if we are attacked again."

The chances of a new attack grew less, however, as the group reached the double door and were ushered through it by urgent hands. Livid alien faces danced around Toller, advancing and receding in the confusion, as he escaped from the confines of the corridor into a night which was shot through with artificial light. In part the light came from the facades of rectangular buildings, but there seemed to be free-floating blocks of radiance and a profusion of varicoloured rays among which drifted vivid lines of intense red and yellow.

Toller had no time to fathom the exotic scene, because an egg-shaped vehicle—a larger version of the one which had earlier transported Steenameert and him to the dome—was waiting only a few paces away. He had the impression that its lower surface was not quite touching the ground. Its circular entrance revealed a dim-lit interior from which other Dussarrans beckoned. Toller halted by the entrance and helped cram his own people plus some of their alien rescuers into the vehicle. At the innermost end of the corridor more aliens were appearing, their mobility almost fully restored, and were running towards him like flapping black birds striving to take to the air.

Toller had no fear of pursuers who could be laid low by the death of only one of their number, but he was hounded by a conviction that Zunnunun was too resourceful to remain off balance for long, that other enemy forces were being ranged against him at that very moment. He threw himself into the oval vehicle, adding to the press of bodies inside, and the entrance flowed out of existence behind him. There came a giddy shifting of weight which signalled that the vehicle was moving and silently becoming airborne. It came to him that he had not seen a pilot or anything like a station from which a pilot could operate, and the eerie thought occurred that the Dussarran craft could control its own

movements.

He was straining to see about him, trying to verify the idea, when he realized that Vantara was quite close by in the airless compression of alien and human forms. Her face was pale, distraught and immobile—rather like a tragic mask of the real woman—and, although her eyes were turned in his direction, he was not sure that she was looking at him. Feeling oddly self-conscious, he tried to produce a reassuring smile.

"Take heart, Vantara," he said in a directed whisper, "I vow to you that no matter what befalls us I will be at your side."

There followed an odd and timeless moment in which her gaze hunted over his face, and then—to Toller it was like a perfect sunrise—she answered his smile. "Toller, my dear Toller! I'm sorry if I have not been—"

Do not speak! Greturk, the alien at Toller's side, cut in with an urgent telepathic warning. *Do not think about what is happening—otherwise we will be easily followed. Try to forget who and what you are. Try to believe that you are nothing more than bubbles of air rising in a huge cauldron of boiling water ... going this way and that way ... swirling and spiralling in unpredictable paths...*

Toller nodded and closed his eyes. He was a bubble rising in a huge cauldron ... going this way and that ... following a dangerous and unpredictable path...

Toller had become so deeply absorbed in the mental discipline, the negation of coherent thought, that he was scarcely aware of the vehicle coming to a halt. At one moment he was jammed upright, barely able to move because of the pressure of human and alien bodies; and at the next he was staggering slightly in a comparatively generous amount of floor space and Dussarrans were vanishing through the circular exit which had appeared in the vehicle's side. He was receiving no structured telepathic communications, but his head was filled with a pulsing urgency. The very air seemed tremulous, agitated by a pervasive sense of panic.

You must disembark quickly. The silent message came from Greturk, the only alien to have remained inside the egg-shaped craft. *There is very little time to spare.*

"What is going on here?" Jerene put in before Toller could voice the same question.

Greturk's black lips twitched. *We are in the midst of a civil conflict—a war you might call it—the first in many thousands of years.*

"A civil war!" Toller said. "In that case why are you so concerned about a few outsiders like us?"

This will come as a surprise—but you and the rest of your kind are at the

centre of the controversy which divides Dussarran society.

Toller blinked down at the alien. "I don't understand."

I know that the Decisioner responsible for the Xa project has explained to you the basic reasons for our presence in this part of the galaxy. How much of that information have you retained?

"There was something about Ropes," Toller replied, frowning. "An explosion which will destroy dozens of galaxies..."

Steennameert cleared his throat and moved closer. "We were told that the crystal sea ... the Xa ... is a machine which will hurl your home world into a distant galaxy, where you will be safe from the explosion."

I am quite impressed, Greturk answered, glancing from Toller to Steennameert while at the same time gesturing towards the vehicle's exit. *It is unusual for a species at your early stage of development to be able to accommodate concepts which are so far from primitive myth-based visions of...*

"We have no relish for being styled as Primitives," Toller growled. "Divivvidiv learned that to his cost."

Perhaps that is why he withheld a piece of information which he knew would provoke an extreme reaction from you.

"Out with it!" Toller scowled into the alien's livid face. "Out with it at once, or I may be..."

There is no need to bluster against me, Toller Maraquine, Greturk replied. *I was opposed to the Xa project from the day of its inception. I am not culpable in any way, and therefore have no compunction about informing you that on the instant in which Dussarra is projected into the target galaxy your home world ... and its neighbour ... will cease to exist.*

Chapter 18

In common with the rest of his companions, Toller was so stunned by Greturk's words that—in spite of the alien's diminutive stature—he meekly allowed himself to be pushed and prodded out of the vehicle. The darkness outside was as copiously shot through with glowing colour as before, and in addition there were curved, tapering columns at the focus of which hovered a sheet of green luminance. Paying little heed to his surroundings, Toller brought Greturk to a halt by grasping his shoulders, and the rest of the humans crowded around him.

"What was that?" he demanded, using the form of words through force of habit—the telepathic communication had been perfectly clear, each word loaded with associated and corroborative layers of meaning. The Kolcorronians knew that a death sentence had been passed on their home worlds, but their minds were unable to accept the concept.

Greturk vainly tried to squirm free of Toller's grip. *It is vital that we should keep moving.*

"It is even more vital that you explain yourself," Toller countered, refusing to leave the spot. "Why is Overland to be destroyed?"

Greturk's black-drilled eyes swept around the group, and Toller knew at once that all of them were about to be subjected to that disconcerting form of telepathy in which many facts were implanted in the mind forcibly and simultaneously. As had been the case with Divivvidiv, he felt a cerebral beam of lighthouse intensity begin to slew across his consciousness...

As the sister worlds rotate about their common centre of gravity the disk-shaped instrument known as the Xa turns with them. Twice in the course of each revolution the Xa's axis points directly at the Dussarran home world—once when it is projected through Land, once when it is projected through Overland. It is at one of these instants of perfect alignment that the Xa will be activated, making Dussarra the focus of supra-geometrical energies which will cause the planet to be relocated in the target galaxy. In that same instant Land and Overland will cease to exist in this continuum. Because Overland is the less massive of the pair, the relocation pulse will be directed through it during the forthcoming alignment. That alignment is due to occur less than ten minutes from now. If we are to prevent the relocation taking place—and thus save your

home worlds from annihilation—we must proceed with all possible speed. The Director is almost certain to unleash the Vadavaks upon us. RELEASE ME AT ONCE—AND FOLLOW ME CLOSELY!

The moment of communion ended and Toller found himself—totally convinced that what he had learned was true—running behind the little alien. They were heading towards the circle of inward-leaning columns whose tips were immersed in greenish fire. Vantara was holding Toller's left hand and Steenameert was running by his right, in step with Jerene. The three female rankers—Tradlo, Mistekka and Arvand—were keeping pace, and it was obvious from the grimly urgent set of their faces that they had absorbed Greturk's message to the full. It was impossible to see far into the ambient darkness because of the profusion of glowing blocks and crisscrossing lines of radiance, but Toller was somehow persuaded that silent battles were taking place over a wide area. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of black-clad Dussarrans were locked together in their strange form of hand-to-hand combat, clogging and coagulating, each individual content to do no more than immobilize one of his counterparts on the enemy side.

"Why are you doing this?" Toller shouted at Greturk's back, giving voice to the queries which had been accumulating in sheltered bywaters of his mind ever since the escape from the dome. "What is it to you if others perish?"

Again the swinging beam of mental radiance ... but faster this time ... a flaring whiplash of knowledge...

Dussarran society has long been divided over the issue of relocating the planet. Despite various pronouncements from the Palace of Numbers about Ropes, many citizens have always doubted that they exist in actuality. We believe that other interpretations of the sub-space probe data could be just as valid. In any case, it is our opinion that intergalactic relocation is an intemperate response to the situation. We had, however, failed to bring Director Zunnunun round to our point of view, or to rally a majority of the public behind us.

The relocation seemed destined to take place without any concrete opposition—and then came the rumours that one of the sacrificial worlds was inhabited by a humanoid species. It was in an attempt to prevent the spread of that knowledge that Director Zunnunun insisted on the Xa station being designed in such a way that it could be governed by a single Decisioner.

His plan could well have succeeded had it not been for one unforeseen development. The Xa, of necessity, had to have some degree of consciousness to enable it to control its own growth, but the technologists had never before produced such an instrument on that scale. They were taken by surprise when, on reaching a certain level of complexity, the Xa developed self-awareness—a

personality—and began to fear its own dissolution. It was during imperfectly screened exchanges between the Xa and Decisioner Divivvidiv that adepts here on Dussarra established beyond doubt that a burgeoning civilization would be annihilated as a result of the relocation—and that was sufficient to unite and mobilize the opposition parties.

The telepathic communication, as well as lodging a store of hard facts like pebbles in the forefront of Toller's mind, was luridly stained with anxiety and urgency. There was a despairing sense of time slipping away too quickly, of great invisible doors of opportunity being slammed in his face. Toller tried to run faster to draw abreast of Greturk, but the alien was fleet of foot and easily kept ahead. They were now only forty or so paces from the tapering columns, and Toller saw that other green-dappled aliens were waiting at the centre of the circle. There were at least six of them, some beckoning to the runners, others struggling to move a white box which was about the size of a small desk.

"Why are we running?" Corporal Tradlo called out from close behind Toller, her words punctuated with gasps. "What is to be gained by ... wearing ourselves out ... if naught can be achieved?"

Good question, Toller thought. It had just occurred to him that there was little point in escaping by means of the alien matter transmitter to a world which was about to be obliterated.

There is much that can be done, came Greturk's reply. *The problem lies in doing it quickly enough.*

"What can be done?" The question came from several of the humans simultaneously.

The white object you see being dragged on to the transfer plate by my brothers is a simplified version of the machine which was used to transport this world to its present location. The plan is to take it to Overland and use it to displace the planet by a short distance. A few tens of miles would be sufficient to destabilize the Xa and start its axis wandering. Under those conditions the relocation of Dussarra could not be attempted.

Toller stumbled to a halt at the edge of the green-lit circle, his gaze fixed on the white box. "How could *that* move an entire planet?" he said in tones of wonder. "It is much too small."

Even in a moment of crushing urgency there was a note of ironic amusement in Greturk's reply. *How large must a fulcrum be, Toller Maraquine?*

Before Toller could speak further there came a vast humming sound from directly above and curved rows of lights appeared far up in the gaudy darkness. The lights were in fixed positions with regard to each other, giving the impression they belonged to a huge skyship which was taking up its station

overhead. The oppressive humming rose and fell at an increasing tempo, creating a sonic bludgeoning effect which numbed mind and body.

Run to the centre of the plate! Greturk fussed and fluttered like a protective bird around the group of humans, goading them into motion. *We have no more time!*

Still holding Vantara's hand, Toller moved on to a circular area of coppery metal some ten paces in diameter. Steenameert and the three rankers crowded on to the disk with him, and the group coalesced with the knot of aliens who were gathered around the white box...

And suddenly—without any physical sensation—the interplanetary leap took place.

The sights of the garish, light-fractured night of the Dussarran home planet vanished on the instant, and a mellow darkness closed in around the travellers. *This is impossible*, Toller thought, momentarily paralyzed with wonder, only then realizing that, although he had been forced to accept the idea of teleportation intellectually, in his heart there had lurked a conviction that it could not be done. There had not been so much as a twinge or a tingle anywhere in his body to inform him that he was being transported across millions of miles of space, and yet... A single glance at the richly emblazoned age-old sky of the sister planets told Toller that he was standing in the peaceful grasslands of his home world.

Having grown up on Overland and spent his adult life navigating across its surface, Toller had the almost instinctive ability to use the companion world as a clock and compass. His brief look at Land, which was almost perfectly centred in the dome of the sky, established that he was on Overland's equator and possibly as little as fifty miles east of the capital city of Prad. The fact that the great disk of Land was divided just about evenly into night and day sides showed that dawn would soon break—which confirmed what Greturk had said about the timing of the Dussarran relocation.

When he returned his attention to earthly matters he saw by the half-light that several of the aliens were kneeling by the white box. They had opened a small door in its side and one of them was making rapid adjustments to something in the interior. A moment later that alien slammed the door shut and sprang to his feet.

The impeller is now alive and will activate itself in four minutes! He spread his arms and made violent scooping movements with his hands, a signal which—even without telepathic aid—the humans readily understood. *Withdraw to the safety line!*

There was a general movement away from the machine. Toller felt slim hands urging him to hurry, and it came to him that these Dussarrans—in spite of their nightmarish appearance—were altruists of the highest order. They had gone to great lengths and exposed themselves to unguessable dangers with no motivation other than the desire to preserve the existence of a totally unknown culture. Toller was reasonably certain that he would not have behaved as well in parallel circumstances, and all at once he felt a rush of mingled emotions—respect and affection—towards the Dussarrans. He ran with the others, losing contact with Vantara on the way, and slowed to a halt when they did, some sixty yards away from the enigmatic white rectangle.

"Is this far enough?" he said to Greturk, trying to visualize the unleashing of forces of sufficient magnitude to disturb a world lumbering through space and time, massively complacent in its shadowy orbit.

This is a safe distance, Greturk replied. Had the impeller not been built illegally, and in great haste, it could have been shielded in such a way that there would have been no need to move away from it. Ideally, it would also have been constructed with widespread anchor points, in such a way that it could not be overturned. Director Zunnunun, by advancing the time of relocation, has forced us to fall back on exigency plans.

Toller frowned, his mind still overwhelmed by partially absorbed ideas and concepts. "What would happen to a man who was too close to the impeller when it ... when it did what is required of it?"

There would be a conflict of geometries. Greturk's eyes swam like twin moons in the grey twilight. The constituent atoms of the man's body would be sliced into a billion times a billion layers...

"I was told my grandfather died in such a manner," Toller said in a low voice. "It must have been instantaneous ... and painless ... but I don't think I want to emulate him to that extent."

We are safe while we stay at this distance from the machine, Greturk replied, looking all about him. Safe from the effects of the machine, anyway.

"How much time remains until the Xa is triggered?"

Greturk did not consult any kind of chronometer, but his response was immediate. *Almost seven minutes.*

"And only about three minutes remain until that thing ... the impeller ... does its work." Toller took a deep breath of satisfaction and glanced at the other humans. "It seems to me that we are quite safe. What do you say, my fellow Kolcorronians? Shall we prepare to celebrate our deliverance?"

"I'm ready for a few beakers of good Kailian black when you are," Steenameert cried out heartily, and the other humans—watched by silent aliens

—cheered and waved their arms in agreement.

Toller was gratified beyond measure when Vantara moved through the gloaming to his side and put her hand in his. Seen in the nascent light of pre-dawn, her face was impossibly beautiful, and suddenly he felt that his entire life had been nothing more than a prelude to this moment of supreme justification. He had been faced with a challenge worthy of the real Toller Maraquine, he had met every demand made of him without flinching, and now a time of reward lay ahead...

"I have been so busy congratulating myself on my good fortune that I have given little thought to you and all your companions, to whom we owe so much," he said to Greturk. "Can you return safely to Dussarra?"

Returning home poses some problems for the present, but I have more serious worries at this time. Greturk continued to scan his surroundings as though every dimly-seen tuft of grass might conceal a deadly enemy. *My principal fear is that Director Zunnunun will have set the Vadavaks upon us. We have, of course, done what we could to make pursuit difficult, but Zunnunun's resources are far greater than ours...*

"What are these Vadavaks?" Toller said. "Are they ferocious hunting beasts which cannot be eluded?"

No. Greturk's thoughts were shaded with something akin to embarrassment. *They are Dussarrans who were born with a major defect in the areas of their brains which are concerned with perception and communication. They are incapable of direct communication with other Dussarrans. We regard the condition in much the same way as you regard deafness.*

"But why should they be feared?"

They do not experience the reflux. They are capable of killing.

"You mean," Toller said, suddenly understanding Greturk's embarrassment, "they are something like me?"

To the ordinary Dussarran the taking of a life is the ultimate abhorrence.

"That may be less due to ethics than dread of the backlash." Toller knew he was in danger of offending the alien who had done so much for the group of fugitives, but he was unable to hold back his words. "After all, you noble Dussarrans were quite prepared to annihilate the entire population of my home world. Did that not offend your delicate sensibilities? Is killing all right as long as it is done at a remove?"

Many of us have put our own lives at risk to preserve your people, Greturk countered. *We make no claim to be perfect, but...*

"I apologize for my ingratitude and shoddy manners," Toller cut in. "Look, if you are so worried about these Vadavaks appearing out of nowhere, can you not

adjust the impeller's controls and cause it to act sooner? Four minutes seems an irksome length of time to wait."

We chose four minutes to allow for variables such as having to withdraw across difficult terrain. Now that the machine has been activated, its internal processes cannot be advanced or retarded. Neither can it be switched off and returned to an inert condition.

Steenameert, who had been paying close attention to the dialogue, raised a hand. "If the machine is immune to interference ... if it cannot be switched off ... are we not already in an inviolable position? Is it not too late for the enemy to try to thwart us?"

Given sufficient time we could have rendered the impeller virtually immune to interference. Greturk's eyes flickered closed for a moment. *As it is, it could be neutralized merely by turning it on its side...*

"What?" Steenameert shot Toller a perplexed glance. "Is that all it would take to stop it working?"

Greturk shook his head in a surprisingly human manner. *The impeller would not be affected internally in any way, but unless it is in a horizontal attitude—with its line of action passing through or close to the centre of the planet—its motive energies will be squandered.*

"I—" Toller broke off as the faintest breath of coolness entered his mind, a feather-flick of unease so tiny and fleeting that it could have been a product of his imagination. He raised his head, separating himself from the discussion, and took stock of his surroundings. Nothing seemed to have changed. The grassy plain reached out to a horizon which was made irregular by low hills to the north; a short distance away the white casing of the impeller glowed placidly through the pewter-coloured light of early dawn; the incongruous group of Dussarrans and humans looked exactly as before—and yet Toller was vaguely alarmed.

On impulse he glanced up at the sky and there, centred on Land and almost touching the terminator on the planet's dark side, was a pulsing yellow star. He knew at once that he was looking at the Xa, thousands of miles above.

No sooner had he made the identification than a faint telepathic voice reached him—strained, enfeebled, tortured—wispings downwards from the zenith. *Why are you doing this to me, Beloved Creator? Please, please do not kill me.*

Feeling oddly like an intruder, Toller spoke quietly to Greturk. "The Xa is ... unhappy."

It was fortunate for all of us that the Xa's increasing complexity allowed it to... Greturk suddenly flinched, as if experiencing a spasm of pain, and spun to face the east. The other Dussarrans did likewise. Toller followed their concerted

gazes and his heart lurched as he saw that the previously bare plain was now the setting for a party of about fifty figures clad in white. They were perhaps two furlongs distant, and above them was a fast-fading ellipse of greenish illumination.

The Vadavaks are upon us! Greturk took one futile step backwards. *And so close!*

Toller glared down at Greturk. "Are they armed?"

Armed?

"Yes! *Armed!* Do they carry weapons?"

Greturk had begun to shiver, but his telepathic response was clear and well controlled. *The Vadavaks are equipped with enervators—instruments of social correction specially designed by Director Zunnunun. The enervators are black rods with glowing red tips. The slightest contact with one of the tips will cause intense pain and paralysis for several minutes.*

"I have heard of more fearsome weapons," Toller sneered, squeezing Vantara's hand before releasing it and putting an encouraging arm around Steenameert's shoulder. "What do you say, Baten? Shall we teach these bumptious pygmies a lesson or two?"

Contact with one enervator rod causes pain and paralysis, Greturk added. *The Vadavaks carry an enervator in each hand—and simultaneous contact with two rods causes pain and death.*

"That is a more serious matter," Toller said soberly, staring at the blurred smear of white on a drab grey-green background which was the enemy's sole manifestation thus far. "How long does it take for death to occur?"

Five seconds. Perhaps ten. Much depends on the size and strength of the individual.

"Much could be achieved in ten seconds," Toller replied, a dryness developing in his mouth as he saw that the Vadavaks had already begun to advance at speed. "If only..."

Your sword is in the possession of Director Zunnunun and can never be retrieved—but one of our number holoviewed it well enough for copying. Greturk nodded to one of the other Dussarrans who moved forward dragging a sack made of a seamless grey material. *We had hoped that the Vadavaks would not make contact with us—in which case we would have destroyed these weapons without ever showing them to you—but now we have no alternative.*

The Dussarran opened the sack and Toller felt a surge of fierce gladness as he saw that it contained seven swords of the distinctive late Kolcorronian pattern. He dropped to his knees and eagerly reached for the familiar weapons.

Be careful! Greturk warned. *In particular, do not touch the blades with your*

bare hands—they now have monomolecular edges which can never be blunted, and they will penetrate your flesh as easily as they would sink into fresh snow.

"Swords!" Jerene's rounded features bore an angry expression as she stepped forward. "What do we want with a collection of antiques? Could you not have copied our pistols?"

Greturk shook his head again. *There was no time ... their interior mechanisms were not readily visible to us ... all we could do in the limited time available was to produce five scaled-down versions of the sword for use by the smaller and weaker females of your race.*

"That was most considerate of you," Jerene exclaimed sarcastically, "but you may be interested to learn that any woman here could..."

"The enemy has taken to the field!" Toller put all the power of his lungs into the shout. "Are we to squabble among ourselves or go out and do battle?"

He pointed to where the gleaming white motes which represented the Vadavaks were spreading across the field of view, becoming larger collectively and individually, each advancing speck developing arms and legs, a face, the capability of inflicting death. On the horizon behind the Vadavaks the sun was appearing as a needle-spray of blinding fire, casting a fateful and melodramatic glow over the natural arena in which the fates of three worlds were to be decided.

Toller took the sword of his fancy from the sack and tried it in his hand to make sure that the balance had not been disturbed by alien machinations. The feel of the familiar weapon was comforting—the spirit of his grandfather was with him again—but it was less reassuring than he had hoped and expected. Seven humans, only one of whom was trained with the sword, were going against at least fifty well-armed aliens. By all accounts, his fabled namesake would have gloried in such a situation—but, no matter how many versions of the forthcoming battle the present-day Toller conjured up in his mind, he could not find one in which there were no deaths among his companions. Some of them, if not all, were bound to die—and Toller could see no glory in that fact. It was degrading, brutal, depressing, obscene, terrifying...

But, even as the adjectives paraded through his mind, he was forced to acknowledge another diamond-hard fact. Unless the Dussarran machine was successfully defended for another three to four minutes, until it performed its vital task, every man, woman and child on Overland would be annihilated in an unimaginable pulse of energy. *That*—above all else—had to be the single truth which governed his actions in the trial which lay ahead.

He looked around his little group of warriors, wondering if his face was as pale as theirs. They had taken their swords in hand and were gazing at him with

expressions which seemed to convey complete faith in his leadership. Their trust was probably a legacy from all those times when he had swaggered and boasted of his prowess in combat—and now he was appalled by the responsibility he had taken upon himself. These people knew they were facing death, and they were afraid, and in the moment of ultimate tribulation they were turning to the only source of hope they could find. It was quite likely that they now regarded Toller as a pillar of strength, and he was numbed with guilt and regret as he realized the extent of his unworthiness to play that role.

"If we advance too far to meet the enemy they will be able to outflank us and overturn the machine," he heard himself say in a firm, clear voice. "We must form a defensive line outside the radius of safety—and take a solemn vow that *none* of the Vadavaks shall pass.

"There are many more things I would like to say—" Toller's eyes locked fleetingly with Vantara's and he repressed an urge to reach out and touch her face—"but now is not the time. We have important work to do first."

Toller turned and ran on a curving path to a point which placed him exactly between the impeller and the oncoming force of Vadavaks. Within a few seconds the other humans had taken up stations on either side of him, at spacings which they instinctively felt could be protected by the sword. The Vadavaks were now only a hundred yards or so away, running fast, and the sound of their feet swishing through the grass could easily be heard by the defenders. Pinpoints of red light danced before them in a horizontal swarm.

Toller tightened his grip on his sword as he saw that the Vadavaks, in place of the rag-like garments of the ordinary Dussarran citizen, wore white helmets and armour. The latter was of a glistening material which seemed to have no effect on the wearer's mobility in spite of covering torso and limbs. The livid, black-holed faces glaring from under the rims of the alien helmets gave the attackers the semblance of an army of corpses, indefatigable because they were already dead.

Toller raised his sword to the first readiness position and waited. *I beg of you, Beloved Creator*, the Xa's words threaded down from the remoteness of the sky, *do not kill me*.

One of the Vadavaks outdistanced the others, nominating himself as Toller's first individual opponent, and dived forward with twin black rods outstretched like stings. The alien must have been totally accustomed to routing docile and unarmed civilians, because he came at Toller with head and torso quite unprotected. Toller struck down into his thin neck and the alien went down and backwards in a fountain of blood, his head connected to his body by only a narrow strip of tissue. The rods he had been holding fell close beside each other

at Toller's feet.

Toller stamped on them, extinguishing the crimson glow at their tips, and his momentum took him into immediate conflict with two more Vadavaks. The pair apparently had not enough time to learn anything from the fate of their companion, because they remained close together and lunged at Toller with enervator rods held only a few inches apart. He took their arms off below the elbows with two transverse strokes which sheared the white armour as if it were paper. The aliens dropped to their knees, their mouths black circles of silent agony, and doubled over the stumps of their forearms.

Toller paid them no further attention—they had ceased to be combatants—and ran his gaze along the line of battle. The Vadavaks were throwing themselves into the fray with undiminished vigour and ferocity, but Toller was heartened to notice that not one Kolcorronian had been laid low. Their lack of experience in handling swords was being more than compensated for by the incredible sharpness of the blades, and the Vadavaks were being cut down as quickly as they advanced. The defence line had lost its regularity, but it was remaining intact, and the white wave of alien attackers was now liberally stained with red as its members collided with and stumbled over their wounded.

Can it be possible? Toller wondered. Are we all to be spared, after all? There can be very little time left before the impeller does its work, and if the Vadavaks are stupid enough not to change their tactics...

From the corner of his eye Toller saw a flicker of white as an alien appeared beyond one end of the battle line and ran towards the rectangular shape of the impeller. Toller broke free and ran on a course which enabled him to intercept the Vadavak about halfway across the margin of safety. The alien slid to a halt in the grass and turned on Toller, the milky marbles of his eyes gleaming beneath the rim of his helmet. He was holding one of his enervator rods as though it were a sword, darting and slicing with the glowing tip, striving to make contact with the skin of Toller's sword arm.

Toller dealt with him by making a sideways flick of his blade which lopped the end off the menacing rod. The alien threw it down, transferred his remaining rod into his right hand and resumed the duel, apparently quite unafraid. Toller—acutely aware that he was within the impeller's radius of death—decided to end the matter speedily in a rain of unstoppable blows. He was on the point of lunging forward when he heard a sound close behind him. He spun around just in time to see a second Vadavak thrusting an enervator rod into his midriff. Toller did his utmost to twist clear of the spitefully gleaming tip, but it made contact with him and pain fountained up through his chest. He fell to his knees, gasping for breath, and his two opponents—now moving at a much more

leisurely pace, apparently relishing their moment of victory—closed in on him with black rods upraised.

A second touch from one of the red tips would bring about his death, Toller had been warned, and it was obvious that the Vadavaks intended to make sure of him by administering multiple contacts. But he had no intention of accepting death so easily, not with so much at stake. In spite of the debilitating pain which was washing through his body, he made a despairing effort to raise his sword to fend off the descending rods—and was thrilled to find his arms responding with close to normal speed and control.

The Vadavaks, abruptly realizing their peril, stabbed at him with their enervators, but his sword was now moving swiftly in a near-visible defensive arc. The black rods were destroyed and scattered in an instant as Toller rose to his feet. One of the aliens got away from him by sprinting off to safety; the other was transfixed as he turned to flee. Toller withdrew his sword from the twitching body and ran back to rejoin the main battle. He noticed a soreness in his legs for the first few paces, but it quickly faded and he deduced that a Dussarran enervator was a fairly inadequate weapon when used against a large and healthy human.

That seemed a favourable omen, but when Toller reappraised the continuing struggle he saw the situation had altered for the worse in the brief time that he had been sidetracked. One of the women was on the ground and surrounded by Vadavaks who were jabbing at her with red-glowing enervators. Fearing that the inert figure might be Vantara, Toller pounded his way towards her attackers with a hoarse cry of rage. He reached them simultaneously with Steenameert, taking them unawares, and in an impossibly short space of time—a time of raging red mists speckled with seething bright-rimmed corpuscles—the two humans had reduced at least five of the enemy to a bloody mass of carrion.

The woman on the ground was revealed as Corporal Tradlo. An enervator had been driven down her throat, her blonde hair was matted with blood, and it was obvious that she was dead.

Toller raised his eyes from her and saw that the remaining four women had split into pairs, each of which was busily engaged in close combat. To his left, Jerene and Mistekka had taken on four Vadavaks and were giving every appearance of being able to deal with the threat; to his right, Vantara and Arvand were almost hidden by a larger group of aliens who were pressing in on them from all sides.

Marvelling at the aliens' carelessness over the essential matter of guarding their flanks, Toller nodded to Steenameert and they flung themselves at the milling group of white-clad figures. Again they wrought a fearful slaughter in

the space of a few heartbeats, inflicting terrible gouting wounds which either levelled the recipients at once or sent them staggering blindly away to sink down and expire in pools of blood.

Other aliens were coming forward to take their places, but Toller was beginning to sense a change in the overall situation. The Vadavaks, possessing not even a rudimentary battle sense, were pressing their attack with undiminished fervour in spite of conspicuous lack of success—and their forces were rapidly being depleted. Snatching a quick glance around the complex scene, Toller guessed that less than half of the Vadavaks were still on their feet, and a proportion of those were becoming slow and uncertain in their movements.

It had to be less than a minute until the impeller unleashed the energies which would displace the planet, and from that time onward Director Zunnunun's warriors would—presumably—have no reason to continue the struggle. They should be well content to withdraw at that stage and limit the number of their dead. Feeling a resurgence of optimism, Toller risked looking in the direction of Greturk and his fellow Dussarrans, hoping for an indication that the machine was about to function. He felt a dull shock when he saw that his allies had disappeared—the only sign that they had ever been present being a fast-fading tinge of green in the morning air.

An instant later Toller paid the price for allowing himself to be distracted from the deadly conflict all about him. Pain exploded through him as something touched his left shoulder, and an instant later the sensation was repeated again in the region of his left hip. He had twice been hit from behind by enervators, but this time—miraculously—the effect was less devastating than before and he was able to remain on his feet. His attacker, who had clearly expected a quick and easy kill, was still gaping at him in astonishment when Toller swung an ill-controlled blow which was intended to sever the alien's neck. The strike was slightly lacking in reach, because of Toller's partial immobility, and the sword tip reached no further than the Vadavak's throat, slicing cleanly through his windpipe. He clapped a hand to his throat and backed rapidly away, only to be impaled from behind by a sword held by the tall, dark-haired figure of Mistekka.

"These large bodkins are quite fun," she called out to Toller, her brown eyes glinting as she casually pushed the dying alien away. "I'm beginning to see why you always carried one."

"Just don't get careless!" No sooner had Toller spoken than he heard Steenameert give a bellow of pain. He turned and saw that his friend was surrounded by four Vadavaks who were jabbing at him with their enervators, at least one of which had found its mark.

"Stay on your feet, Baten!" Toller shouted. He threw himself forward, closely

followed by Mistekka and the stockier figure of Jerene. They descended on Steenameert's attackers in a murderous swoop which, again in what seemed the blink of an eye, had a significant effect on the balance of forces. Steenameert had been hit with enervators several times and was sinking to the ground in spite of Arvand's attempts to hold him up. But when Toller took a broader view he was uplifted to see that the humans were running out of live opponents. Of the original attacking force only two were on their feet in the immediate vicinity, and they were being competently dealt with by Jerene and Mistekka.

Three other Vadavaks, having faced strong and well-armed enemies for the first time, were withdrawing in dismay, fleeing across the plain towards the point where they had materialized. The only other movements among the aliens, Toller noted with an exultant feeling of relief, came from the white-and-crimson carpet of the wounded. It was a tragedy that even one of the Kolcorronians had been lost, but...

"Behind you, Toller!"

Jerene's warning shriek came too late. Toller heard the sudden movement shockingly close behind him, and realized at once that he had become too complacent, too certain that the diminutive Vadavaks had none of the tenacity of a genuine warrior. Now he felt a curious, unmanly sensation in the calf of his left leg. There was no pain to speak of, and yet he had just received the most serious injury of his life. He looked down and saw that a Kolcorronian sword, almost certainly Tradlo's, had gone to the bone in his leg. He struck backwards at the wounded Vadavak who had been lying on the ground, feigning death and awaiting his chance to strike. The alien sighed and rolled away to meet the point of Jerene's sword.

"We must finish the lot of them," Jerene shouted. "Show no mercy!"

"Keep everybody well away from the machine," Toller said to her, wondering why Vantara was not more in evidence in her capacity as Jerene's commander. "It is bound to detonate, or whatever it does, any second now."

Jerene nodded and signalled for the combatants to move farther away from the box, which was now glowing like fresh snow in the light of the rising sun. "And we had better take a look at that leg of yours."

"I'll be..." Toller glanced down at his leg and felt a moment of giddiness as he saw that a grinning red mouth had opened right across the calf. It was spewing blood down his ankle on to the grass, and in its depths he could see the gleam of bone. When he tried to move the leg his foot remained obstinately on the ground.

"That has to be stitched here and now," Jerene said in a hard and unemotional voice. "Somebody give me a held kit."

Toller allowed himself to be lowered to the ground beside Steenameert, who was beginning to show signs of regaining consciousness. He felt nauseated, and was glad to surrender all responsibility to another for a period, even when the pain of the stitching began. With his chin resting on folded hands, Toller clenched his teeth and distracted himself from the pain by thinking about the impeller. What would the crucial moment be like? Would they hear great explosions or be blinded by flashes of lightning? And why was the cursed box taking so long to unleash its power?

"Surely more than four minutes have passed since we arrived in this place," he said to those who had clustered around to watch his leg being repaired. "What say you? Can you see anything happening?"

Steennameert, who was lying with his face towards the sky, startled Toller by answering his question as though he had never been unconscious. "I don't know about our wonderful white box, Toller—but I think something very strange is happening up there."

He pointed straight up to the zenith and others followed his example. Toller twisted his upper body around, grunting as he involuntarily disturbed the work being done on his leg, and looked into the centre of the sky. The vast disk of Land was divided equally by the terminator, and mounted exactly on the central line was the pulsing yellow star the watchers knew to be the Xa. But changes had taken place since Toller had first looked at it.

The Xa had grown much brighter—it now resembled a miniature sun—and its pulsations had become so rapid that they were almost merging into each other. It came to Toller that he had been so preoccupied with Greturk's impeller, and the events surrounding it, that he had practically forgotten about that infinitely greater impeller which had spread itself across the weightless zone. The collective attention focused on the distant Xa seemed to throw a telepathic gateway wide open...

I cannot believe you are doing this to me, Beloved Creator! The anguish-laden message washed down out of an aureate sky. After all I have done for you, you are bringing forward the time of my death! I implore you, Beloved Creator, do not deny me a last few minutes in your treasured company...

"What's going on here?" Toller growled, tearing the needle and suture from Jerene's fingers as he raised himself to a sitting position. "Greturk told us that his cursed box of tricks would do its job long before the Xa ... long before Dussarra was hurled into another galaxy ... but the way things are going..." He fell silent, a chill perspiration gathering on his brow as he realized that he, and everybody he knew, and his entire home world could be on the point of instantaneous destruction.

Steenameert raised himself on one elbow. "It may be that Greturk's device is imperfect. He told us it was built in too much haste. Dussarrans can make mistakes, also, and it may be that the delay mechanism he spoke of is not..." Steenameert's voice faded and his eyes grew wide as he pointed with one trembling finger at something beyond Toller's shoulder.

Toller followed his gaze and swore savagely as he saw something which had the power to dismay him, even in this time of astonishing and momentous events. The gleaming white figure of a Vadavak, one who must have concealed himself during the closing chaotic moments of battle, had appeared by the boxy shape of the impeller. Professional training must have made him much stronger than the average Dussarran because, as the petrified humans watched, he squatted and put his hands under one edge of the impeller, then slowly but steadily straightened up.

The impeller tilted in unison with his movements and fell on its side. An instant later, almost as though triggered by impact, something in the white box began to emit a mechanical scream.

Toller tried to scramble to his feet, but his left leg refused to take his weight and he lurched painfully to the ground. "That's the final warning," he shouted, undergoing a unique kind of torment because of his inability to move. "The machine must be uprighted—*otherwise all is lost!*"

He looked to the three women who were standing in his field of view, willing them to undertake what he could not. Mistekka and Arvand continued to stare down at him, frozen to the spot by a new kind of fear. Vantara dropped to her knees, covered her face and began to sob.

"I expect promotion for this," Jerene exclaimed as she leapt to her feet, took her sword in hand and began to run towards the impeller. The strength inherent in her solid limbs, sprinter's strength, drove her through the impeding grass at a speed Toller doubted he could have matched even had he not been wounded.

The lone Vadavak, showing vastly greater courage and obduracy than his vanquished comrades, chose not to retreat. He ran towards Jerene and, when separated from her by several paces, dived at her ankles. She partially thwarted him with a scything blow of her sword—a touch of crimson was abruptly added to the bleached palette of the scene—but the alien succeeded in clamping his hands around one of Jerene's shins, bringing her to the ground. There followed a moment in which it was impossible to see what was happening, a moment in which Toller was struck dumb with anxiety, and then Jerene was up and running again.

The shrieking of the white rectangle seemed to intensify as she reached it. She grasped its nearer top edge and tried to pull it downwards, but it resisted her

efforts. She ran around to the farther side and disappeared from view as she stooped to gain a more effective hold on the massive cabinet. And then, with nerve-destroying slowness, the impeller rotated into its normal attitude.

In less than one heartbeat, Jerene had reappeared from behind the impeller and was sprinting—head thrown back and limbs blurring—towards the fear-stricken watchers. She had covered perhaps a third of the distance to safety when the impeller suddenly fell silent. In the absence of its frenetic screaming another message of hysteria was perceived with silent and dreadful clarity, beating down from the remote apex of the heavens.

Do not kill me, Beloved Creator! Do not...

Toller, his face contorted into an inhuman mask of dread, looked beyond Jerene and saw the lustrous cabinet of the impeller begin to change its appearance. It glimmered and threw off expanding pale images of itself, layered versions of reality which flowed outwards to encompass all that could be seen of space and time.

Jerene was running through that shimmering matrix of what was and what might be, and Toller fancied she was calling his name. In one agonizing thrust of his limbs he forced himself into an upright position and tried to move towards her.

But above Jerene the entire dome of the sky had begun to convulse and contort. Concentric rings of eye-searing brilliance were pulsing and flooding outwards from the Xa, and they were clashing in intolerable discords with the emanations from the white box...

Too much is happening at once. Toller thought in the wildest extremities of terror.

EVERYTHING IS HAPPENING AT ONCE...

Chapter 19

A deep, velvety and infinite darkness—a kind of night which was outside of Toller's previous experience—suddenly pervaded the scene. It was as though an opaque cover had been clamped over the entire planet. The blackness above was made even more intense by the fact that the impeller, after its display of dimensional sorcery, was now glowing like a huge block of fluorescent ice, casting a shallow pool of illumination over the silenced battle field.

Toiler was still, blinking, trying to force his eyes to adapt to the strange new conditions, when Jerene reached him and allowed herself to be brought to a halt by his arms. She clung to him for a brief period, trembling and breathing harshly, then straightened up and stepped back a pace. For an instant Toller half-expected her to give him a formal salute, as though making amends for the breach of some rigorous discipline. Vantara, who had been standing close by, moved to Toller's side and gently enfolded his arm with hers.

Toller was scarcely aware of her presence as he gazed into the awesome emptiness of the heavens. At first he had thought the dark celestial canopy was completely featureless, but as his eyes continued to adjust he began to pick out coldly remote points of light which could be identified as stars. They were faint and sparse compared to those he had known all his life, so meagre with their output of light that an appreciable time went by before he seized on the strangest and most disconcerting factor of all.

Overland's sister world had vanished from its place directly above.

In its place, in the crown of the heavens, there was nothing more than a handful of chilly flecks of light arranged in alien configurations.

Steennameert, overcoming his paralysis, rose to his feet behind Toller and spoke with the rapt voice of a child. "It was all to no avail, Toller. We have been cast out. This place is not home to us."

Toller nodded, not trusting himself to reply, still yielding up his mind and soul to the black void which spanned his vision. *We have indeed been cast out*, he told himself. *This is how the universe will look when it has grown old...*

"Such darkness," Vantara whispered, pressing herself closer to Toller. "It pleases me not at all—and I'm *cold*."

"In that case," Toller said, firmly disentangling his arm from hers, "I suggest

that you begin gathering materials to build a fire. It may be a long time until dawn—if dawn ever comes."

"Of course dawn will come!" Vantara, angered by his symbolic rejection, was instantly on the offensive. "How can dawn fail to come? What a foolish thing to say!"

Toller realized with a surge of pity that she had no inkling, no glimmer of understanding of the momentous series of events the group had survived. His own insight, derived from telepathic exchanges with Divivvidiv and Greturk, was nebulous and patchy, but he knew in his bones that Overland—instead of being annihilated—had been projected into an inconceivably remote region of the universe.

And the "universe" he was thinking about was not even the limited and well-defined entity which came to mind when Kolcorronian scientists used the word. It was that woolly, intangible and maddeningly elusive philosophical concept which Divivvidiv had referred to as the *space-time continuum*. Toller had grasped the notion at the time of his telepathic tuition, but in spite of all his efforts his understanding of it had been fading ever since, like the wistful memory of a dream.

Now it was all but gone, the only lingering remnant being its effect on his modes of thinking. Without being able to justify the idea in any form of words, he was quite prepared to believe that the incomprehensible forces unleashed by the Xa in its death throes could have displaced Overland in time as well as in space, perhaps far into the future of some parallel cosmos.

He was finding it hard to remember why he had ever been enamoured of Vantara in the first place—and now, gazing at her beautiful but petulant face, he sensed an unbridgeable gulf opening between them. She had closed her mind, and as a consequence had no way of sharing Toller's principal worry of the moment. Once, during the long hours of the flight to Dussarra, he had asked Divivvidiv how he knew the relocation device would not deposit the planet in the depths of interstellar space, too far from a sun for "minor" adjustments to be made in its position. Divivvidiv, possibly lost for a good answer, had slipped away from the question with some comments about *probability coalescence* and *abstruse self-generating design features of the Xa* which in the final outcome were to cope with *biological viability zones* and *orbital dynamics*.

Now Toller had to ask himself if there was a sun hidden behind the passive bulk of the planet. Either there would be a normal sunrise some hours from now, or Overland would grow colder and colder, and all its inhabitants would perish in never-ending blackness. There was only one way to obtain the answer, Toller realized, and that was by waiting. And there was no point in waiting in the

dark...

"Why is everyone not gathering wood?" he shouted jovially, turning away from Vantara. "Let us find an agreeable place—away from these miserable alien corpses—and light a good fire to comfort us through the night."

Cheered by having been presented with a homely objective, Steenameert, Mistekka and Arvand darted away towards a clump of wryberry bushes, the rounded outlines of which had gradually become visible in the starlight. Vantara gave Toller a prolonged stare, which he guessed to be one of disdain, then turned and slowly walked after the others, leaving him in the sole company of Jerene.

"Your leg needs many more stitches, but there is not enough light." She glanced at the impeller, which had now faded into a rectangular patch of grey. "I will bind the wound now and finish the job properly in the morning."

"Thank you," Toller said, suddenly realizing that he was quite incapable of walking unaided. The wound, while serious enough, seemed insignificant in comparison to his size, and he was chastened to find that he felt cold, ill and weak. He stood patiently while Jerene bound his calf tightly with a bandage from the field kit.

"This is where my farm upbringing comes in useful," she said, securing the dressing with an expert knot.

"Thank you again!" Toller spoke in mock indignation, grateful to be distracted from his haunting worry about the sun. "You may nail new shoes to my hooves in the morning, but in the meantime will you assist me to join the others by the fire?"

Jerene stood up, put an arm around his waist and helped him walk towards the flicker of orange light which was already beckoning through the darkness. He found it more difficult and painful than he had expected to make progress through the long grass, and he was relieved when Jerene stopped to rest.

"Now I *doubly* deserve promotion," she said breathlessly. "You weigh nearly as much as my pet greyhorn."

"I'll see to your promotion as soon as..." Toller paused, hesitating to make any promises for a future which might not exist. "You were very courageous when you ran to the machine. My blood froze for fear that you would not get clear of it in time."

"Why were you so concerned?" Jerene murmured. "After all, I had achieved what I set out to do."

"It may have been because..." Toller smiled, realizing that Jerene was playing an ancient game with him, and all at once as they stood together in the darkness that game became more important to him than all his fear for the future of the planet. He drew her closer to him and they kissed with a kind of gentle

fervour.

"The countess can see what we are doing," Jerene said, still being provocative as the kiss ended, and her breath was warm in his mouth. "The countess will not be pleased."

"What countess?" Toller said, and he and Jerene began to laugh as they clung together in the dark, dark night.

Toller had not expected to sleep. His wounded leg had begun throbbing like a busy machine, and in any case it had been inconceivable to him that he could lay down the burden of consciousness while wondering if his world was lost in a starless void. But the warmth of the fire had been pleasant, and it had felt good to have Jerene lying at his side with one arm draped across his chest, and he had been more tired than he knew...

He opened his eyes with a start, trying to solve the urgent problem of deciding where he was. The fire had been reduced to white-coated embers, but it gave enough light for him to see the sleeping forms of his tiny band of warriors—and suddenly the great question was again hammering between his temples. He abruptly raised his head, causing Jerene to sigh in her sleep, and scanned the edges of the world.

There was a faint but unmistakable feathering of pearly light above one section of the horizon.

Toller's vision blurred with gratification as he took in the full, wondrous meaning of the tentative glow, then he sank back down to rest.

Chapter 20

Queen Daseene had suffered a major stroke, one which was almost certain to prove fatal.

As news of the impending tragedy raced out from Prad to the towns and lesser communities of Overland, the common people—already chastened by inexplicable events in the sky—became even more morose and subdued. Those of a religious or superstitious turn of mind saw the Queen's illness as having been foretold by the spate of omens which had so radically transformed the appearance of the heavens. And even those who had no time for the supernatural were affected by their awareness that something *very* strange had happened at dawn three days previously.

The early risers who had been out of doors at the crucial time were extremely graphic in their reports. They had spoken of the initial awe-inspiring moment during which a fierce source of yellow light, like a miniature sun, had appeared at the zenith, centred on the great disk of Land. Hardly had the eye become accustomed to the cosmic intruder when multiple shells of luminance, concentric to different sources, had exploded into pulsing conflict across the dawn sky.

And then—a final incredible act in the cosmic drama—the sky had ... *died*.

The same word—died—had been employed over and over again. It sprang spontaneously to the lips of untutored observers who had spent their lives under heavens which were extravagantly patterned with light, spilling over with astronomical jewels of every kind.

The sky had appeared to die when Land simply blinked out of existence—along with the Great Wheel and a myriad of lesser silver spirals; countless thousands of stars, the most brilliant of which had formed the constellation of the Tree; the irregular streamers of misty radiance strewn like delicate tresses among the galaxies; the comets whose glowing and tapering fans partitioned the universe; the darting meteors which had enlivened the dome of night, briefly linking star to star.

All of these had disappeared in an instant, and now the sky seemed dead—all the more so because of the cold, aloof and infinitely remote points of light which, instead of illuminating the sky, served only to emphasize its lack of light.

Toller Maraquine, supported by his crutches, was watching the sunset from

the south-facing balcony of his family's home. He had a hot drink positioned within reach on the wide stone balustrade, but it was forgotten for the time being as he saw the sky assume deeper and more sombre colours. He repressed a shiver as the alienness of the darkening celestial dome made itself more and more apparent, and it was not merely the aching absence of the sister world from its ordained station directly overhead which disturbed him. He had spent a fair amount of time on the "outside" of Overland—where most of the inhabitants could not even visualize having the detailed convexity of another planet suspended above them—and had quickly become accustomed to the changed environment.

His present sense of alienation, he had to admit to himself, was caused by the stark *emptiness* of the night sky. Doing his utmost to be pragmatic, calm and reasonable he had tried to shrug the whole thing off. What did it matter, he had asked himself, if the irrelevant and uncaring night sky contained a billion stars or only a scattered handful? Would either condition affect the yield of a harvest by so much as a single grain?

The trouble was that the reassuring negative answer failed to provide sufficient reassurance. He had no idea of what fate had overtaken Land or Dussarra—for all he knew those worlds no longer existed *anywhere*—but he understood with a bleak and sterile exactitude that Overland had been, to use Steenameert's phrase, cast out. This was an *alien* region of the space-time continuum. It had a heart-sinking quality to it. Somehow, within the blink of an eye, Overland had been flung into a decayed universe which had grown old and cold ... *old and cold* ... and the paramount question was posed: Could human life—individually and collectively—go on just as it had always done?

Physically, there appeared to be no obstacle to prevent the men and women of Kolcorron living out their lives in the same manner as their forebears had done since the beginnings of history. But was it possible that the drear sense of isolation, of inhabiting an outpost in the black wastes of infinity, could alter the racial outlook?

Land and Overland—sister worlds, so close that they were linked by a bridge of air—might have been designed by some cosmic Planner to coax and lure their inhabitants into becoming interplanetary travellers. And, once that critical first step had been taken, there had beckoned a universe laden with astronomical treasures—so obviously charged with the forces of life—that it would have been impossible for the adventurer to turn back. Toller's people had been predisposed by their spatial environment to look outwards, to believe that their future lay in *moving* outwards into a fertile and welcoming universe—but how would they feel now? Would there ever appear a hero with sufficient vision and courage,

sufficient *stature*, to gaze at the remote and icy stars of Overland's bleak new sky and vow to make them his own?

Unwilling to confront abstracts any longer, Toller turned his back on the red-gold sunset and took a sip of his mulled brandy. As well as being heated, the liquor had been spiced and buttered to offset the coolness of the twilight air. He found its calorific familiarity deeply comforting as he watched his father and Bartan Drumme fuss over the telescopes which had been set up on the balcony. In his eyes the two older men had become granite pillars of intellectual fortitude and good sense in a quicksand universe, and his respect for them had been enhanced beyond measure. They were discussing a strange scientific anomaly, a quirky lesion in the fabric of the new reality, which thus far had been noticed by relatively few people.

"It is quite ironic," Cassyll Maraquine was saying. "It would be no exaggeration to say that, taking the state factories as a whole, there are at least a gross of highly qualified engineers and technicians who are directly answerable to me. They spend much of their time peering at the most accurate measuring instruments we can devise—but none of them saw *anything*!"

"Be fair," Bartan murmured. "There is no change in the way in which circles relate to circles, and most of your—"

Cassyll shook his greying head. "No excuse, old friend! It took a humble employee of the Cardapin brewery—a cooper!—to fight his way to me through all the cursed barriers that bureaucracies insist on erecting in spite of one's doughtiest efforts to prevent them. I have since plucked the man out of his lowly occupation and appointed him to my personal staff, where—"

"Tell me, father," Toller cut in, his curiosity aroused. "What is this to-do concerning rings and circles and wheels and the like which perplexes you so? What can be so strange and intriguing about an ordinary circle?"

"A circle has always had certain fixed properties, just like any other geometrical figure, and now those properties have suffered a sudden change," Cassyll said in solemn tones. "Until now, as you very well know, the circumference of a circle has been *exactly* equal to three times its diameter. Now, however—if you care to put the matter to the test—you will find that the ratio of circumference to diameter is slightly *more* than three."

"But..." Toller tried to assimilate the idea, but his mind baulked at the task. "What does it mean?"

"It means we are a long way from home," Drumme put in, with a twist of the lips which hinted that he had said something very profound.

"Yes, but will it make any difference to our lives?"

Cassyll snorted as he took the lens cap off a telescope. "There speaks a man

who has never had to earn his crusts in commerce or industry! The re-design and re-calibration of certain classes of machinery is going to cost the state a veritable fortune. And then there will be clerical costs, and accountancy costs, and—"

"Clerical?"

"Just think of it, Toller. We have twelve fingers, so we naturally count to the base of twelve. That, coupled with the fact that the circumference of a circle used to be precisely three times the diameter, made whole areas of computation absurdly easy. From now on, however, everything in that line is going to be more difficult—and I am not talking about matters as rudimentary as a cooper having to learn to make longer straps for his barrels. Take, for example, the—"

"Tell me," Toller said quickly, anxious to forestall one of his father's rambling discourses, "what is the new ratio? I ought to know that much, at least."

Cassyll glanced significantly at Bartan. "There has been a certain amount of discussion on that point. I have been too busy—what with the distressing events at the palace and so forth—to take measurements in person. Some of my staff are claiming that the new ratio is three-and-a-seventh—which, of course, is nonsense."

"Why is it nonsense?" Bartan said with some heat.

"Because, my old friend, there has to be a natural harmony in the world of numbers. Three-and-a-seventh would work in with nothing. I have no doubt at all that when the measurements are made with proper accuracy we will find that the new ratio is amenable to..."

Toller allowed his attention to wander away from what promised to be a lengthy argument of the type from which his father and Bartan Drumme had always derived great satisfaction. He wished that Jerene was by his side, but she had gone to visit her family in the village of Divarl and was not expected back until the morrow. Tired of standing by the balustrade, he made his way to a couch, lowered himself on to it and set his crutches aside. His leg, now that the process of healing was well under way, had become stiff and capable of producing excruciating pain when subjected to any degree of stress. Simply living with such a leg, continually devising strategies to prevent it unleashing bolts of agony, was an experience which Toller found enervating and exhausting, and he was glad to lie down.

"Son, perhaps you should go off to your room and take your night's sleep," Cassyll Maraquine said gently, coming to stand by the couch. "The wound was more severe than you seem to think."

"Not yet—I'd rather stay here for a while." Toller smiled up at his father. "I seem to remember us exchanging similar words many times in the past, when I was a child. Are you about to pack me off to bed whether I like it or not?"

"You are too big for that kind of treatment. Besides, I am busy and I do not want to be plagued with calls for glasses of water."

"And honey straws," Bartan Drumme bantered from farther along the balcony. "Don't forget the honey straws."

"Honey straws!" Toller rose on one elbow. "Is that what I...?"

"Yes, even though it might seem a strange weaning for the one they have begun to call the Godslayer," Cassyll said to Toller. "You didn't know that, did you? One can only guess at what kind of stories your friend Steenameert is noising abroad, but I'm told that every tavern in the realm is ringing with tales of how you flew to a land far beyond the heavens and slew a thousand gods ... or demons ... or a promiscuous mixture of both in order to save Overland from being swallowed by a great crystal dragon."

Cassyll paused, looking rueful. "Now that I weigh the matter up, I suspect that the average ale-fuddled ploughman's understanding of what happened is equal to or better than mine. Toller, all those things that were explained to you when mind addressed mind without recourse to speech... Have you no recollection at all, not even a trace, of what was meant by the term 'space-time'? I would dearly love to know why two words which can have no logical connection came to be joined together in that particular way."

"I am unable to help you," Toller said with a sigh. "When Divivvidiv was speaking within my head I seemed to have a full understanding of what he meant, but the messages were written in smoke. Everything has faded. I reach for meanings, only to find emptiness. Not a true emptiness—but one which is haunted by echoes, a poignant feeling of massive doors having just closed for ever, of my being too slow and too late. I am sorry, father—I wish it were otherwise."

"Never mind—we will make the journey unaided." Cassyll brought a thick blanket to the couch and draped it over Toller. "The nights are colder here."

Toller nodded and made himself comfortable, yielding to the luxurious feeling of being well cared for and of having no immediate responsibilities. His leg was throbbing warmly, and the physicians had predicted that he would henceforth walk with a limp, but that gave him even more entitlement to bask like a child in snug warmth, secure like a child beneath a blanket which—better than the stoutest armour—gave protection against all those elements of the outside world which might bring harm.

Safely cocooned, his mind misting with drowsiness, Toller tried to define his position in an unfamiliar universe. So much had been *lost*. The Queen was dying, unable to face or even comprehend a reality in which the planet of her birth—to which she had longed to return—no longer existed. Her dream of a

single nation encompassing two worlds had been shattered in an instant. It had been a good dream, one with which Toller had instinctively sympathized, but now there would be no mile-high columns of skyships, commercially and culturally laden, plying the invisible trade lanes between Land and Overland. Instead, there would be ... what?

More tired than he had realized, Toller found himself quite unable to deal with the sly and shifting enigmas of the future. He began slipping in and out of consciousness, and with each return to lucidity the sky was darker and the stars were more numerous, looking brighter than he had expected. The balcony was dark also, because his father and Bartan Drumme were using the telescopes, busily making and comparing notes.

Toller listened to the murmurous activity for an indeterminate time ... dozing and drifting ... half-comprehending the stray wisps of conversation that came his way ... and gradually his mood began to change. He could see now that he had allowed himself, possibly through battle shock and extreme weariness, to be intimidated by the new sky, to become downcast and despondent in the face of it. He had asked if Kolcorron would ever find champions worthy of challenging that inimical black void, and at the very time of posing the question had been too blinkered by pessimism to realize that he was already in the company of such heroes.

Cassyll and Bartan were two middle-aged men whose investment in the old order of things had been much greater than his, and whose stake in a vexed future had to be correspondingly less—but had they slumped down to indulge in self-pity? No! Their reaction had been to take up their swords—swords of the mind—and at that very moment, quietly and without fanfare, they were engaged in no less an undertaking than laying the foundations of a new astronomy!

Halfway between wakefulness and sleep, Toller smiled.

His father and Bartan Drumme were speaking in low voices to avoid disturbing Toller's rest, but whispers insinuate themselves into the quasi-realities of the drowsing mind more readily than shouts ... five planets observed in the local system so far, Bartan ... counting the double world as one, that is ... if we have logged five in such a short time, it is only reasonable—don't you think?—to assume that there must be others ... *I should rise to my feet in this very instant and take part in what is going on* ... it scarcely seems possible—a cream-colored planet girdled by a great ring—but *perhaps I have done enough for the day* ... confirm your initial calculations, Cassyll ... something very close to an inclination of twenty degrees, which means that Overland will have seasons from now on ... *Jerene will be with me in the morning, and with her help I'll soon be able to work* ... the people, especially the farmers, must prepare to cope

with the great changes brought about by the seasons ... *seasons and reasons, reasons and seasons*... I have a curious premonition about that ringed planet, Bartan—it is so exceptional, so portentous in its aspect, that it *must* be destined to play a major role in our future affairs...

Toller lapsed easily into a profound and healing sleep.

When he awoke the balcony was silent and deserted, an indication that the night was now well advanced. He found he had been covered with extra blankets which had protected him against the growing coldness of the air. The sky looked just as it had done when he first saw it. Unfamiliar constellations were poised overhead, and a tinge of nacreous light on the eastern horizon was beginning to overpaint the faintest of the meagre stars.

This time Toller's attention was caught by what appeared to be a bright double planet which had risen above the pre-dawn spray of luminance. On impulse he threw the blankets aside and struggled to his feet, lips moving silently as the wound in his leg exacted its due toll of pain. He gathered up his crutches and negotiated his way across the tiled floor to the nearest of the telescopes. His disability complicated the task of aiming and focusing the instrument, but within a few seconds he was gazing into the eyepiece.

And there, suspended before him in velvety blackness, was a shimmering world accompanied by a single huge moon. The larger component of the binary was bluish in colour, perhaps a signal that it had an abundance of water, and as his eyes drank in the radiant spectacle Toller felt a touch of the uncanny, a stealthy coolness spreading down his spine.

"You may be right about the ringed world, father," he whispered. "But—somehow—I wonder..."