secrétaire qu'il entraîna jusqu'au moment où il put lancer :

– Bonjour, monsieur le curé! Vous savez! Je suis en mesure de vous rassurer... Tout mécréant que je sois, je devine votre angoisse à l'idée qu'un crime a pu être commis dans votre église... Eh bien! non... La science est formelle.. *Notre* comtesse est morte d'un arrêt du cœur...

Maigret s'était approché de Jean Métayer

– Une question...

Il sentait le jeune homme nerveux, haletant d'angoisse.

— Quand êtes-vous allé pour la dernière fois au *Journal de Moulins?*

– Je... attendez...

Il allait parler. Mais sa méfiance fut mise en éveil. Il lança au commissaire un regard soupçonneux.

– Pourquoi me demandez-vous ça?

– Peu importe!

– Je suis obligé de répondre?

– Vous êtes libre de vous taire!

Peut-être pas tout à fait une tête de dégénéré, mais une tête inquiète, tourmentée. Une nervosité fort au-dessus de la moyenne, capable d'intéresser le Dr Bouchardon. qui parlait au curé.

Je sais que c'est à moi qu'on fera des misères!... Mais je me défendrai..

– Entendu! Vous vous défendrez!

Je veux d'abord voir un avocat... C'est mon droit... D'ailleurs, à quel titre êtes-vous?..

— Un instant! Vous avez fait du Droit?

— Deux ans!

Il essayait de reprendre contenance, de sourire.

– Il n'y a ni plainte ni flagrant délit... Donc, vous n'avez aucune qualité pour...

— Très bien! Dix sur dix!

— Le docteur affirme...

— Et moi, je prétends que la comtesse a été tuée par le plus répugnant des saligauds. Lisez ceci!

Et Maigret lui tendit le papier imprimé. Tout raide, soudain, Jean Métayer regarda son compagnon comme s'il allait lui cracher au visage.

— Un... vous avez dit un?... Je ne vous permets...

Et le commissaire, lui posant doucement la main sur l'épaule :

— Mais, mon pauvre garçon, je ne vous ai encore rien dit, *à vous!* Où est le comte? Lisez toujours. Vous me rendrez ce papier tout à l'heure...

Une flamme de triomphe dans les yeux de Métayer.

– Le comte discute chèques avec le régisseur!... Vous les trouverez dans la bibliothèque!...

Le prêtre et le docteur marchaient devant et Maigret entendit la voix du médecin qui disait

muring one might expect of a rider urging his horse over a difficult jump.

"Can you get through them?" asked Morrolan.

"Of course," snapped Aliera. "Now let me concentrate. Be ready."

Be ready.

They were always saying stuff like that.

Just exactly what does that mean, anyway? Be ready. Like, have your eyes open? Be certain you've had a good meal and used the chamber pot? Now is the wrong time for a nap? Make sure you aren't sneezing when It happens? What, exactly? It means nothing, that's what it means. An empty noise.

"I'm ready," I said.

"As am I," said Morrolan. "Yes," said Teldra. Verra did not deign to speak, and no one expected her to, I suppose because being a goddess means never needing to sneeze.

I was watching the trembling at the end of Pathfinder, so I saw it when it happened: A tiny spark appeared on the very tip of the blade. The trembling caused it to jump around, leaving diminutive golden trails in the air; I couldn't tell if they were really there or were just products of my vision. Not, I suppose, that it mattered. There began to be a sensation of motion—the kind of motion that happens in dreams, where nothing changed, and my feet didn't move, but there was the feeling as if my stomach had suddenly been left behind and needed to catch up—not the wrenching nausea of a teleport, fortunately, but still unsettling.

The sense of motion increased.

"Shallow breaths, Boss."

"Right."

Sometime in there, Morrolan had drawn Blackwand—it tells you how messed up my senses were that I hadn't noticed, still didn't feel it; all I was really aware of was the sensation of motion, as if something had pulled me from the bottom of a hill and I start up up up rolling and spinning and being everywhere at once and no place at all happening at the same time and time again you've been through this before you realize that you'll never forget everything you thought you knew about moving from one place to another flash of light flickering and still moving past and present and future filled with unknown dangers appearing from everywhere nowhere somewhere somehow what when where was I and how did I get here from there we are slowing down down down stop.

There were four of them; maybe two of them were the same ones we'd seen before, but I couldn't tell them apart well enough to say. Two were standing, two sitting on what appeared to be an uncomfortable-looking couch. I'd been among humans, Dragaerans, Serioli, cat-centaurs, and gods. One way or another, they were people—but these were *things*. They looked like things, and I thought of them as things, and I really wanted to put them away like things.

The first bit of bad news was, the things didn't seem startled by our presence. If we were counting on surprise, we could be in real trouble.

One of the sitting ones was holding something that appeared to be some sort of tube, with projections that fit nicely into its hand. If it was a weapon, we could be in real trouble.

It was clear that two of them, including the one with the tube, were looking at Verra. It was possible that their idea all along was to kill her, and now that we had brought her, the rest of us could simply be disposed of. If that was their thinking, we could be in real trouble.

I had no time, just then, to pay attention to surroundings—I think I noted that we were indoors, and that was about it. Things happened so quickly that I just had no time to note the sort of details that can save your life; we might be in the Jenoine equivalent of someone's parlor, or of a sorcerer's laboratory, or the weapon room of their Imperial Guard for all I knew. We might be surrounded by Jenoine food and drink, Jenoine books, or Jenoine death traps. If the latter, we might be in real trouble.

"I think we might be in real trouble, Boss."

"We do have some, I take it?"

"Yes, we have some concerning Herr Padillo. You see, it was he who was my primary reason for going to Bonn."

"Who was the other man?"

Maas waved his hand airily. "A minor functionary who was interested in buying some arms. Of no consequence, really. He had little money. But it was Herr Padillo I wished to see. And here is where the irony creeps in, Herr McCorkle, and perhaps the pity too. Your establishment is very dim, is it not? There is little light?"

"True."

"As I said, the little man was of no importance. Your place is dimly lighted, so I can only assume that a mistake was made. The two gentlemen who burst in shot the wrong man. They were supposed to kill me." Maas laughed. It sounded as humorous as the ha-ha's people write in letters.

"The pity, I take it, is that you weren't shot. It's not the funniest story I've heard in a long time, although it has its points."

Maas reached into his brief case and rummaged around. He came up with a long dappled cigar. "Cuban," he said. "Would you care for one?"

"I'd be betraying the fatherland."

Maas got the cigar lighted and took a few experimental puffs. "I had information that I wished to sell to Herr Padillo concerning his current assignment. You see, Herr McCorkle, a man of Herr Padillo's talents is rare. Such men are difficult to come by, and they are to be treasured. In the course of their activities they make enemies because their primary function is to frustrate the opposition's carefully made plans. Herr Padillo, through his language ability and his personal resourcefulness, has been highly successful in his assignments. Has he told you of them?"

"We never discussed it."

Maas nodded. "He is also a prudent man. But, as I said, his successes were notable. In the course of his work he found it necessary to remove some rather prominent political figures. Oh, not the ones

who make the headlines, but those who, like Herr Padillo, worked in the shadows of international politics. He is, I'm reliably informed, one of the best."

"He also makes a hell of a good hot buttered rum," I said.

"Ah, yes. The cover of the café in Bonn. Really excellent. For some reason, Herr McCorkle, you do not strike me as the kind of man who would engage in this business of information and politics."

"You're right. I'm not that kind of man at all. I'm just along for the ride."

"Yes. How much do you think that our friends in the East might pay for a topflight agent of the United States—for one who is the *sine qua non* of its intelligence *apparat*?"

"I don't know."

"Money, of course, would be out of the question."

"Why?"

"An ambitious man in the U. S. intelligence organization for which Herr Padillo occasionally does odd jobs, shall we say, would not be looking for money. He would be looking for the coup that would enhance his reputation, for the brilliant stroke that would advance his career. That is what I came to tell Herr Padillo. For a price, of course."

"And you were interrupted."

"Unfortunately, yes. As I have told you before, my sources are excellent. They cost a bit, but their reliability is without question. I learned that a trade was in the offing between our Russian friends in the KGB and Herr Padillo's employers."

"What kind of trade?"

Maas puffed some more on his cigar. It was growing an excellent ash.

"Do you remember two men called William H. Martin and Vernon F. Mitchell?"

"Vaguely. They defected four or five years ago."

"Five," Maas said. "They were mathematicians for your National Security Agency. They went to Mexico, flew to Havana, and caught

on seeing the Boat Race—and he noticed something odd going on on the towpath. And it was because of Deirdre, of course.' He sighed: he had told me of these events in the light and ironic tone appropriate to an account of social discomfiture recollected in tranquillity, and seemed almost to have forgotten that the quarrel between his father and their host had not been the chief catastrophe of the afternoon. 'Poor Deirdre. But you will understand, Professor Tamar, that my mother would not have wished to tell the Coroner what Rupert said to my father.'

The boy looked very graceful and at ease, lying on the grass beside the little temple, and I thought how well the surroundings became him: if the designer of the garden had had the power to choose not only the shrubs, flowers, trees, temples and statuary but also some living inhabitant for his Arcadia, it would have been, I could not doubt, a boy who looked like Leonidas—with the same delicately carved profile, the same grape-black hair, the same olive-tinted smoothness of complexion. There was something about him, all the same, which reminded me that there is a darker side of Arcadia: the gods who have their birthplace in that remote and mountainous region are not the good-natured and reasonable deities who have their home on Olympus, and their purposes are not always benign.

'I quite understand,' I said, 'that your mother would not have cared for so an offensive a remark to be repeated in the newspapers. It seems surprisingly fortunate that nothing was asked which obliged her to mention it. I should have supposed—but I am very ignorant of such matters—that the Coroner would have inquired rather closely about the time immediately preceding your cousin's death: to establish, for example, exactly how long she had been alone on the roof terrace.'

'He mostly wanted to know what sort of mood she was in—whether she seemed at all depressed, and so on. We were able to tell him, as it happened, that she had been in unusually good spirits.' There was again an ironical note in his voice, which I could not quite account for. 'My mother noticed at lunch how pleased she seemed to

be, and asked her if she had something special to be excited about.'

'And had she?'

'Yes, so she said. It was still a secret, she said, but when we knew about it it would be a great surprise for us. My mother of course assumed she was talking of some love-affair. But it wasn't really quite like that. She had the sort of look she used to have when she'd found something out that she knew you didn't want her to know—it was rather a habit of hers. You could tell, if you knew her, that she meant the surprise to be an unpleasant one for us—something that would make her the centre of attention, and make us all wish we'd been nicer to her.'

'It sounds,' I said, 'like a rather disagreeable form of high spirits. But at least you can be satisfied that her death was accidental.'

He had been lying on his side, looking towards me. He now made a quarter turn and lay on his back, his hands clasped behind his head. I could not tell, therefore, with what expression he said, 'Oh no, Professor Tamar, it wasn't an accident.' His tone, however, was one of detachment; of slight irony; and a certainty that sounded like knowledge.

The honey-scented air was almost unnaturally still. Leaves, flowers and shadows were as motionless as stone, and the birds were no longer singing. It is in such conditions, I have heard it said, that cattle and goats and certain other animals may behave wildly and unpredictably, as if in terror of some unseen presence.

'I understood,' I said, 'that the verdict was accident.'

'It couldn't have been an accident,' said the boy. 'The wall around the terrace is too high to fall from by accident.'

'But you say that your cousin behaved as if she were in good spirits?'

'I say that she behaved, Professor Tamar, as if she expected to be the centre of attention and make us all wish we'd have been nicer to her. Yes. How else could she have done that except by killing herself?' He turned towards me again, looking at me with his curious lapis lazuli eyes; and what he said seemed for a moment quite reasonable and persuasive.