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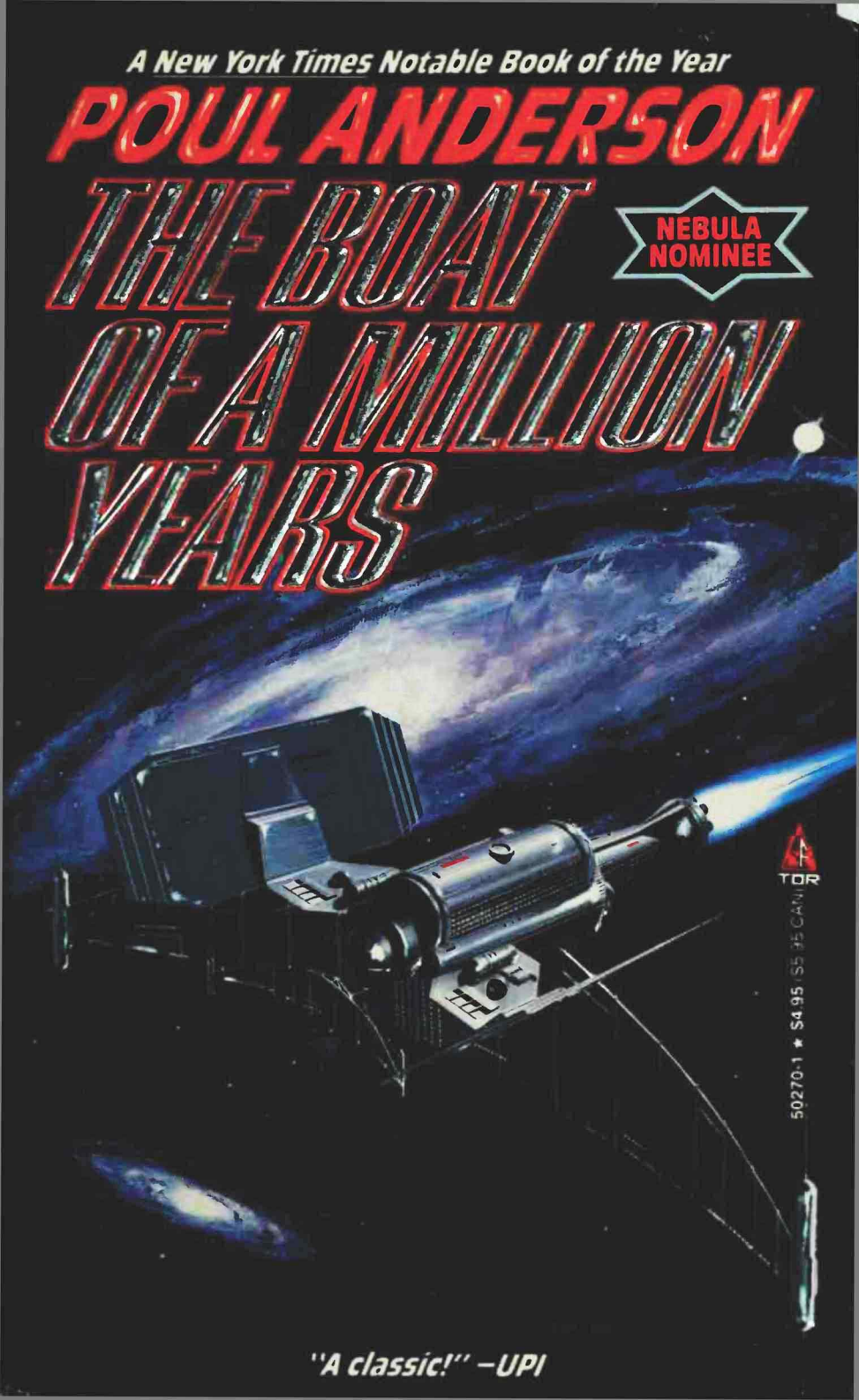

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THE BOAT OF A MILLION YEARS

POUL ANDERSON

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

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THE BOAT OF A MILLION YEARS

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To
G. C. and Carmen Edmondson
Salud, amor, dinero y tiempo para gustarlos.

May he go forth in the sunrise boat,
May he come to port in the sunset boat,
May he go among the imperishable stars,
May he journey in the Boat of a Million Years.

—***The Book of Going Forth by Daylight***
(Theban recension, ca. 18th Dynasty)

I

Thule

1

"To sail beyond the world—"

Hanno's voice faded away. Pytheas looked sharply at him. Against the plain, whitewashed room where they sat, the Phoenician seemed vivid, like a flash of sunlight from outside. It might only be due to the brightness of eyes and teeth or a skin tan even in winter. Otherwise he was ordinary, slender and supple but of medium height, features aquiline, hair and neatly trimmed beard a crow's-wing black. He wore an unadorned tunic, scuffed sandals, a single gold finger ring.

"You cannot mean that," said the Greek.

Hanno came out of reverie, shook himself, laughed. "Oh, no. A trope, of course. Though it would be well to make sure beforehand that enough of your men do believe we live on a sphere. They'll have ample terrors and troubles without fearing a plunge off the edge into some abyss."

"You sound educated," said Pytheas slowly.

"Should I not? I have traveled, but also studied. And you, sir, a learned man, a philosopher, propose to voyage into the sheerly unknown. You actually hope to come back." Hanno picked a goblet off the small table between them and sipped of the tempered wine that a slave had brought.

Pytheas shifted on his stool. A charcoal brazier had made the room close as well as warm. His lungs longed for a breath of clean air. "Not altogether unknown," he said. "Your people go that far. Lykias told me you claim to have been there yourself."

Hanno sobered. "I told him the truth. I've journeyed that way more than once, both overland and by sea. But so much of it is wilderness, so much else is changing these days, in ways unforeseeable but usually violent. And the Carthaginians are interested just in the tin, with whatever other things they can pick up incidental to that. They only touch on the southern end of the Pretanic Isles. The rest is outside their ken, or any civilized man's."

"And yet you desire to come with me."

Hanno in his turn studied his host before replying. Pytheas too was simply clad. He was tall for a Greek, lean, features sharp beneath a high forehead, clean-shaven, with a few deep lines. Curly brown hair showed frost at the temples. His eyes were gray. The directness of their glance bespoke imperiousness, or innocence, or perhaps both.

"I think I do," said Hanno carefully. "We shall have to talk further. However, in my fashion, like you in yours, I want to learn as much as I can about this earth and its peoples while I am still above it. When your man Lykias went about the city inquiring after possible advisors, and I heard, I was happy to seek him out." Again he grinned. "Also, I am in present need of employment. There ought to be a goodly profit in this."

"We are not going as traders," Pytheas explained. "We'll have wares along, but to exchange for what we need rather than to get wealthy. We are, though, pledged excellent pay on our return."

"I gather the city is not sponsoring the venture?"

"Correct. A consortium of merchants is. They want to know the chances and costs of a sea route to the far North, now that the Gauls are making the land dangerous. Not tin alone, you understand—tin may be the least of it—but amber, furs, slaves, whatever those countries offer."

"The Gauls indeed." Nothing else need be said. They had poured over the mountains to make the nearer part of Italy theirs; a long lifetime ago war chariots rumbled, swords flashed, homes blazed, wolves and ravens feasted across Europe. Hanno did add: "I have some acquaintance with them. That should help. Be warned, the prospects of such a route are poor. Besides them, the Carthaginians."

"I know."

Hanno cocked his head. "Nevertheless, you are organizing this expedition."

"To follow knowledge," Pytheas answered quietly. "I am fortunate in that two of the sponsors are . . . more intelligent than most. They value understanding for its own sake."

"Knowledge has a trick of paying off in unexpected ways." Hanno smiled. "Forgive me. I'm a crass Phoenician. You're a man of consequence in public affairs—inherited money, I've heard—but first and foremost a philosopher. You need a navigator at sea, a guide and interpreter ashore. I believe I am the one for you."

Pytheas' tone sharpened. "What are you doing in Massalia? Why are you prepared to aid something that is . . . not in the interests of Carthage?"

Hanno turned serious. "I am no traitor, for I am not a Carthaginian. True, I've lived in the city, among many different places. But I'm not overly fond of it. They're too puritanical there, too little touched by any grace of Greece or Persia; and their human sacrifices—" He grimaced, then shrugged. "To sit in judgment on what people do is a fool's game. They'll continue doing it regardless. As for me, I'm from Old Phoenicia, the East. Alexandros destroyed Tyre, and the civil wars after his death have left that part of the world in sorry shape. I seek my fortune where I can. I'm a wanderer by nature anyway."

"I shall have to get better acquainted with you," Pytheas said, blunter than he was wont. Did he already feel at ease with this stranger?

"Certainly." Again Hanno's manner grew cheerful. "I've thought how to prove my skills to you. In a short time. You realize the need to embark soon, don't you? Preferably at the start of sailing season."

"Because of Carthage?"

Hanno nodded. "This new war in Sicily will engage her whole attention for a while. Agathokles of Syracuse is a harder enemy than the Carthaginian suffetes have taken the trouble to discover. I wouldn't be surprised if he carries the fight to their shores."

Pytheas stared. "How can you be so sure?"

"I was lately there, and I've learned to pay attention. In

Carthage too. You're aware she discourages all foreign traffic beyond the Pillars of Herakles—often by methods that would be called piracy were it the work of a private party. Well, the suffetes now speak of an out-and-out blockade. If they win this war, or at least fight it to a draw, I suspect they'll lack the resources for some time afterward; but eventually they'll do it. Your expedition will take a pair of years at least, likelier three, very possibly more. The earlier you set forth, the earlier you'll come home—if you do—and not run into a Carthaginian patrol. What a shame, after an odyssey like that, to end at the bottom of the sea or on an auction block."

"We'll have an escort of warships."

Hanno shook his head. "Oh, no. Anything less than a penteconter would be useless, and that long hull would never survive the North Atlantic. My friend, you haven't seen waves or storms till you've been yonder. Also, how do you carry food and water for all those rowers? They burn it like wildfire, you know, and resupplying will be chancy at best. My namesake could explore the African coasts in galleys, but he was southbound. You'll need sail. Let me counsel you on what ships to buy."

"You claim a great many proficiencies," Pytheas murmured.

"I have been through a great many schools," Hanno replied.

They talked onward for an hour, and agreed to meet again on the following day. Pytheas escorted his visitor out. They stopped for a moment at the front door.

The house stood high on a ridge above the bay. Eastward, beyond city walls, hills glowed with sunset. The streets of the old Greek colony had become rivers of shadow. Voices, footfalls, wheels were muted; the air rested in chilly peace. Westward the sun cast a bridge across the waters. Masts in the harbor stood stark against it. Gulls cruising overhead caught the light on their wings, gold beneath blue.

"A lovely sight," Pytheas said low. "This coast must be the most beautiful in the world."

Hanno parted his lips as if to tell about others he had seen, closed them, said finally: "Let us try to bring you back here, then. It won't be easy."

2

THREE VESSELS fared by moonlight. Their masters dared not put in at Gadeira or any part of Tartessos—Carthaginian territory—and kept the sea after dark. The crews muttered; but night sailing was not unheard of on familiar lanes, and to be out in the very Ocean was a strangeness overwhelming all else.

The craft were alike, so they could more readily travel in convoy. Each was a merchantman, though her principal cargo was well-armed men and their supplies. Narrower in the beam than most of its kind, the black hull swept some hundred feet from the high stern, where the twin steering oars were and a swan's head ornament reared, to the cutwater at the prow. A mast amidships carried a large square sail and a triangular topsail. Forward of it stood a small deckhouse, aft of it lay two rowboats, for towing her at need or saving lives in the worst need. She could get perhaps eighty degrees off the wind, slowly and awkwardly; nimbler rigs existed, but drew less well. Tonight, with a favoring breeze, she made about five knots.

Hanno came forth. The cabin, which the officers shared, was confining for a person of his habits. Often he slept on deck, together with such of the crew as found the spaces below too cramped and smelly. Several of them rested blanket-wrapped on straw ticks along the bulwarks. Moonlight turned planks hoar, cross-barred with long unrestful shadows. Air blew cold, and Hanno drew his chlamys close about him. The wind lulled above whoosh of waves, creak of timbers and tackle. The ship rocked gently, making muscles flex in a dance with her.

A figure stood at the starboard rail, near the forward lookout. Hanno recognized Pytheas' profile against quicksilver moonglade and went to join him. "Rejoice," he greeted. "You can't sleep either?"

"I hoped to make observations," the Greek replied. "Nights this clear will be few for us, won't they?"

Hanno looked outward. Brightnesses rippled, sheened, sparked over the water. Foam swirled ghostly. Lanterns hung from the yard scarcely touched his vision, though he saw their counterparts glimmer and sway on the companion

ships. Across a distance hard to gauge in this moving mingling of light and night, a vague mass lifted, Iberia. "We've been lucky thus far in the weather," Hanno said. He gestured at the goniometer in Pytheas' hand. "But is that thing of any use here?"

"It would be much more accurate ashore. If only we could— Well, doubtless I'll find better opportunities later, the Bears will be higher in the sky."

Hanno glanced at those constellations. They had dimmed as the moon climbed. "What are you trying to measure?"

"I want to locate the north celestial pole more exactly than has hitherto been done." Pytheas pointed. "Do you see how the two brightest stars in the Lesser Bear, with the first star in the tail, form three corners of a quadrangle? The pole is the fourth. Or so they say."

"I know. I *am* your navigator."

"I beg your pardon. I forgot for a moment. Too absorbed." Pytheas chuckled ruefully, then grew eager. "If this rule of thumb can be refined, you appreciate what a help that will give seamen. Still more will it mean to geographers and cosmographers. Since the gods have not seen fit to place a star just at the pole, or even especially close, we must make do as best we are able."

"There have been such stars in the past," Hanno said. "There will be again in the future."

"What?" Pytheas stared at him through the phantom radiance. "Do you mean the heavens change?"

"Over centuries." Hanno's hand made a chopping motion. "Forget it. Like you, I spoke without thinking. I don't expect you to believe me. Call it a sailor's tall tale."

Pytheas stroked his chin. "As a matter of fact," he said, low and slow, "a correspondent of mine in Alexandria, at its great library, has mentioned that ancient records give certain intimations. . . . It requires deeper study. But you, Hanno—"

The Phoenician formed a disarming grin. "Perhaps I make lucky guesses once in a while."

"You are . . . unique in several respects. You've actually told me very little about yourself. Is 'Hanno' the name you were born with?"

"It serves."

"You seem without home, family, ties of any kind." Impulsively: "I hate to think of you as lonely and defenseless."

"Thank you, but I need no sympathy." Hanno mildened his manner. "You judge me by yourself. Are you already homesick?"

"Not really. Not on this quest that I've dreamt of for years." The Greek paused. "But I do have roots, wife, children. My oldest son is married. He should have grandchildren for me when I return." With a smile: "My oldest daughter is now marriageable. I left arrangements for her in my brother's hands, with my wife's advice and consent. Yes, my little Danaë too, she may well have a little one of her own by that time." He shook himself, as if the wind had touched him with cold. "It won't do to yearn. We'll be long gone at best."

Hanno shrugged. "And meanwhile, I've found, barbarian women are usually easy."

Pytheas regarded him for a silent spell and said nothing about youths already available. Whatever Hanno's tastes might be, he didn't expect the Phoenician would become intimate with any member of the expedition. Behind that genial front of his, how much humanity was in him?

3

ALL AT once, like a blow to the belly, there the Keltoi were. A dozen tall warriors sprang from the forest and started across the grassy slope to the beach, a score, a hundred, two hundred or worse. More swarmed onto the twin headlands sheltering the cove where the ships had anchored.

Mariners yelled, dropped their work of preparing camp, snatched for their weapons, milled about. Soldiers among them, hoplites and peltasts, most still armored, pushed through the chaos to take formation. Helmets, breastplates, shields, swords, pike heads shimmered dully in a thin rain. Hanno ran to their captain, Demetrios, caught him by the wrist, and snapped, "Don't initiate hostilities. They'd love to take our heads home. Battle trophies."

The hard visage fleered. "Do you suppose if we stay peaceful, they'll embrace us?"

"That depends." Hanno squinted into the dimness before

him. The hidden sun at his back had to be near the horizon. Trees made a gray wall behind the oncoming attackers. War cries went saw-edged over the boom of surf outside the little bay, echoed from cliff to cliff, sent gulls shrieking aloft. "Someone spied us, maybe days ago; sent word to his fellow clansmen; they followed our course, with the woods for a screen; they expected we'd camp at one of the places where the Carthaginians do—we'd see the burnt wood, rubbish, traces, and head in—" He was thinking aloud.

"Why didn't they wait till we were asleep, except for our sentries?"

"They must be afraid of the dark. This can't be their country. And so—Hold fast. Give me—I should have a peeled wand or a green bough, but this may suffice." Hanno turned about and tugged at the standard. Its bearer clung and cursed him.

"Make him give me this, Demetrios!" Hanno demanded.

The mercenary leader hesitated an instant before he ordered, "Let go, Kleanthes."

"Good. Now blow trumpets, bang on shields, raise all the noise you can, but stay where you are."

The emblem aloft, Hanno advanced. He moved slowly, gravely, staff in right hand, naked sword in left. At his rear, brass brayed and iron thundered.

The Carthaginians had cleared away high growth as far as the spring where they got water, a distance of about an Athenian stadion. New brush sprang up to hinder passage and make it noisy. Thus total surprise was impossible, and the Gauls were not yet in that headlong dash which civilized men dreaded. They trotted forward as individuals or small groups, disorderly and deadly.

They were big, fair-complexioned men. Most flaunted long mustaches; none had shaved lately. Those that did not braid their hair had treated it with a material that reddened it and stiffened it into spikes. Paint and tattoos adorned bodies sometimes naked, oftener wrapped in a dyed woolen kilt—a sort of primitive himation—or attired in breeches and perhaps a tunic of gaudy hues. Their weapons were long swords, spears, dirks; some bore round shields, a few had helmets.

One huge man at the forefront of the roughly semicircular van wore a gilt helmet that flared out in horns. A bronze

torc circled his throat, gold helices his arms. The warriors to his right and left were almost as flamboyant. He must be the chief. Hanno moved toward him.

The racket from among the Greeks was giving the barbarians pause, puzzling them. They slowed, looked around, damped their shouts and muttered to each other. Watching, Pytheas saw Hanno meet their leader. He heard horns blow, voices ring. Men sped about, carrying a word he could not understand. The Gauls grumbled piecemeal to a halt, withdrew a ways, squatted down or leaned on their spears, waited. The drizzle thickened, daylight faded, and he saw only shadows yonder.

An hour dragged itself into dusk. Fires blossomed under the forest.

Hanno returned. He walked like another shadow past Demetrios' pickets, between the hushed and huddled sailors, to find Pytheas near the boats, not to flee but because there the water cast off enough light to ease the wet gloom a little.

"We're safe," Hanno declared. Breath gusted out of Pytheas.

"But we've a busy night ahead of us," Hanno went on. "Kindle fires, pitch tents, get the best of the wretched food we have and cook it as well as possible. Not that our visitors will notice the quality. It's quantity that counts with them."

Pytheas peered, striving to read the half-seen face. "What's happened?" he asked unevenly. "What have you done?"

Hanno's tone stayed cool, with a hint of hidden laughter. "You know I've acquired enough Keltic language to get by, and a fair acquaintance with their customs and beliefs. Those aren't too different from several other wild races'; I can guess my way past any gaps in my knowledge. I went out to them in the style of a herald, which made my person sacred, and talked with their chief. He's not a bad fellow, as such people go. I've known worse monsters in power among Hellenes, Persians, Phoenicians, Egyptians—No matter."

"What . . . did they want?"

"To overcome us before we could escape, of course, take our boats, capture our ships, plunder them. The fact alone showed this isn't likely their native country. Carthaginians have treaties with natives. True, these might have denounced the agreement for some childish reason. However,

then they'd have attacked after dark. They brag about their fearlessness, but when it's a question of booty more than glory, they wouldn't care to take unnecessary casualties or risk our being able to stand them off while most of us got away to the ships. Nevertheless they came at us as soon as we were ashore. So they must be afraid of the dark hereabouts—ghosts and gods of the lately slain, not yet appeased. I played on that, among other things."

"Who are they?"

"Pictones from the east, intending to settle these parts." Hanno began pacing, to and fro before the eyes of Pytheas. Sand scrunched soddenly underfoot. "Not much like those tame and half-tame tribes in your Massalian hinterland; but not entirely alien to them, either. They have more respect for skills, for learning, than I've generally found your ordinary Greek does. Their ornament, all their workmanship is beautiful. Not only a herald but a poet, any wise person is sacred. I proved myself a magician, what they call a druid, by various sleight-of-hand tricks and occultistic nonsense. I threatened—oh, very delicately—to lay a satire on them if they offended me. First I'd convinced them I was a poet, by a rough plagiarism of lines from Homer. I'll have to work on that. I've promised them more."

"You have what?"

Hanno's laugh rang aloud. "Ready the camp, I say. Prepare the feast. Tell Demetrios' men they're to be an honor guard. We'll have guests at dawn, and I daresay the festivities will brawl on through the whole day. You'll be expected to give pretty lavish gifts, but that's all right, we have ample trade goods along, and honor will require you receive severalfold the value in stuff we can better use. Also, we now have safe conduct for a considerable distance north." He paused. Sea and land sighed around them. "Oh, and if we get decent weather tomorrow night, do carry on your star observations, Pytheas. That will impress them no end."

"And . . . it's a part of what we're journeying for," whispered the other man. "What you've saved."

4

BEHIND LAY the Dumnonian tin mines, and the harbor to which no Carthaginians would come while the war lasted, and the three ships. Lykias kept a guard on them and saw to their careening and refitting. Demetrios organized overland

explorations of the west and south coasts. The interior and north of Pretania Pytheas claimed for himself.

He came with Hanno and a small military escort out of the hills, onto a rolling plain where, here and there, wilderness yielded to plowland and pasture. A gigantic mound inside a fosse and earthworks dominated it. The chalky crater hollowed on top held armed men and their lodgings.

Its commander received the travelers hospitably, once he was sure of their intentions. Folk were always eager for word from outside; most barbarians had pathetically narrow horizons. Talk went haltingly by way of Hanno and a Dumnonian who had accompanied the party this far. Now he wanted to go home. A man by some such name as Segovax offered to replace him and lead the guests to a great wonder nearby.

Autumn was in the wind, chill and loud. Leaves were turning yellow, brown, russet and beginning to fly away. A trail went onto an upland where trees were few. Cloud shadows and pale sunlight sickled across immensities of sallow grass. Sheepflocks afar were lost in loneliness. The Greeks marched briskly, leading the pack ponies they had gotten in Dumnonia. They would not return to the hill fort but push on. One winter was scant time to range this land. Come spring, Pytheas must be back with his ships.

The sight waxed slowly before him. At first it seemed little, and he supposed people made much of it only because they knew nothing better. As he neared, the sense of its mass grew and grew. Within a time-worn earthen rampart loomed a triple ring of standing stones, perhaps seventy cubits wide, the tallest of them well-nigh three man-heights, slabs almost as huge joining them on top, gray, lichenous, weathered, powerful beyond his understanding.

"What *is* this?" he whispered.

"You've seen megalithic works in the South, haven't you?" Hanno's voice was less calm than his words, hushed beneath the wind.

"Yes, but nothing like—Ask!"

Hanno turned to Segovax. Keltic lilted between them.

"He says giants built it in the morning of the world," Hanno told Pytheas.

"Then his people are as ignorant as we," the Greek said

low. "We'll camp here, overnight at least. Maybe we can learn something." It was more a prayer than a hope.

Throughout the rest of the day he devoted himself to his eyes and his instruments. Hanno could give scant help and Segovax hardly any information. Once Pytheas spent a long time finding the exact center of the complex and sighting from there. "I think," he said as he pointed, "that yonder stone outside—the sun will be seen to rise over it on Midsummer's Day. But I cannot be sure, and we cannot wait to find out, can we?"

Night approached. The soldiers, who had snatched the chance to idle, started a fire, cooked food, made ready. Their talk and occasional laughter rattled meaningless. They had no reason to fear attack by mortal men, nor to wonder what ghosts might linger here.

The weather had cleared, and after full darkness Pytheas left the camp to observe, which he did at every opportunity. Hanno came along, bearing a wax tablet and stylus to record the measurements. He had the Phoenician trick of writing without light. Pytheas could use ridges and grooves to read instruments by his fingertips, measurements less close than he wished but preferable to none at all. When a stone had blocked view of flames, they were alone in the ring with the sky.

Titan blacknesses walled them in. Stars flickered between, as if trapped. Overhead curved the Galaxy, a river of mist across which winged the Swan. The Lyre hung silent. The Dragon coiled halfway around a pole strangely high in heaven. Cold deepened with the hours, the vast wheel turned, frost formed hoar on the stones.

"Hadn't we better get some sleep?" Hanno asked at last. "I'm forgetting what warmth feels like."

"I suppose so." Pytheas' answer dragged. "I've learned as much as I can." Abruptly, harshly: "It isn't enough! It never will be. Our lives are a million years too short."

5

AFTER THE long voyage north, past land that grew ever more rugged, ever more girded with holms and reefs, the coast finally bent eastward. These were waters as rough as the ground on which their surf crashed; the ships stood well

out and cast anchor at sunset. It was better to huddle fireless than dare those unknown approaches. On the fourth day there appeared above haze the red and yellow heights of an island. Pytheas decided to pass between it and the main shore. His vessels battled their way on until dark.

Men saw no dawn, for air had thickened further. Aft of them a whiteness towered from edge to unseen edge of the world. They had a light breeze and visibility of about a dozen Athenian stadia, so they hoisted dripping sails. The sheer island began to fall behind them, and ahead, to starboard, they spied a murk that ought to be a lesser one. Noise of breakers loudened, an undergroundish thunder.

Then the white wall rolled over them, and they were blind. The breeze died and they lay helpless.

Never had they known or heard of a fog such as this. A man amidships saw neither bow nor stern; vision lost itself in smothering, eddying gray. Over the side he could barely make out turbulence streaked with foam. Water settled on cordage and fell off in a wicked little rain. The deck sheened with it. Wetness weighted hair, clothes, breath, while cold gnawed inward to the bone, as if he were already drowning. The formlessness was full of noise. Seas grew heavier, timbers groaned, the hull swayed crazily. Billows rushed and rumbled, surf roared. Horns hooted, crew wailed themselves hoarse, ship called desperately to unseen ship.

Pytheas, aft by the helm, shook his head. "What makes the waves rise when we have no wind?" he asked through the tumult.

The steersman gripped his useless tiller and shuddered. "Things out o' the deeps," he rasped, "or the gods o' these waters, angry that we trouble them."

"Launch the boats," Hanno advised Pytheas. "They'll give some warning if we're about to drift onto a rock, and maybe they can pull us clear."

The steersman bared teeth. "Oh, no, you don't!" he cried. "You'll not send men down to the demon-beasts. They won't go."

"I won't send them," Hanno retorted. "I'll lead them."

"Or I," Pytheas said.

It became the Phoenician who shook his head. "We can't risk you. Who else could have brought us this far, or can

bring us home? Without you we're all dead. Come help me put spirit into the crew."

He got his men, because Pytheas' calm words damped the terror in them. They unlashed a boat, dragged it to the side, shoved it over a rail when the deck canted and white-maned waves galloped just beneath. Hanno sprang down, braced calves between two thwarts, took an oar a sailor handed him, fended off while his rowers followed one by one. They fought free at the end of a towline and the next boat came after.

"I do hope the other skippers—" began Hanno. A dash of brine choked off what nobody heard anyhow.

The ship was gone into wet smoke. The boat climbed a comber that was like a moving hillside, hovered on the crest, plunged into a trough where men looked up the heights of water around them. Noise rolled empty of direction. Hanno, at the rudder, could only try to keep the hawser unfouled behind him. "Stroke!" he bawled. "Stroke, stroke, stroke!" Men gasped at oars and bailing buckets. The sea lapped around their ankles.

A monstrous grip seized them. They whirled. A cataract leaped out of the fog. It burst over their heads. When they could see again, the ship was upon them. The boat smashed into her hull. The water ground it against the strakes. Wood broke, tore free of nails, shrieked. The boat fell asunder.

Pytheas beheld it. A man flailed arms and legs. The sea dashed him at the ship. His skull split open. Brains, blood, body went under.

"Lines out!" Pytheas shouted. He himself didn't stop to uncoil any from a bollard. He drew his knife and slashed a sheet free of the slack mainsail. When he cast the end overboard, it disappeared in fog and foam. None of the swimmers he glimpsed, lost, glimpsed again had noticed it.

He signalled for another length. The cut sheet still cleated and in his left hand, he slid over the rail. Feet planted on the hull, arm straining to hold the cordage taut and himself in place, he leaned straight out. With his right hand he swung the second line like a whip.

Now he was visible to those he would save, except when the vessel rose onto that side and a wave fountained across him. A man swung past. Pytheas flicked the loose line at his face. The man caught it. Sailors on deck hauled him aboard.

The third whom Pytheas rescued was Hanno, clinging to an oar. After that, his strength was spent. He got back with the help of two mariners and fell in a heap beside the Phoenician. No others attempted his feat; but no more waifs came to sight in the rage around.

Hanno stirred. "To the cabin, you and me and these two," he said through clattering teeth. "Else the cold will kill us. We wouldn't have lived ten minutes in that water."

In the shelter, men stripped, toweled till blood awoke to stinging life, pulled blankets tightly about themselves. "You were magnificent, my friend," Hanno said. "I wouldn't have supposed you, a scholar—tough, but a scholar—could do it."

"Nor would I have." Exhaustion flattened Pytheas' voice.

"You saved us few from the consequences of my folly."

"No folly. Who could have foreseen the sea in windless air would go so wild so fast?"

"What might have done it?"

"Demons," mumbled a sailor.

"No," Pytheas replied. "It must have been a trick of these enormous Atlantic tides, thrusting through a strait cluttered with isles and reefs."

Hanno mustered a chuckle. "Still the philosopher, you!"

"We've a boat left," Pytheas said. "And our luck may turn. Beseech your gods if you like, boys." He lay down on his pallet. "I am going to sleep."

6

THE SHIPS survived, though one scraped a rock and opened seams. When fog had lifted and waters somewhat calmed, rowers pulled the three to the high island. They found a safe anchorage with a sloping strand where, at low water, they could work to repair damage.

Several families lived nearby: unshorn, skin-clad fishers who kept a few animals and scratched in tiny gardens. Their dwellings were dry-laid stones and turf roofs above pits. At first they fled and watched from afar. Pytheas ordered goods set out, and they timidly returned to collect these. Thereafter the Greeks were their house guests.

That proved fortunate. A gale came from the west. The ships got barely adequate protection from the bluffs around

the east-side inlet, but everywhere else the storm ramped unchecked for days and nights. Men could not stand against it. Indoors they must struggle to speak and hear through the racket. Breakers higher than city battlements hurled themselves onto the western cliffs. Stones weighing tons broke from their beds in what had been the shallows. Earth trembled. The air was a torrent of spume, whose salt flayed faces and blinded eyes. It was as if the world had toppled into primordial chaos.

Pytheas, Hanno, and their companions hunched crowded together on dried seaweed strewn over a dirt floor in a cave of gloom. Coals glowed faint red on the hearthstone. Smoke drifted acrid through the chill. Pytheas was another shadow, his words a whisper amidst the violence: "The fog, and now this. Here is neither sea nor land nor air. They have all become one, a thing like a sea-lung. Farther north can only be the Great Ice. I think we are near the border of life's kingdom." They saw his head lift. "But we have not come to the end of our search."

7

EASTWARD OVERSEA, four days' sail from the northern tip of Pretania, the explorers found another land. It rose sharply out of the water, but holms protected a great bay. On an arm of this dwelt folk who received newcomers kindly. They were not Keltoi, being even more tall and fair. Their language was kin to a Germanic tongue which Hanno had gotten a little of on an earlier wandering; he could soon make himself understood. Their iron tools and weapons, arts and way of life, did bear a Keltic mark. However, their spirit seemed different, more sober, less possessed by the unearthly.

The Greeks meant to abide a short while, inquire about those realms that were their goal, take on fresh supplies, and proceed. But their stay lengthened. Toil, danger, loss had worn them down. Here they found hospitality and admiration. As they gained words, they won full comradeship, shared in undertakings, swapped thoughts and recollections and songs, sported, made merry. The women were welcoming. Nobody urged Pytheas to order anchors up or asked why he did not.

The guests were no parasites. They brought wonderful gifts. On a ship of theirs they carried men who knew only longboats fashioned of planks stitched together, driven by paddles. Those men learned more about their own waters and communities elsewhere than they had dreamed they might. Trade followed, and visits to and fro for the first time ever. Hunting was excellent in the hinterland, and the soldiers fetched plenty of meat home. The presence of the Greeks, their revelation of an outside world, gave new sparkle to life. They felt themselves taken into brotherhood.

This was the country its people named Thule.

Midsummer came, with the light nights.

Hanno and a lass went to gather berries. Alone under the sweetnesses of birch trees, they made love. The long day tired her, and after they returned to her father's house she fell happily asleep. He could not. He lay for an hour on their bed of hides, feeling her warm against him, hearing her and her family breathe, himself inhaling the fragrance and pungency of the cows stalled at the far end of the single long room. A banked fire sometimes let slip a flamelet, but what made soft dusk was the sky beyond the wickerwork door. Finally he rose, pulled his tunic back over his head, and stole forth.

Above him reached utter clarity, a hue that raised memories of white roses. No more than half a dozen stars could shine through it, atremble, barely seeable. Air rested cool, so quiet that he heard water lap on the bayshore. Dew gleamed on ground that slanted down to the broad argency of it. Inland the terrain climbed toward mountains whose ridges lifted blue-gray into heaven.

He left the village. Its houses nestled together, a double row that ended at a great barn where grain was threshed, in this rainy climate, and which would serve as a fortress in case of attack. Beyond were paddocks, beehives, small fields goldening toward harvest. He drifted from them, beachward. When he came to grass he wiped off his bare feet the muck that free-running pigs and chickens had left in the lane. The moisture caressed him. Farther on he reached shingle, rocks cold and hard but worn smooth. The tide was ebbing, that mighty pulse which the Mediterranean seas scarcely felt, and kelp sprawled along the strand. It gave off odors of salt, depths, mysteries.

Some distance onward, a man stood looking aloft. Brass gleamed as he pointed his instrument. Hanno approached. "You too?" he murmured.

Pytheas started, turned about, and replied mechanically, "Rejoice." In the luminous twilight it was clear how he must force a smile.

"Not easy to sleep under these conditions," Hanno ventured. The natives themselves didn't much.

Pytheas nodded. "I hate to miss a minute of the loveliness."

"Poor for astronomy, though."

"Um, by day I've been . . . gathering data that will yield a better value for the obliquity of the ecliptic."

"You should have ample by now. We're past the solstice."

Pytheas glanced away.

"And you sound right defensive," Hanno pursued. "Why do we linger here?"

Pytheas bit his lip. "We've . . . a wealth of discoveries still to make. It's like a whole new world."

Hanno's voice crackled: "Like the land of the Lotus Eaters."

Pytheas lifted his quadrant as if it were a shield. "No, no, these are real people, they labor and have children and grow old and die the same as us."

Hanno regarded him. The waters whispered. Finally the Phoenician said, "It's Vana, isn't it?"

Pytheas stood mute.

"Many of these girls are beautiful," Hanno went on. "Height, slenderness, skin that the summer sun kisses tawny, eyes like the sky around that sun, and those blond manes—oh, yes. And the one who's with you, she's the bonniest of the lot."

"It's more than that," Pytheas said. "She's . . . free. Unlettered, unaware, but quick and eager to learn. Proud, fearless. We cage our wives, we Greeks. I never thought of it till lately, but . . . is it not our doing that the poor creatures turn so dull that we're apt to seek sweethearts male?"

"Or whores."

"Vana is as mettlesome as the liveliest hetaira. But she's not for sale, Hanno. She honestly loves me. A few days ago we decided she must be carrying my child. She came to my arms weeping and laughing."

"She's a dear person, true. But she's a barbarian."

"That can be changed."

Hanno shook his head. "Don't play tricks on yourself, my friend. It's not like you. Do you daydream about taking her along when we leave? If she survived the voyage, she'd wither and die in Massalia, like any uprooted wildflower. What could she make herself into? What sort of life could you give her? You're too late. Both of you."

Again Pytheas stood mute.

"Nor can you settle here," Hanno told him. "Only think. You, a civilized man, a philosopher, crammed cheek by jowl with other human bodies and cattle into a wretched wattle-and-daub hut. No books. No correspondence. No discourse. No sculptures, no temples, no traditions of yours, nothing of all that's gone to form your soul. She'll age fast, your lady, her teeth will go and her dugs will sag and you'll loathe her because she was the bait that trapped you. Think, I say, think."

Pytheas' free hand knotted into a fist and smote his thigh, over and over. "But what can I do?"

"Leave. She'll have no trouble getting a husband who'll raise the child. Her father's well off by their standards, she's proven herself fertile, and every child is precious, as many of them as they lose. Hoist sail and go. We came in search of the Amber Island, remember? Or if it's a myth, then we want to find whatever the reality is. We have these eastern shores and seas to learn a little about. We mean to return to Pretania and finish circumnavigating it, determine its size and shape, for it's important to Europe in a way that Thule can't be for centuries. And then come home to your people, city, wife, children, grandchildren. Do your duty, man!"

"You . . . speak harshly."

"Yes. I respect you that much, Pytheas."

The Greek looked from side to side, to the mountains athwart that sky which hid the stars in its light, down over woodlands and meadows, out across the shining bay toward unseen Ocean. "Yes," he said at last. "You're right. We should have departed long ago. We shall. I'm a graybeard fool."

Hanno smiled. "No, simply a man. She brought a springtime you thought you'd lost back into your heart. How often I've seen it happen."

"Has it to you?"

Hanno laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Come," he said, "let's go back and try to sleep. We've work ahead of us."

8

WEARY, BATTERED, faded, and triumphant, three ships neared Massalia harbor. It was a crisp autumn day, the water danced and glittered as if diamond were strewn upon sapphire, but wind was light and bottoms were foul; they moved slowly.

Pytheas beckoned Hanno to him. "Stand with me here on the foredeck," he requested, "for it may be the last quiet talk we shall ever have."

The Phoenician joined him in the bows. Pytheas was being his own lookout in this final hour of his voyage. "You can certainly expect a busy time," Hanno agreed. "Everybody and his third cousin will want to meet you, question you, hear you lecture, send you letters, demand a copy of your book and insist you write it yesterday."

Pytheas' lips quirked upward. "You'll always have a jape, won't you?"

They stood for a bit, watching. Now as the season of the mariners drew to a close, the waves—how small and gentle, in this refuge from the Atlantic—were beswarmed with vessels. Rowboats, lighters, tarry fishers, tubby coastwise merchantmen, a big grain ship from Egypt, a gilt-trimmed barge, two lean warcraft spider-walking on oars, all sought passage. Shouts and oaths volleyed. Sails boomed, yardarms slatted, tholepins creaked. The city shone ahead, a blue-shadowed white intricacy overspilling its walls. Smoke blew in tatters from red tile roofs. Farmsteads and villas nestled amidst brown stubblefields, pastures still green, darkling pines and yellowing orchards beyond. At the back of those hills, a higher range lifted dun. Gulls dipped and soared, mewing, in their hundreds, like a snowstorm of the North.

"You will not change your mind, Hanno?" Pytheas asked.

The other turned grim. "I cannot. I'll stay till I collect my pay, and then be off."

"Why? I don't understand. And you won't explain."

"It's best."

"I tell you, a man of your abilities has a brilliant future here—boundless. And not as a metic. With the influence I'll have, I can get you Massaliot citizenship, Hanno."

"I know. You've said this before. Thank you, but no."

Pytheas touched the Phoenician's hand, which grasped the rail hard. "Are you afraid people will hold your origin against you? They won't. I promise. We're above that, we're a cosmopolis."

"I am everywhere an alien."

Pytheas sighed. "Never have you . . . opened your soul to me, as I have to you. And even so . . . I have never felt so close to anyone else. Not even—" He broke off, and both turned their glances aside.

Hanno took on his cool tone again. He smiled. "We've been through tremendous things together, good and bad, terrible and tedious, frolicsome and frightening, delightful and deadly. That does forge bonds."

"And yet you will sever them . . . so easily?" Pytheas wondered. "You will merely bid me farewell?"

In a single instant, before Hanno summoned laughter back to himself, something tore apart and the Greek looked into a pain that bewildered him. "What else is life but always bidding farewell?"

II

The Peaches of Forever

To Yen Ting-kuo, subprefect of the Tumbling Brook district, came an inspector from Ch'ang-an, on an errand for the very Emperor. A courier arrived beforehand, giving the household time to prepare a suitable welcome. Next noontide the party appeared, first a dust cloud on the eastern road, then a troop of mounted men, servants and soldiers, attendant on a carriage drawn by four white horses.

Pennons aloft, metal aflash, they made a brave sight. Yen Ting-kuo appreciated it the more against the serenity of the landscape. From his hilltop compound, the view swept down to Millstone Village, earthen walls, roofs of tile or thatch, huddled together along lanes where pigs and peasants fared, but not unsightly—an outgrowth, a part of the yellow-brown loess soil from which men drew their lives. Beyond reached the land. This was early summer, barley and millet intensely green on their terraces, dotted with blue-clad human forms at work. Farmhouses nestled tiny, strewn across distances. Orchards here and there were done flowering, but fruit was set and leaves full of sunlight. Willows along irrigation canals shivered pale beneath a breeze that smelled warmly of growth. Pine and cypress on farther ridges gave dark dignity. Right and left were heights used for pasture, whose contours stood bold out of shadow.

West of the village those hills steepened rapidly and forest covered much of them. The journey remained long and ever more difficult to yonder frontier, to the realms of the Tibetans and Mongols and other barbarians, but already here civilization began thinning out and one treasured it as perhaps no one quite could in its heartland.

Yen Ting-kuo murmured:

> *"Beautiful are the procession of seasons*
> *Bequeathed us by the gods*
> *And the procession of ways and rites*
> *Bequeathed us by the ancestors—"*

but broke the old poem off and went back through the gate. Ordinarily he would have continued to his house and waited inside. To receive an Imperial envoy he placed himself and his sons, robed in their best, on the porch. Servants flanked the direct way to it across the outer court; elsewhere shrubs made a kind of maze conducting attention to a goldfish pond. Women, children, and menial workers were tucked away in other buildings of the compound.

Stamp, rattle, and clang announced the advent. An equerry did so more formally, dismounting and entering, to be met halfway by the subprefect's chamberlain. They exchanged bows and necessary words. Thereafter the inspector appeared. The servants prostrated themselves, and Yen Ting-kuo gave him the reverence due from a nobleman of lesser rank.

Ts'ai Li responded courteously. He was not of the most impressive, being a short man and rather young for one of such stature, whereas the subprefect was tall and gray. Even the emblems the inspector had donned upon leaving his vehicle showed signs of hard travel. However, many generations of closeness to the throne lived on in his quiet self-assurance. It was to be seen that host and guest took a quick liking to each other.

Presently they could talk alone. Ts'ai Li had been conducted to his quarters, helped to a bath and a change of raiment. Meanwhile arrangements were made for his entourage, assistants and attendants quartered according to rank in the compound, soldiers among the villagers. Savory odors drifted about, a banquet in preparation, spices, herbs, roasting meats—fowl, suckling pig, puppy, turtle—and liquors gently warmed. Sometimes a twang of zither or chime of bell came audibly loud from the house where singers and dancing girls rehearsed.

The inspector had intimated that before thus meeting local officials he wished a confidential talk. It took place in a

chamber almost bare except for two screens, fresh straw mats, arm rests, a low table whereon waited wine and rice cakes from the South. Still, the room was bright and airy, its proportions pleasant; the paintings, of bamboo and of a mountain scene, and the calligraphy on the screens were exquisite. Ts'ai Li expressed proper admiration, sufficient to show he appreciated, not enough to require they be given him.

"My lord's slave returns humble thanks," Yen Ting-kuo said. "I fear he will find us a somewhat poor and uncultivated lot in these remote parts."

"Not at all," replied Ts'ai Li. Long, polished fingernails gleamed as he brought cup to lips. "Indeed, here seems to be a haven of peace and order. Alas, even near the capital bandits and malcontents are rife, while elsewhere there is actual rebellion and doubtless the Hsiung-nu beyond the Wall look hungrily our way once more. Thus I must perforce have my escort of soldiers." His tone registered his scorn for that lowliest of the free classes. "By the favor of Heaven, no need for them arose. The astrologers had indeed found a propitious day for my departure."

"The presence of the soldiers may have helped," said Yen Ting-kuo dryly.

Ts'ai Li smiled. "So speaks the bluff old baron. I gather your family has provided this district with its leaders for a goodly time?"

"Since the Emperor Wu-ti appointed my honored ancestor Yen Chi after his service against the Northern barbarians."

"Ah, those were the glorious days." Ts'ai Li breathed forth the least of sighs. "We impoverished heirs of them can only strive against a rising flood of troubles."

Yen Ting-kuo shifted on his heels, cleared his throat, looked straight across the table, and said, "My lord is surely at the forefront in that effort, having made such a long and arduous journey. In what may we help further his righteous purposes?"

"Largely I require information, and perhaps a guide. Word has reached the capital of a sage, a veritable holy man, in your domain."

Yen Ting-kuo blinked. "What?"

"Travelers' tales, but we have questioned several such men at length, and the stories agree. He preaches the Tao, and his virtue appears to have brought him great longevity." Ts'ai Li hesitated. "Actual immortality? What can you tell me, Sir Subprefect?"

"Oh." Yen Ting-kuo scowled. "I understand. The person who names himself Tu Shan."

"You are skeptical, then?"

"He does not fit *my* idea of a holy man, Sir Inspector," Yen Ting-kuo growled. "We get no few who claim to be. Simple countryfolk are all too ready to listen, especially in unsettled times like these. Masterless wanderers, who do no useful work but beg or wheedle their way along. They claim tremendous powers. Peasants swear they have seen such a one cure the sick, exorcise demons, raise the dead, or what have you. I've looked into some cases and found no real proof of anything. Except that often the drifter has availed himself of men's purses and women's bodies, convincing them that is the Way, before moving elsewhere."

Ts'ai Li narrowed his eyes. "We know about charlatans," he said. "We also know about ordinary wu, folk magicians, honest enough but illiterate and superstitious. Indeed, their beliefs and practices have seeped into the once pure teachings of Lao-tzu. This is unfortunate."

"Does not the court follow, instead, the precepts of the great K'ung Fu-tze?"

"Certainly. Yet—wisdom and strength grow scarce, Sir Subprefect. We must seek them where they are to be found. What we have heard of this Tu Shan has led the One Man himself to think that his will be a desirable voice among the Imperial councillors."

Yen Ting-kuo stared down into his cup as if to seek a comforting revelation therein. "It is not for the likes of me to question the Son of Heaven," he said at length. "And I daresay that fellow can do no serious harm." He laughed. "Perhaps his advice will prove no worse than some."

Ts'ai Li regarded him for a silent while before murmuring, "Do you imply, Sir Subprefect, that the Emperor has occasionally been misled in the past?"

Yen Ting-kuo paled a little, then flushed and almost snapped, "I speak no disrespectful word, Sir Mandarin."

"Of course not. Understood," said Ts'ai Li smoothly. "Although, between us, the implication is quite correct."

Yen Ting-kuo gave him a startled stare.

Ts'ai Li's tone grew earnest. "Please consider. It is now ten years since glorious Wang Mang received the Mandate of Heaven. He has decreed many reforms and sought in every way to better the lot of his people. Yet unrest waxes. So, be it said, do poverty at home and barbarian arrogance abroad." He left unspoken: There are those, ever more of them, who declare that the Hsin is not a new dynasty at all but only a usurpation, a product of palace intrigue, and the time is overpast to restore the Han to that power which is rightfully theirs. "Clearly, better counsel is much needed. Intelligence and virtue often dwell beneath a lowly roof."

"The situation must be desperate, if you were sent this far to track down a mere rumor," Yen Ting-kuo blurted. He made haste to add, "Of course, we are honored and delighted by your exalted presence, my lord."

"You are most gracious, Sir Subprefect." Ts'ai Li's voice sharpened. "But what can you tell me about Tu Shan?"

Yen Ting-kuo looked away, frowned, tugged his beard, and spoke slowly. "I cannot in honesty call him a rogue. I investigate everything questionable that I hear of, and have no report of him defrauding anyone, or doing any other evil. It is only . . . he is not my idea of a holy man."

"The seekers of the Tao are apt to be, ah, somewhat eccentric."

"I know. Still— But let me tell you. He appeared among us five years ago, having passed through communities to the north and east, sojourning a while in some. With him traveled a single disciple, a young man of the farmer class. Since then he has acquired two more, and declined others. For he has settled down in a cave three or four hours' walk from here, in the forest upland by a waterfall. There he meditates, or so he claims. I have gone there, and the cave has been turned into a rather comfortable little abode. Not luxurious, but no hardship to inhabit. The disciples have made themselves a hut nearby. They cultivate a bit of grain, catch a few fish, gather nuts and berries and roots. Folk bring other things as gifts, including money. They make the walk

in order to hear whatever words he cares to give them, unburden themselves of their woes—he has a sympathetic ear—and receive his blessing, or simply spend a while in his silent presence. From time to time he comes down here for a day or two. Then it is the same, except that he drinks and eats well at our one inn and disports himself in our one joyhouse. I hear he is a mighty lover. Well, I have not heard of him seducing any man's wife or daughter. Nevertheless, his conduct scarcely seems pious to me, nor do such preachments of his as I have heard make much sense."

"The Tao is not expressible in words."

"I know. Just the same—well, just the same."

"And as for making love, I have heard from those learned in the Tao state that by so doing, especially if he prolongs the act as much as possible, a man comes nearer balancing his Yang with the Yin. At least, this is one school of thought. Others disagree, I am told. But we can hardly expect conventional respectability of a person whose goal in life is enlightenment."

Yen Ting-kuo achieved a sour smile. "My lord is more tolerant than me, it seems."

"No, I merely thought I should seek to prepare myself before setting out, that I might hope to understand whatever I may find." Ts'ai Li paused. "What of Tu Shan's earlier life? How much truth is in his claim to great age? I hear he has the aspect of a young man."

"He does, together with the vigor and all else. Should a sage not be, rather, of reverend appearance?" Yen Ting-kuo drew breath. "Well, but I have made inquiries about those claims of his. Not that he asserts them loudly. In fact, he never mentions the matter unless he must for some reason, as to explain how long-dead Chou P'eng could have been his teacher. But neither has he tried to cover his tracks. I have been able to question people and to visit a few sites myself, when business has taken me in those directions."

"Please tell me what you have ascertained, that I may compare my own information."

"Well, it is evidently true, he was born more than a hundred years ago. That was in the Three Great Rocks district, and his class was merely artisan. He followed his father's

trade, a blacksmith, married, had children, nothing unusual aside from his not growing old in body. That did gradually make him a neighborhood marvel, but he does not seem to have taken much if any advantage of it. Instead, when his children were married off and his wife had died, he announced he would seek wisdom, the reason for his strange condition and for all else in the world. He set forth, and was not heard of again until he became a disciple of Chou P'eng. When that old sage died in turn, Tu Shan fared onward, teaching and practicing the Tao as he understood it. I do not know how close that is to what Chou P'eng taught. Nor do I know how long Tu Shan proposes to stay here. Perhaps he himself does not. I have asked him, but such people are always skilled in evading questions they do not wish to answer."

"Thank you. It confirms the reports given me. Now a man of your perspicacity, Sir Subprefect, must see that such a life indicates extraordinary powers of some kind, and—"

A deferential presence appeared in the doorway. "Enter and speak," said Yen Ting-kuo.

Ts'ai Li's secretary took a step into the room, bowed low, and announced: "This underling begs pardon for disturbing his superiors. However, word has just come to him which may have a certain interest and perhaps urgency. The sage Tu Shan is on the western road bound for the village. Has my lord any commands?"

"Well, well," murmured the subprefect. "What an interesting coincidence."

"If it is a coincidence," answered Ts'ai Li.

Yen Ting-kuo lifted his heavy brows. "Has he foreseen my lord's arrival and purpose?"

"It need not be a matter of occult abilities. The Tao works to bring events together in harmony."

"Shall I summon him here, or bid him wait upon my lord's convenience?"

"Neither. I will go to him—much though it pains me to interrupt this fascinating conversation." At his host's look of surprise, Ts'ai Li added, "After all, otherwise I would have sought him out in his retreat. If he is worthy of respect, let him be shown respect."

With a rustle of silk and brocade, he rose from his

cushion and started forth. Yen Ting-kuo followed. The inspector's equerry hastened to summon a decent minimum of attendants and bring them after the magnates. They went through the gate and down the hill at a suitably dignified pace.

A wind had arisen. It boomed from the north, cooling the air, driving clouds before it whose shadows went like sickles across the land. Dust whirled yellow off fields and the road. A flock of crows winged past. Their cawing cut through the babble underneath. Folk had clustered at the village well. They were those whose work was not out amidst the crops: tradesmen, artisans, their women and children, the aged and infirm. Soldiers from the envoy's escort crowded roughly in among them, curious.

All were gathered about a man who had stopped at the wellside. His frame, big and broad, wore the same plain blue, quilted jacket and trousers as any peasant's. His feet were bare, thick with calluses. Also bare was his head; stray black locks fluttered free below a topknot. His face was wide, rather flat-nosed, weatherbeaten. He had leaned a staff against the coping and taken a small girl child onto his shoulder. Near him stood three young men, as simply garbed as himself.

"Ah, ha, little one!" the man laughed, and chucked the girl under the chin. "Would you have a ride on your old horsey? Shameless beggar wench." She squirmed and giggled.

"Bless her, master," asked the mother.

"Why, what she is, that is the blessing," replied the man. "She is still near the Fountainhead of Quietness to which wise men hope they may return. Not that that forbids your desiring a sweetmeat, eh, Mei-mei?"

"Can childhood, then, be better than age?" quavered one whose wispy beard fell white from a head bent forward.

"You would have me teach, when my poor throat is choked by the dust of my faring?" responded the man genially. "No, please, first a cup or three of wine. Nothing in excess, including self-denial."

"Make way!" cried the equerry. "Make way for the lord Ts'ai Li, Imperial legate from Ch'ang-an, and for the lord of the district, Yen Ting-kuo!"

Voices halted. People scrambled aside. Frightened, the girl whimpered and reached for her mother. The man gave her to the woman and bowed, politely if not abjectly, as the two robed forms neared him.

"Here is our sage Tu Shan, Sir Inspector," said the subprefect.

"Off with you!" the equerry bade the commoners. "This is a matter of state."

"They may listen if they wish," said Ts'ai Li mildly.

"Their smell should not offend my lord's nostrils," declared the equerry, and the crowd did shuffle some distance away, to stand in bunches and gape.

"Let us seek back to the house," Yen Ting-kuo proposed. "This day you receive a great honor, Tu Shan."

"I thank my lord most profoundly," the newcomer answered, "but we are shabby and unwashed and altogether unfit for your home." His voice was deep, lacking a cultivated accent though not quite lowly-sounding either. A chuckle seemed to run within it and flicker behind his eyes. "May I take the liberty of presenting my disciples Ch'i, Wei, and Ma?" The three youths abased themselves until he gave them an unobtrusive signal to rise.

"They can join us." Yen Ting-kuo failed to hide his distaste entirely.

Did Tu Shan perceive that? He addressed Ts'ai Li: "Perhaps my lord would care to state his business at once. Then we shall know whether or not pursuing it would waste his time."

The inspector smiled. "I hope not, Sir Sage, for I have already expended a great deal of that," he said. To the baron, the secretary, and the rest who had heard and were shocked: "Tu Shan is right. He has certainly spared me a doubtless difficult trail to his hermitage."

"Happenstance," said the man spoken of. "Nor does it take supernatural insight for me to guess your errand."

"Rejoice," Ts'ai Li told him. "Word of you has reached the august ears of the Emperor himself. He bade me seek you out and bring you to Ch'ang-an, that the realm have the benefit of your wisdom."

The disciples gasped before recovering a measure of steadiness. Tu Shan stayed imperturbable. "Surely the Son of Heaven has councillors beyond counting," he said.

"He does, but they are insufficient. As the proverb goes, a thousand mice do not equal a single tiger."

"Perhaps my lord is a bit unfair to the advisors and ministers. They have huge tasks, beyond my poor wits to understand."

"Your modesty is commendable. It reveals your character."

Tu Shan shook his head. "No, I am just a fool, and ignorant. How could I dare so much as see the Imperial throne?"

"You defame yourself," said Ts'ai Li on a slight note of impatience. "None can have lived as long as you without being intelligent and without gaining experience. Moreover, you have pondered what you have observed and drawn valuable lessons from it."

Tu Shan smiled wryly, as though at an equal. "If I have learned anything, it is that intelligence and knowledge are worth little by themselves. Failing the enlightenment that goes beyond words and the world, they serve mainly to provide us with wonderful reasons for doing what we intend to do regardless."

Yen Ting-Kuo could not forbear to interject, "Come, come. You are no ascetic. The Emperor rewards, with Imperial generosity, those who serve him well."

Tu Shan's manner shifted subtly. It hinted at a schoolmaster with a pupil somewhat slow. "I have visited Ch'ang-an in my wanderings. Though of course I could not go into the palace grounds, I was in mansions. My lords, there are too many walls there. Every ward is closed off from every other, and when the drums sound from the towers at dusk, their gates are barred to all but the nobility. In the mountains one may go freely beneath the stars."

"To him who walks in the Way, all places should be alike," said Ts'ai Li.

Tu Shan inclined his head. "My lord is well versed in the *Book of the Way and Its Virtue*. But as for me, I am a blunderer, half blind, who would be forever stumbling against those walls."

Ts'ai Li stiffened. "I think you make excuses to avoid a duty you would find onerous. Why do you preach to the people, if you care too little about them to lend your thoughts in aid of them?"

"They cannot be aided thus." Low, Tu Shan's words nonetheless cut through the wind. "Only they themselves can cope with their troubles, just as every man can only find the Tao by himself."

Ts'ai Li's voice slid quietly as a dagger: "Do you deny the Emperor's beneficence?"

"Many Emperors have come and gone. Many more shall." Tu Shan gestured. "Behold the flying dust. Once it, too, lived. The Tao alone abides."

"You risk . . . punishment, Sir Sage."

Sudden laughter pealed. Tu Shan slapped his thigh. "How can a head removed from its neck give counsel?" He calmed as fast. "My lord, I meant no disrespect. I say only that I am not fit for the task you have in mind, and unworthy of it. Take me with you, and this will soon be clear. Better that you spare the priceless time of the One Man."

Ts'ai Li sighed. Yen Ting-kuo, watching the inspector, eased a bit. "You rascal," Ts'ai Li said, rueful, "you use the Book—what is the line?—'Like water, soft and yielding, that wears away the hardest stone—'"

Tu Shan bowed. "Should we not say, rather, that the stream flows on to its destiny while the stupid rock stays where it was?"

Now Ts'ai Li spoke as to an equal. "If you will not go, so be it. Forgive me when I report that you proved . . . a disappointment."

Tu Shan nearly grinned. "How shrewdly you put it." He bowed to Yen Ting-kuo. "See, my lord, there is no reason for me to track dirt across your beautiful mats. Best my disciples and I take ourselves from your presence at once."

"Correct," said the subprefect coldly.

The inspector cast him a disapproving glance, turned again to Tu Shan, and said, in a voice slightly less than level, "Yet you, Sir Sage, have lived longer than almost any other man, and show no sign of age. Can you at least tell me how this is?"

Tu Shan became grave. Some might say he spoke in pity. "I am forever asked that."

"Well?"

"I never give a clear answer, for I am unable."

"Surely you know."

"I have said I do not, but men insist, eh?" Tu Shan appeared to dismiss sadness. "The story goes," he said, "that in the garden of Hsi Wang Mu, Mother of the West, grow certain peaches, and that he whom she allows to eat of these is made immortal."

Ts'ai Li looked long at him before answering, well-nigh too softly to hear, "As you wish, Sir Sage." The watching people drew breath, glanced about, one by one retreated. The inspector bowed. "I depart in awe."

Tu Shan bowed likewise. "Greet the Emperor. He too deserves compassion."

Yen Ting-kuo cleared his throat, hesitated, then at a gesture followed Ts'ai Li out of the village, back up the hill to the manor house. Their attendants trailed after them. The common folk made reverence, bent above folded hands, and slipped away to the shelter of their homes. Tu Shan and his disciples stood alone by the well. The wind blustered through silence. Shadows came and went.

Tu Shan took his staff. "Come," he said.

"Where, master?" Ch'i ventured.

"To our retreat. Afterward—" For an instant, pain crossed the face of Tu Shan. "I do not know. Elsewhere. West into the mountains, I think."

"Do you fear reprisal, master?" asked Wei.

"No, no, I trust the word of yonder lord. But it is well to be gone. This wind smells of trouble."

"The master can tell," said brash Ma. "He must have caught that scent often in his many years. Did you indeed taste those peaches?"

Tu Shan laughed a little. "I had to tell the man something. Doubtless the story will spread, and tales will arise of others who have done the same. Well, we shall be afar."

He began walking. "I have warned you aplenty, lads," he continued, "and I will warn you again. I have no inspiration, no secrets to impart. I am the most ordinary of persons, except that somehow, for some reason, my body has stayed young. So I searched for understanding, and discovered that this is the only livelihood open to such as I. If

you care to listen to me, do. If not, leave with my blessing. Meanwhile, let us see a brisker pace."

"Why, you said we have nothing to fear, master," protested Ma.

"No, I did not." Tu Shan's voice harshened. "I fear witnessing what will most likely happen to these people, whom I, helplessly, love. The times are evil. We must seek a place apart, and the Tao."

They walked onward through the wind.

III

The Comrade

1

A SHIP was loading at the Claudian dock. She was big for an ocean-goer, two-masted, her round black belly taking perhaps five hundred tons. The gilt sternpost, curved high over the steering oar fixtures in the form of a swan's neck and head, also bespoke wealth. Lugo went over to inquire about her. Bound more or less this way, he had turned aside with the idea of seeing what went on at the waterfront. He made it his business to keep fully aware of the world around him.

The stevedores were slaves. Though the morning was cool, their bodies gleamed and reeked with sweat as they carried amphoras across the dock and up the gangplank, two men to each great jug. A breeze off the river mingled whiffs of fresh pitch from the ship with their odors. The foreman stood by, and him Lugo could approach.

"The *Nereid*," he replied, "with wine, glassware, silks, and I don't know what else, for Britannia. Her skipper wants to catch tomorrow's early tide. Hoy, you!" His whip flicked across a bare back. It was single-stranded and unloaded, but left a mark between shoulderblade and loincloth. "Move along, there!" The slave gave him a hopeless glower and trudged a little faster to his next burden at the warehouse. "Got to freshen 'em pretty often," the foreman explained. "They get out of shape and lazy, sitting around idle. Not enough to do any more." He sighed. "Free men, you could lay off in these wretched times, and call back when you needed them. But if everybody's in his station for life—"

"It's a wonder this vessel is going," Lugo said. "Won't she draw pirates like flies to a carcass? I hear the Saxons and Scoti are turning the shores of Armorica into a blackened desert."

"The House of the Caelii always was venturesome, and I guess there's a big profit to be made when so few dare sail," the foreman answered.

Lugo nodded, stroked his chin, and murmured, "M-m, sea rovers usually do seek their plunder on land. No doubt *Nereid* will carry guards as well as her crew being armed. If several barbarian craft came in sight, Scoti probably couldn't climb that tall freeboard out of their currachs, and given any kind of wind, she can show her heels to Saxon galleys."

"You talk like a mariner yourself. But you don't look like one." The foreman's glance sharpened. Suspicion was the order of the day. He saw a medium-sized, wiry man of youthful appearance; face narrow and high in the cheekbones, curved nose, slightly oblique brown eyes; black hair and a neatly trimmed beard such as was coming into fashion; clean white tunic, blue raincloak with a cowl shoved back; stout sandals; staff in hand, though he walked lithely.

Lugo shrugged. "I've been around. And I enjoy talking to people. You, for instance." He smiled. "Thanks for satisfying my curiosity, and a good day to you."

"Go with God," said the foreman, disarmed, and turned his attention back to the longshoremen.

Lugo sauntered on. When he came opposite the next gate, he stopped to admire the view eastward. His lashes snared sunlight and made bits of rainbow.

Before him flowed the Garumna, on its way to its confluence with the Duranius, their shared estuary, and the sea. Some two thousand shimmering feet across, the water bore several rowboats, a fishing smack bound upstream on oars with its catch, a gaudy spiritsail above a slim yacht. Land on the far side reached low, intensely green; he saw the tawny walls and rosy tiles of two manor houses amidst their vineyards, while smoke blew in tatters from humbler roofs of thatch. Birds winged everywhere, robin, sparrow, crane, duck, a hawk on high, the startling blue of a kingfisher. He

heard their calls as an overtone that skipped through the lapping and rustling of the river. It was hard to imagine that heathen Germani raged at the gates of Lugdunum, that the chief city of central Gallia might even now have fallen to them, less than three hundred miles from here.

Or else it was all too easy to imagine. Lugo's mouth tightened. Come along, he told himself. He was more prone to reverie than other men, with less excuse nowadays. This vicinity had been spared so far, but the handwriting on the wall grew plainer for him to read every year, as certain Jews he had known would have phrased it. He turned and reentered the city.

The gate was minor, a sally port in the bulwarks whose towers and battlements stood foursquare around Burdigala. Beside his spear, a sentry leaned half asleep against the sun-warmed stones. He was an auxiliary, a German himself. The legions were in Italy or out toward the frontiers, and mere skeletons of what they had once been. Meanwhile barbarians like this wrung leave from the Emperors to settle in Roman lands. In return, they were supposed to obey the laws and furnish troops; but in Lugdunensis, for example, they had revolted. . . .

Lugo passed through, across the open pomoerium, into a street that he recognized as Vindomarian Way. It twisted among buildings whose flat sides crowded out all but a strip of sky, the lumpiness of its cobblestones slickened by stinking offal, an obscure lane quite likely going back to ages when only the Bituriges squatted here. However, Lugo had in the course of time taken care to learn the entire city, old as well as new quarters.

Not many people jostled him, and they for the most part shabbily clad. Housewives chattered together while they carried laundry to the river, pails of water from the nearest aqueduct outlet, baskets of vegetables gotten at a local marketplace. A porter came by under a load well-nigh as heavy as what was in the donkey cart he met; he and the driver cursed, trying to get past each other. An apprentice fetching wool for his master had stopped to jape with a girl. Two countrymen in ancient-style coats and breeches, probably cattle drovers, made remarks so accented and full of Gallic words that Lugo could hardly understand what he over-

heard. A drunken man—a laborer to judge by his hands, out of work to judge by his condition—lurched along in search of a frolic or a fight; unemployment had become rife as the upheavals of the past decade cowed an already decaying commerce. A meretrix in pathetic, bedraggled finery, seeking customers even this early, brushed against Lugo. Except for laying a hand over the purse at his waist he ignored her. A hunchbacked beggar whined for alms in the name of Christ and then, when likewise ignored, tried Jupiter, Mithras, Isis, the Great Mother, and Celtic Epona; finally he screamed maledictions at Lugo's back. Shockheaded children in grimy smocks ran their little errands or played their little games. For them he felt a tug of compassion.

His Levantine features marked him out among them all. Burdigala was cosmopolitan; Italy, Greece, Africa, Asia had poured blood into it. Yet most dwellers remained what their forebears must always have been, strongly built, roundheaded, dark of hair but fair of skin. They spoke Latin with a nasal intonation he had never quite mastered.

A potter's shop, its front open on the wares and whirr of the wheel, showed him where he must turn onto broader Teutatis Street—which, lately, the bishop was trying to make its residents call after St. Johannes. It was his quickest route through this maze toward Mother Thornbesom's Lane, where lived the one he sought. Rufus might not be at home, but was certainly not at work. The shipyard had had no orders for well over a year, and its men were now dependent on the state for their bread; circuses amounted to an occasional bear-baiting or the like. If Rufus was out, Lugo was prepared to stroll around inconspicuously till he came back. Lugo had learned patience.

He had gone a hundred yards farther when the new noise reached him. Others heard it too, halted, stiffened, listened with heads cocked and eyes slitted. The majority began retreating. Shopkeepers and apprentices made ready to close doors and shutters. A few men licked their chops and drifted in the direction of the sound. Turmoil called their kind to itself. The racket loudened, muffled by houses and contorted alleys but unmistakable. Lugo knew it of old, the deep, racking growl, the yelps and hoots. A crowd was hounding somebody.

He realized with a chill who the quarry must be. For a moment he paused. Was it worth the risk? Cordelia, the children, he and his family might have thirty or forty years ahead of them.

Resolution came. He should at least go see whether the situation was hopeless or not. He pulled the hood of his paenula over his head. Sewn to the edge was a veil, which he drew down. He saw reasonably well through the gauze, but it hid his face. Lugo had learned preparedness.

A military patrol might wonder at the sight and stop him for questioning. However, were a patrol in the neighborhood, that pack would not be after Rufus. Instead—Lugo's mouth twisted briefly upward—Rufus might well be under arrest.

Lugo moved to intercept the oncoming tumult, as closely as he could judge. He went a trifle more quickly than the trouble seekers, not quickly enough to draw any special heed. The hood overshadowed the veil and blinkered sight of it; perhaps nobody noticed. Within himself he spoke ancient incantations against danger. Give fear no hold upon you, keep sinews loose and senses open, ready at every instant to flow with the rush of action. Calm, alert, supple; calm, alert, supple—

He came out on Hercules Place just as the hunted man did. A corroded bronze statue of the hero gave the small square its name. Several streets radiated thence. He who burst forth was stocky, his coarse features freckled, his thin hair and unkempt beard an unusual orange-red. The tunic that flapped around stout limbs was drenched and a-reek with sweat. Indeed this must be Rufus, Lugo saw, and "Rufus" must be a nickname.

The fugitive was built for strength, not speed. His pursuers swarmed close behind. They numbered about fifty, proletarians like him in drab, oft-mended garments. Quite a few were women, locks gone Medusa wild around maenad faces. Most bore what weapons they could snatch, knife, hammer, stick, loose cobblestone. Through their baying tore words: "Sorcerer! . . . Heathen! . . . Satan—kill—" A flung rock struck Rufus between the shoulders. He staggered and pounded on. His mouth stretched wide, his chest heaved, his eyes stared as if blinded.

Lugo's gaze flickered. Sometimes he could not wait and

see how things went, he must make an instant decision. He gauged the layout, distances, speeds, nature of the throng. Terror thrilled through the hatred they howled. The chance of rescue looked worth taking. If he failed, he might escape with injuries less than fatal; and those would soon heal.

"To me, Rufus!" he shouted. To the pack: "Halt! Hold off, you lawless dogs!"

The man in the lead snarled at him. Lugo brought hands near the middle of his staff. It was oak. He had drilled holes in the ends and filled them with lead. It whirred and smacked. The man screamed. He reeled aside. A broken rib, likely. Lugo's weapon punched the next under the breastbone. Air whoofed from lungs. Lugo caught a third man across a kneecap. He shrieked his pain and flailed against two at his back. A woman swung a mop. Lugo fended it off and rapped her knuckles. Maybe he cracked a bone or two.

The crowd recoiled on itself, milled, moaned, gibbered. From behind his whirling, half invisible staff, Lugo grinned at them and at the rowdies who had appeared. "Go home," he called. "Dare you take Caesar's law in your own hands? Be off!"

Somebody threw a stone. It missed. Lugo laid a blow on the nearest scalp. He controlled its force. Matters were amply bad without producing corpses; those would provoke immediate official action. Nevertheless the wound bled spectacularly, sudden red brilliance over skin and pavement, a shock to behold.

Rufus' gasps rattled. "Come along," Lugo muttered. "Slow and steady. If we run, they'll be after us again." He backed off, still twirling the staff, still grinning his most wolfish. At the corner of vision, he saw Rufus sidle on his right. Good. The fellow had kept that much wit.

The hunters mumbled and gaped. The hurt among them ululated. Lugo entered the narrow street he had chosen. It bent around a tenement, and he had no more sight of Hercules. "Now we move," he clipped, and turned around. "No, you fool." He caught Rufus' sleeve. "Don't run. Walk."

Such people as were present looked warily at them but

didn't interfere. Lugo ducked into the first alley he knew connected with a different street. When they were alone at the noisome middle of it, he said, "Stop." He put his staff beneath an arm and reached for the fibula that held his cloak. "We'll drape this over you." He tucked the veil back inside the cowl before he covered his companion's distinctive hair. "Very well. We are two peaceful men going about our business. Can you remember that?"

The artisan blinked from the hood. Sweat glistened in what light there was. "Who, who be you?" His voice quavered deep. "What you want?"

"I would like to save your life," Lugo said coldly, "but I don't propose to risk mine any further. Do as I say and we may yet make it to shelter." When the other began in a dazed fashion to seem doubtful, Lugo added, "Go to the authorities if you wish. Go at once, before your dear neighbors pluck up courage and come in search. Tell the prefect you're accused of sorcery. He'll find out anyway. While you're being interrogated under torture, you might think how you can prove your innocence. Sorcery is a capital offense, you know."

"But you—"

"I am no more guilty of it than you are. I have a notion we can help each other. If you disagree, farewell. If not, come with me, and keep your mouth shut."

Breath shuddered into the burly frame. Rufus drew the cloak close about him and shambled along.

His gait grew easier as they proceeded, for nothing untoward happened. They simply mingled with traffic. "You may think the world is ending," Lugo remarked low, "but it was a purely local fuss. Nobody elsewhere has heard of it, or if anyone has, he doesn't care. I've seen people go on with their everyday lives while the enemy was breaking down the gates."

Rufus glanced at him, gulped, but preserved silence.

2

LUGO'S HOME was in the northwest quadrant, on the Street of the Sandalmakers, a quiet area. The house was unostentatious, rather old, stucco peeling off the concrete here and there. Lugo knocked. His majordomo opened the door; he

kept only a few slaves, carefully chosen and winnowed over the years. "This man and I have confidential matters to discuss, Perseus," he said. "He may be staying with us a while. I do not wish him disturbed in any way."

The Cretan nodded and smiled his bland smile. "Understood, master," he replied. "I will inform the rest."

"We can trust them," Lugo said aside to Rufus. "They know they have soft berths." To Perseus: "As you can see—and smell—my friend has had a strenuous time. We'll lodge him in the Low Room. Bring refreshments immediately; water as soon as you can heat a decent amount, with washcloth and towel; clean garb. Is the bed made up?"

"It always is, master." The slave sounded a bit hurt. He considered. "As for raiment, yours will not fit. I'll borrow from Durig. Shall I then purchase some?"

"Hold off on that," Lugo decided. He might need all the cash he could scrape together in a hurry. Though not the debased small stuff. That was too bulky; one gold solidus equalled about fourteen thousand nummi. "Durig's our handyman," he explained to Rufus. "Otherwise we boast a gifted cook and a couple of maids. A modest household." Homely details might soothe. He wanted Rufus fit to answer questions as soon as might be.

From the atrium they passed into a pleasant room, equally unpretentious, lighted by sunshine that leaded clerestory windows turned greenish. A mosaic at the center of the floor tiles depicted a panther surrounded by peacocks. Wooden panels set into the walls bore motifs more current, the Fish and Chi Rho among flowers, a large-eyed Good Shepherd. Since the reign of Constantine the Great it had been increasingly expedient to profess Christianity, which hereabouts had better be of the Catholic sort. Lugo remained a catechumen; baptism would have laid inconvenient obligations on him. Most believers put it off till late in life.

His wife had heard and come to meet him. "Welcome, dear," she said happily. "You're back fast." Her gaze fell on Rufus and grew troubled.

"This man and I have urgent business," Lugo told her. "It is highly confidential. Do you understand?"

She swallowed but nodded. "Hail and welcome," she greeted in a subdued voice.

Brave girl, Lugo thought. It was hard to look away from her. Cordelia was nineteen, short but deliciously rounded, her features delicate and lips always slightly parted below a lustrous mass of brown hair. They had been married four years and she had borne him two children thus far, both still alive. The marriage brought him certain useful connections, her father being a curial, though no dowry worth mentioning, the curial class being crushed between taxes and civic duties. More important to the couple, they had been drawn to each other, and wedlock became an ever higher delight.

"Marcus, meet Cordelia, my wife," Lugo said. "Marcus" was a safely frequent name. Rufus bobbed his head and grunted. To her: "We must get busy at once. Perseus will see to the necessities. I'll join you when I can."

She stared after them as he guided his companion off. Did he hear her sigh? Abrupt fear stabbed. He had gone forth with hope aflutter in him, a hope so wild that he must keep denying it, scolding himself for it. Now he saw what the reality might lead to.

No, he would not think about that. Not immediately. One step, two steps, left foot, right foot, that was how to march through time.

The Low Room was downstairs, a part of the cellar that Lugo had had bricked off after he acquired this house. Such hideaways were common enough to draw scant attention. Often they were for prayer or private austerities. In Lugo's line of work, it was clear that he could have use for a place secure from eavesdroppers. The cell was about ten feet square and six high. Three tiny windows just under the ceiling gave on the peristyle garden at ground level. The glass in them was so thick and wavy as to block vision, but the light that seeped through met whitewashed walls, making the gloom not too dense at this moment. Tallow candles lay on a shelf beside flint, steel, and tinder. Furnishings were a single bed, a stool, and a chamber pot on the dirt floor.

"Sit down," Lugo invited. "Rest. You're safe, my friend, safe."

Rufus hunched on the stool. He threw back the cowl but clutched the paenula around his tunic; the place was chilly. His red head lifted with a forlorn defiance. "Who the muck be you, anyhow?" he growled.

His host lounged back against the wall and smiled. "Fla-

vius Lugo," he said. "And you, I believe, are a shipyard carpenter, unemployed, generally called Rufus. What's your real name?"

An obscenity was followed by: "What's it matter to you?"

Lugo shrugged. "Little or nothing, I suppose. You could be more gracious toward me. That rabble would have had the life out of you."

"And what's that to you?" The retort was harsh. "Why'd you step in? Look here, I be no sorcerer. I want naught to do with magic or heathendom, me, a good Christian, a free Roman citizen."

Lugo lifted a brow. "Have you absolutely never made an offering elsewhere than in church?" he murmured.

"Well, uh, well—Epona, when my wife was dying—" Rufus half rose. He bristled. "Dung o' Cernunnos! *Be* you a sorcerer?"

Lugo raised a palm. His left hand moved the staff, slightly but meaningfully. "I am not. Nor can I read your mind. However, old ways die hard, even in the cities, and the countryside is mostly pagan and from your looks and speech I'd guess your family were Cadurci a generation or two ago, back in the hills above the Duranius Valley."

Rufus lowered himself. For a minute he breathed hard. Then, piece by piece, he began to relax. A smile of sorts responded to Lugo's. "My parents come o' that tribe," he rumbled. "My right name, uh, Cotuadun. Nobody calls me aught but Rufus any more. You be a sharp 'un."

"I make my living at it."

"No Gaul you. Anybody might be a Flavius, but what's 'Lugo'? Where you from?"

"I've been settled in Burdigala a fair number of years." A knock on the plank door was handily timed. "Ah, here comes the excellent Perseus with those refreshments I ordered. I daresay you've slightly more need of them than I do."

The majordomo brought a tray of wine and water flagons, cups, bread, cheese, olives in a bowl. He put it on the ground and, at Lugo's wave, departed, closing the door behind him. Lugo sat down on the bed, reached, poured, offered Rufus a drink not much diluted. His own he watered well.

"Your health," he proposed. "You pretty near lost it today."

Rufus took a long swallow. "Ahhh! Bugger me if that don't go good." He squinted through the dusk at his rescuer. "Why'd you do it? What be I to you?"

"Well, if nothing else, those proles had no right to kill you. That's the job of the state, after you've duly been found guilty—which I am sure you are not. It behooved me to enforce the law."

"You knew me."

Lugo sipped. The wine was Falernian, sweet on his tongue. "I knew of you," he said. "Rumors had reached me. That's natural. I keep track of what's going on. I have my agents. Nothing to frighten you, no secret informers. But street urchins, for example, who earn a coin by bringing me word of anything interesting. I determined to seek you out and learn more. It's lucky for you that that chanced to be exactly when and where I could snatch you from your fellow sons of toil."

The question soughed through him: How many chances had he missed, by what slender margins, throughout all the years? He did not share the widespread present-day faith in astrology. It seemed likeliest to him that sheer accident ruled the world. Perhaps today the dice had been due to roll in his favor.

If the game was real. *If* anyone like him existed, had ever existed, anywhere under the sky.

Rufus' head thrust forward from the heavy shoulders. "Why did you?" he grated. "What the dung be you after?"

He needed calming down. Lugo check-reined the eagerness within himself, that was half fear. "Drink your wine," he said. "Listen, and I'll explain.

"This house may have led you to think I'm a curial, or a mildly prosperous shopkeeper, or something of that kind. I'm not." Had not been for a long while. Diocletian's decree had supposedly frozen everybody into the status to which they were born, including the middle classes. But rather than be crushed, grain by grain, between the stones of taxation, regulation, worthless currency, moribund trade, more and more were fleeing. They slipped off, changed their names, became serfs or outright slaves, illegal itinerant la-

borers and mountebanks; some joined the Bacaudae whose bandit gangs terrorized the rural outback, some actually sought to the barbarians. Lugo had made better arrangements for himself, well in advance of need. He was accustomed to looking ahead.

"I'm currently in the pay of one Aurelian, a senator in this city," he went on.

Hostility sparked. "I heard about him."

Lugo shrugged again. "So he bribed his way into that rank, and even among his colleagues is monumentally corrupt. What of it? He's an able man and understands that it's wise to be loyal to those who serve him. Senators aren't allowed to engage in commerce, you may know, but he has varied interests. That calls for intermediaries who are not mere figureheads. I come and go for him, to and fro, sniffing out dangers and possibilities, bearing messages, executing tasks that require discretion, giving advice when appropriate. There are worse stations in life. In fact, there are less honorable ones."

"What's Aurelian want with me?" Rufus asked uneasily.

"Nothing. He's never heard of you. Fate willing, he never shall. I sought you out on my own account. We may be of very great value to each other." Lugo sharpened his tone. "I make no threats. If we cannot work together but you have done your best to cooperate with me, I can at least get you smuggled out of Burdigala to someplace where you can start over. Remember, you owe me your life. If I abandon you, you're a dead man."

Sullenness and the gesture of the fig: "They'll know you hid me here."

"Why, I'll tell them myself," Lugo declared coolly. "As a solid citizen, I did not want you unlawfully slaughtered, but I did feel it incumbent on me to interview you in private, draw you out—Hold!" He had set his cup on the ground as he talked, expecting Rufus might lunge. Now he gripped the staff in both hands. "Stay right on that stool, boy. You're sturdy, but you've seen what I can do with this."

Rufus crouched back.

Lugo laughed. "That's better. Don't be so damned edgy. I really don't want to cause you any harm. Let me repeat, if you'll be honest with me and do as I say, the worst that will

happen to you is that you leave Burdigala in disguise. Aurelian owns a huge latifundium; it can doubtless use an extra workman, if I put in a good word, and the senator will cover up any little irregularities for me. At best—well, I don't yet know, and therefore won't make any promises, but it could be glorious beyond your highest-flying childhood dreams, Rufus."

His words and the lulling tone worked. Also, the wine had begun to. Rufus sat quiet a moment, nodded, beamed, tossed off his drink, held out a hand. "By the Three, right!" he cried.

Lugo clasped the hard palm. The gesture was fairly new in Gallia, maybe learned from Germanic immigrants. "Splendid," he said. "Just speak fully and frankly. I know that won't be easy, but remember, I have my reasons. I mean to do well by you, as well as God allows."

He refilled the emptied cup. Behind his jovial façade, tension gathered and gathered.

Rufus drank. His vessel wobbled. "What d'you want to know?" he asked.

"First, why you got into grief."

Rufus' pleasure faded. He scowled beyond his questioner. "Because my wife died," he mumbled. "That's what broke the crock."

"Many men are widowed," Lugo said, while memory twisted a sword inside him.

The big hand tightened around the cup till knuckles stood white. "My Livia was old. White hair, wrinkles, no teeth. We'd two kids what grew up, boy and girl. They be married, kids o' their own. And they've gone gray."

"I thought this might be," Lugo whispered, not in Latin. "O Ashtoreth—"

Aloud, using today's language: "The rumors that reached me suggested as much. That's why I came after you. When were you born, Rufus?"

"How the muck should I know?" The response was surly. "Balls! Poor folk don't keep count like you rich 'uns. I couldn't tell you who be consul this year, let alone then was. But my Livia was young like me when we got hitched—fourteen, fifteen, whatever. She was a strong mare, she was, popped her young out like melon seeds, though only the

two o' them got to grow up. She didn't break down fast like some mares."

"You may well have reached your threescore and ten, then, or gone beyond," Lugo said most softly. "You don't look a day over twenty-five. Were you ever sick?"

"No, 'less you count a couple times I got hurt. Bad hurts, but they healed right up in a few days, not so much as a scar. No toothaches ever. I got three teeth knocked out in a fight once, and they grew back." The arrogance shriveled. "People looked at me more and more slanty. When Livia died, that broke the crock." Rufus groaned. "They'd been saying I must've made a deal with the Devil. *She* told me what she heard. But what the muck could I do? God give me a strong body, that's all. She believed."

"I do too, Rufus."

"When she fell bad sick at last, not many 'ud speak to me any more. They'd shy from me in the street, make signs, spit on their breasts. I went to a priest. He was scared o' me too, I could see it. Said I ought to go to the bishop, but the bastard stalled about taking me to him. Then Livia died."

"A release," Lugo could not help venturing.

"Well, I'd gone to a whorehouse for a long time," Rufus answered matter-of-factly. Fury flared. "Now they, them bitches, they told me go away and don't come back. I got mad, raised a ruckus. People heard and gathered around outside. When I came out, the scumswine yelled at me. I decked the loudest mouthed o' them. Next thing I knew, they were on me. I barely fought free and ran. They came after me, more and more o' them."

"And you'd have died under their feet," Lugo said. "Or else presently the rumors would have reached the prefect. The tale of a man who never grew old and was clearly no saint, therefore must be in league with the diabolical. You'd have been arrested, interrogated under torture, doubtless beheaded. These are bad times. Nobody knows what to expect. Will the barbarians prevail? Will we have another civil war? Will plague or famine or a total collapse of trade destroy us? Heretics and sorcerers are objects to take fear out on."

"I be none!"

"I didn't say you were. I accept you're a common man, as common as I've ever met, aside from— Tell me, have you known or heard of anyone else like you, whom time doesn't appear to touch? Kinfolk, perhaps?"

Rufus shook his head.

Lugo sighed. "Neither have I." He mustered resolve and plunged forward. "And I have waited and tried, searched and endured, since first I came to understand."

"Uh?" The wine splashed from Rufus' cup.

Lugo sipped out of his own, for what comfort it could give. "How old do you think I am?" he asked.

Rufus peered before he said at the bottom of his throat: "You look maybe twenty-five."

A smile quirked on the left side of Lugo's mouth. "Like you, I don't know my age for certain," he answered slowly. "But Hiram was king in Tyre when I was born there. What chronicles I have since been able to study and figure from show me that that was about twelve centuries ago."

Rufus gaped. The freckles stood lurid on a skin gone white. His free hand made a sign.

"Don't be afraid," Lugo urged. "I'm in no pact with darkness. Or with Heaven, for that matter, or any power, any soul. I am your kind of flesh, whatever that means. I have simply been longer on earth. It is lonely. You have had the barest foretaste of how lonely it is."

He rose, leaving staff and cup, to pace the cramped floor, hands behind back. "I was not born Flavius Lugo, of course," he said. "That is only the latest name I have taken out of—I've lost count of how many. The earliest was—never mind. A Phoenician name. I was a merchant until the years brought me to trouble much like yours today. Then for a long time I was a sailor, a caravan guard, a mercenary soldier, a wandering bard, any number of trades in which a man may come and go little noticed. That was a hard school I went through. Often I came near dying from wounds, shipwreck, hunger, thirst, a dozen different perils. Sometimes I would have died, were it not for the strange vigor of this body. A slower danger, more frightening as I began to perceive it, was that of drowning, losing my reason, in sheer memories. For a while I did have scant use of my wits. In a way that was a mercy; it blunted the pain of losing everyone

I came to care for, losing him and losing her and losing, oh, the children. . . . Bit by bit I worked out the art of memory. I now have clear recall, I am like a walking library of Alexandria—no, that burned, didn't it?" He chuckled at himself. "I do make slips. But I have the art of storing what I know until it's wanted, then calling it forth. I have the art of controlling sorrow. I have—"

He observed Rufus' awed regard and broke off. "Twelve hundred years?" the artisan breathed. "You seen the *Savior*?"

Lugo forced a smile. "Sorry, I have not. If he was born in the reign of Augustus, as they say—that would have been, m-m, between three and four hundred years ago—then I was in Britannia at the time. Rome hadn't conquered it yet, but trade was brisk and the southern tribes were cultured in their fashion. And much less meddlesome. That's always a highly desirable feature in a place. Damnably hard to find these days, short of running off to the wild Germani or Scoti or whatever. And even they—

"Another art I've developed is that of aging my appearance. Hair powder, dyes, such things are cumbersome, unreliable. I let everybody talk about how young I continue to look. Some people do, after all. But meanwhile gradually I begin to stoop a little, shuffle a little, cough, pretend to be hard of hearing, complain of aches and pains and the insolence of modern youth. It only works up to a point, of course. Finally I must vanish and start a new life elsewhere under a new name. I try to arrange things so it will be reasonable to suppose I wandered off and met with misfortune, perhaps because I'd grown old and absent-minded. And as a rule I've been able to prepare for the move. Accumulate a hoard of gold, learn about the home to be, perhaps visit it and establish my fresh identity—"

Some of the weariness of the centuries fell over him. "Details, details." He stopped and looked into one of the blind windows. "Am I going senile? I don't usually gabble this way. Well, you're the first like me I've found, Rufus, the very first. Let's hope you won't be the last."

"Did you, uh, know about others?" groped the voice at his back.

Lugo shook his head. "I told you I never did. How could

I? A few times I thought I saw a trace, but it gave out or it proved false. Once I may have. I'm not sure."

"What was that . . . master? You want to tell me?"

"I may as well. It was in Syracuse, where I based myself for a good many years because of its ties with Carthage. Lovely, lively city. A woman, Althea was her name, fine to look on and bright in the way women sometimes got to be in the later days of the Greek colonies—I knew her and her husband. He was a shipping magnate and I skippered a tramp freighter. They'd been married for over three decades, he'd gone bald and pot-bellied, she'd borne him a dozen children and the oldest of them was gray, but she might have been a maiden in springtime."

Lugo fell silent a while before finishing, flat-voiced: "The Romans captured the city. Sacked it. I was absent. Always make an excuse to clear out when you see that kind of thing coming. When I returned, I inquired. She could have been taken for a slave. I could have tried to find her and buy her free. But no, when I'd tracked down somebody who knew, insignificant enough to've been left unhurt, I learned she was dead. Raped and stabbed, I heard. Don't know if that's true or not. Stories grow in the telling. No matter. It was long ago."

"Too bad. You should'a got in there first." Lugo tautened. "Uh, sorry, master," Rufus said. "You don't, uh, don't seem to hate Rome."

"Why should I? It's eternally the same tale, war, tyranny, massacre, slavery. I've been party to it myself. Now Rome is on the receiving end."

"What?" Rufus sounded aghast. "Can't be! Rome is *forever*!"

"As you like." Lugo turned back to him. "Apparently I have, at last, found a fellow immortal. At least, here is someone I can safeguard, watch, make certain of. Two or three decades should suffice. Though already I have no real doubt."

He drew breath. "Do you see what this means? No, you scarcely can. You've had no time to think about it." He surveyed heavy visage, low forehead, dismay yielding to a loose-lipped glee. I don't expect you ever will, he

thought. You are a moderately competent woodworker, nothing else. And I'm lucky to have found this much. Unless Althea—but she slipped through my fingers, away into death.

"It means I am not unique," Lugo said. "If there are two of us, there must be more. Very few, very seldom born. It isn't in the bloodlines, like height or coloring or those deformities I've seen run in families. Whatever the cause is, it happens by accident. Or by God's will, if you prefer, though I'd think that makes God out to be sheerly capricious. And surely senseless mischance takes off many immortals young, as it takes off ordinary men and women and children. Sickness we may escape, but not the sword or the runaway horse or the flood or the fire or the famine or whatever. Possibly more die at the hands of neighbors who think this must be a demon, magician, monster."

Rufus cowered. "My head's all a-spin," he whimpered.

"Well, you've had a bad time. Immortals need rest too. Sleep if you wish."

Rufus' expression was glazing over. "Why couldn't we say we was, uh, saints? Angels?"

"How far would you have gotten?" Lugo gibed. "Conceivably a man born into royalty— But I don't suppose that's ever happened, as rare as our kind must be. No, if we survive, we learn early on to keep our heads low."

"Then how shall we find each other?"

Rufus hiccoughed and farted.

3

"COME OUT with me into the peristyle," said Lugo.

"Oh, gladly," Cordelia sang. Almost, she danced at his side.

It was an evening mild and clear. The moon stood over the eastern roof, close to full, in a sky still violet-blue. Westward, heaven darkened and stars trembled forth. City sounds had mostly died out; crickets chirred. Moonlight dappled the flowerbeds, shivered on the water of a pool, brought Cordelia's young face and breast out of shadow into argency.

She and he stood hand in hand a few minutes. "You were

so busy today," she said at length. "When you came back early, I hoped— Of course, you had your work to do."

"I did that, unfortunately," he replied. "But these next hours belong to us."

She leaned against him. Her hair carried a remnant fragrance of sunlight. "Christians should give thanks for what they get." She giggled. "How easy to be a Christian, tonight."

"How have the children done today?" he asked—his son Julius, no longer stumping about but leaping adventurously everywhere, starting to talk; little, little Dora asleep in her crib, starfish hands curled tight.

"Why, very well," said Cordelia, a bit surprised.

"I see them too seldom."

"And you care. Not many fathers do. Not that much." She squeezed his hand. "I want to give you lots of children." Impishly: "We can begin at once."

"I have . . . tried to be kind."

She heard how the words dragged, let go of him, widened her eyes in alarm. "What's wrong, beloved?"

He made himself take hold of her shoulders, look into her face—the moonlight made her searingly beautiful—and answer: "Between us, nothing at all." Only the fact that you will grow old and die. And that has happened so often, so often. I cannot count the deaths. There is no measure for the pain, but I think it has not grown any less; I think I have merely learned to live with it, as a mortal can learn to live with an unhealable wound. I thought we could have, oh, thirty, perhaps forty years together before I must leave. That would have been wonderful.

"But I have an unexpected journey to make," he said.

"Something that man—Marcus—something he's told you?"

Lugo nodded.

Cordelia grimaced. "I don't like him. Forgive me, but I don't. He's coarse and stupid."

"He is that," Lugo agreed. It had seemed wise to him that they let Rufus share their supper. Confinement in the Low Room with nothing but his dreads and animal hopes for company had been breaking what self-control was left

him, and he needed it for the time ahead. "Nevertheless, I got important information from him."

"Can you tell me what it is?" He heard how hard she tried not to make it a plea.

"I'm sorry, no. Nor can I say where I'm bound or how long I'll be gone."

She caught both his hands. Her fingers had turned cold. "The barbarians. Pirates. Bacaudae."

"Travel has its dangers," he admitted. "I've spent a lot of this day making arrangements for you. Just in case, darling, just in case." He kissed her. The lips that shivered beneath his bore a thin taste of salt. "You should know this is a matter that may or may not concern Aurelian, but if it does, it must be investigated at once, and he's in Italy. I've told his amanuensis Corbilo as much, and you can collect my pay for your needs from him. I've also left a substantial sum in trust for you at the church. The priest Antoninus took it and gave me a receipt that I'll give you. And you are heir to this property. You'll be all right, you and the children." If Rome hangs together.

She threw herself against him and clung. He stroked her hair, her back, ruffling the gown, making the caress an embrace. "There, there," he crooned, "this is just in case. Don't be afraid. I'm not running any great risk." He believed that was true. "I'll be back." That was not true, and hurt like fire to utter. Well, no doubt she'd marry again, after he was given up for dead. *Last heard of on the Ordovician coast, about when a Scotic raid occurred . . .*

She stood back, hugged herself, swallowed, smiled unsteadily. "Of course you w-w-will," she avowed. "I'll p-pray for you the whole while. And we have this night."

Until shortly after dawn, when *Nereid* cast off. He'd obtained passage for himself and Rufus. Most of Britannia continued secure, but the barbarians ravaged enough of it that nobody would question a couple of men who appeared in, say, Aquae Sulis or Augusta Londinium with a story of having fled. Given money in hand, they could start afresh; and Lugo had buried a fair supply of honest coins in the island, several generations back.

"If only you could remain," escaped from Cordelia.

"If only I could." But Rufus was marked in Burdigala.

Rufus, the male, the oaf, the immortal, who would surely perish miserably without an intelligent man in charge of him. And he must not. However awkward, his was the only help Lugo had toward the ultimate coming together of their kind.

Cordelia heard how the words wrenched themselves from her husband's mouth. "I will *not* whine," she declared. "We do have this night. And many, many more on the far side of your journey. I'll wait for you, I'll always wait."

No, Lugo thought, you won't. That wouldn't make sense, once you've decided you're a widow, still young but with time at your heels.

Nor could you ever have waited for me always.

I seek for her who shall never have to leave me.

IV

Death in Palmyra

THE CARAVAN to Tripolis would leave at daybreak. Nebozabad, its master, wanted everything ready the evening before. He wanted every man rehearsed in making and breaking camp. Delays not only cost money, they multiplied risk.

So he thought. Some people told him not to fret. Peace was now secure, they said, Syria firmly in Arabian hands. Had not the Khalifa himself passed through Tadmor, on his way to holy Jerusalem, three years ago? Nebozabad was less trustful. Throughout his life he had seen too much war, with the disruption of trade, breakdown of order, and upsurge of banditry that soon followed. He meant to use every hour of opportunity that God granted him.

Therefore his charges bedded down not in a caravanserai but on a ground beyond the Philippian Gate. He went about, speaking to camel drivers, guards, traders, lesser folk, issuing commands where needed, piecemeal giving turmoil a shape and a meaning. Night was well upon him before he was done.

He paused, then, to enjoy a moment alone. Air had gone cool, with a tinge of smoke from the small fires that glimmered in the camp. Otherwise it was a huddle of darkness. He made out the peaks of a few tents, pitched by the more prosperous among his travelers, and sometimes light flickered off the spearhead of a sentry on his rounds. Nebozabad wanted all routines working from the outset. A murmur reached his ears, talk of men who sat up late, occasionally the soft whicker of a horse or the rumble and gurgle in a camel's throat.

Stars glittered brilliant, beyond counting. From the west a

gibbous moon cast light down the shallow valley. It frosted hills, palm fronds, the tower tombs that rose out of shadow, the turrets and battlements of the city wall. That wall loomed sheer, gray-white, as if a piece of the steppe surrounding this basin had been turned on end. It seemed as eternal, too, its massiveness never to be breached, the life that now slept behind its shelter to pulse every day forever.

The thought made Nebozabad bite his lip. Much too well did he know otherwise. In his own lifetime the Persians had driven out the Romans, and later the Romans had driven out the Persians, and today both nations were in retreat before the sword of Islam; and while trade routes still bore wealth into Tadmor and forth again, the city was long past her glory. Ah, to have lived then, when she—Palmyra on Latin and Greek tongues—was the queen of Syria, before Emperor Aurelian crushed Zenobia's bid for freedom—

Nebozabad sighed, shrugged, turned about and started back. A city, like a man, must bear whatever fate God decrees. In that much, at least, the Muslims were right.

On his way, he heard and answered several greetings. "Christ be with you, master." "And his spirit be with you." Everyone recognized his stocky form in the plain djellabah, his rather heavy features bared to the sky. Moonlight touched white streaks in hair and short-cropped beard.

Presently he neared his own tent. It was of good material though modest size; he never took along weight that could, instead, be in articles of value. Lamplight glowed faint yellow around a flap hanging loose.

A hand clutched his ankle. His stopped short, sucked in a breath, closed fingers on knife hilt. "Quiet," whispered frantically. "By God's mercy, I pray you. I mean no harm."

Nonetheless chill tingled through him as he peered. Someone crouched, flattened close to the ground, a paleness amidst the shadows. Naked? "What is this?" he hissed.

"I need help," came back at him. "Can we speak alone? Behold, I am unarmed."

He believed he knew that voice. Often had he had to make quick decisions. "Abide," he said low. The imploring hand released him. He stepped around to the front of his tent and slipped past the flap, with care that little light flash forth. Within, the camel's-hair fabric enclosed a measure of warmth. A clay lamp dimly showed his bedroll spread out

for him, water pitcher and basin and two or three other minor comforts ready, his body servant hunkered down. That person brought knees, hands, and brow to earth in salutation and asked, "What is my master's desire?"

"I expect a visitor," Nebozabad told him. "Depart cautiously, as I arrived. When I have secured the entrance, let no one else seek to me, nor ever speak a word of this."

"On my head be it, master." The slave glided off. Nebozabad had chosen and trained him well; he was wholly loyal. When he was gone, Nebozabad looked out for a moment, murmured, "Come now," and drew back again.

The other scuttled through, straightened, confronted him. Despite his half knowledge, he gasped. A woman indeed. Oh, woman's very self!

He remembered the danger, muttered a curse, hastened to secure the entrance. Then he dared try to deal with her.

She had lowered herself to knees and toes, hands laid across her lap. Midnight tresses flowed over shoulders, down past her breasts. He guessed flittingly that that was not quite by chance. Nothing else had she for garment, except grime, a streak of clotting blood on the left forearm, sweat that shimmered in the lamplight, and the gloom. Her body might have belonged to an ancient goddess, lithe, firm-bosomed, slim-waisted, round-hipped. The face she turned to him was broad across the cheekbones, straight of nose, lips full above the cleanness of chin and jawline. Her skin was faintly golden and the great eyes, beneath arching brows, were hazel. In her, Roman of the West, Roman of the East, Hellene, and Persian had mingled with Syria.

He stared down at the sight. She seemed a maiden, no, a youthful matron, no, something for which he had no name. But he knew her.

Her voice trembled husky. "O Nebozabad, old friend, there is no hope left me save in you. Help me, as once my house helped you. You have known us all your life."

Forty-odd years. The thought struck like a dagger. His mind flew back across more than thirty of them.

1

ALIYAT BOTH longed for Barikai's return and dreaded it. She would have the solace of his embrace and of giving him her own upbearing love. So had they stood together when they lost other children; but those were in-

fants. First, though, she must tell him what had happened.

He was elsewhere in Tadmor, talking with the merchant Taimarsu. News from the front was evil, the Persians inflicting defeat after defeat upon the Romans, thrusting into Mesopotamia, with Syria's defenses thin on their left. More and more, commerce with the seaboard pulled into its shell and awaited the outcome. Caravan masters such as Barikai suffered. Most were, themselves, chary of venturing anywhere. He, bolder, went off to persuade the traffickers that they should not let goods molder in warehouses.

She imagined his heartiness, his laughter: "I'll convey them. Prices in Tripolis or Berytus will be at a peak! Rewards are for the brave." She had encouraged it. Daughter of a man in the same trade, she was closer to her husband than most wives, almost a partner as well as his mate and the mother of his children. It eased the wistfulness that tugged at her whenever she stood on the city wall and watched his train move off beyond the horizon.

But today— A female slave found her in the garden and said, "The master is here." Aliyat's spirit twisted within her. She called up courage as women must, in childbed or by deathbed, and hastened. Her skirts rustled through a silence full of eyes. All the household knew.

It was a fair-sized household in a good-sized building. Until lately Barikai, like his father before him, had done well. Aliyat hoped it would not become necessary to sell off any slaves; she was fond of them. She was instituting frugality. . . . What mattered such things?

The atrium lay dim with eventide. Her glance fell on the image of the Virgin that stood in a niche, its blue and gold aglow against whitewash. For a little while she had knelt before it, silently praying that the news not be true. The image had merely stared, changeless.

Barikai had just given his cloak to a servant. Beneath it he wore a robe decorated with gold thread, to show power, confidence. Time had grizzled the dark hair and furrowed the lean face, but he still walked springily. "Christ be with you, my lady," he began, as was seemly in the presence of attendants. His gaze sharpened. He reached her in three long strides and took her by the shoulders. "What is wrong?"

She must swallow twice before she could beg, "Come

with me." His mouth drew tight. Wordlessly he followed her back into the garden.

Enclosed by the house, it was a place of cool calm, refuge from the world. Jasmine and roses grew around a pool where water lilies floated. Their fragrances drenched the air. Overhead, heaven had gone royal blue as the sun went below the roof. Here two people could be alone.

Aliyat turned to Barikai. She doubled her fists at her sides and forced out, "Manu is dead."

He stood unmoving.

"Young Mogim brought the word this morning," Aliyat told him. "He was among the few who escaped. The squadron was on patrol south of Khalep. A Persian cavalry troop surprised them. Mogim saw Manu take an arrow in his eye, fall from the saddle, go down under the hoofs."

"South of Khalep," Barikai croaked. "Already. Then they are coming into Syria."

She knew that man-thought was only the first poor shield he could lift. She saw it break in his grasp. "Manu," he said. "Our first-born. Gone." The hand shook with which he crossed himself, over and over. "God have mercy on him. Christ take him home. Help him, holy Georgios."

I too should pray, Aliyat thought, and knew with a wan surprise that any wish to do so had withered.

"Have you told Aqmat?" Barikai asked.

"Of course. Best, I think, best leave her and her children in peace for a while." Manu's young wife had lived in terror of this since he was called to war. The fact had fallen on her like a hammer.

"I sent a messenger to Hairan, but his master has dispatched him to Emesa on some business," Aliyat went on. The younger of their sons worked for a dealer in wine. "The sisters mourn at home." Their three living daughters were married, well enough that she was glad of the earlier struggle to amass good dowries for them.

"I think now—to carry on my trade—I think I will take Nebozabad to apprentice," Barikai mumbled. "You know him, do you not? Son of the widow Hafsa. Only ten years old, but a likely lad. And it would be a kindness. It might make the saints smile a little on Manu's soul."

Abruptly he seized her, painfully hard. "But why do I chatter like this?" he yelled. "Manu is gone!"

She loosened his hands, guided his arms around her, held him very close. They stood thus for many heartbeats, while shadows rose in the garden and light drained from the sky.

"Aliyat, Aliyat," he whispered at last, shakenly, into her hair, "my love, my strength. How can it be that you are what you are? Wife of mine, mother, grandmother, and yet you could well-nigh be the girl I made my bride."

2

WHEN THE Persians occupied Tadmor, they first levied a heavy tribute. Thereafter they were not bad overlords—no worse than the Romans, thought Aliyat in secret. Zarathushtrans who held fire sacred, they let everybody worship according to belief, and in fact kept Orthodox Christians, Nestorian Christians, and Jews from molesting each other. Meanwhile their firm control of the territories they won allowed trade to resume, also with their own country. After a dozen years, people heard that they were advancing farther, had taken Jerusalem and presently Egypt. Aliyat wondered if they would go on to Old Rome, but decided, from what men told about Italy, that that raddled land, divided among Lombard chiefs, the Catholic Pope, and remnant Imperial garrisons, would be no prize.

Word trickled in: a new Emperor, Heraklios, reigned in Constantinople and was said to be energetic and able. However, he had woes close to home. Barely did he cast the wild Avars back from the capital city.

In Tadmor such events seemed remote, not quite real. Aliyat was nearly the sole woman there who even heard of them. One had one's private life to cope with. For her, too, the days and the years blurred together. A grandchild born, a friend dying, rose into reality and stood afterward in memory like lone hills espied on a long caravan trek.

So matters were at the hour that ended them.

She set forth with a sturdy female attendant for the agora. They left early in the morning, to finish her bargaining and carry back her purchases before the heat of the day drove folk indoors to rest. Barikai bade her a farewell she could barely hear. He had been weak of late, with bouts of pain in the chest and shortness of breath, he who was hith-

erto so strong. Neither prayers nor physicians availed much.

Aliyat and Mara followed their winding street to the Colonnade and walked on along it. The great double row of pillars gleamed triumphant between the arches at either end, bursting into florescence where the capitals challenged heaven. From a ledge on each, a statue of some famous citizen looked down, centuries of history at attention. Below them the ways were crowded with shops, trading offices, chapels, joyhouses, humanity. Smells eddied thick, smoke, sweat, dung, perfume, aroma of spices and oils and fruits. Noise rioted, footfalls, hoofbeats, wheel-creak, hammer-clang, chant, shout, speech, mostly the Aramaic of this country but also Greek, Persian, Arabic, and tongues of lands more distant yet. Colors swirled, a cloak, a robe, a veil, a headdress, a pennon streaming from a lance, an ornament, a charm. A rug seller sat amidst the rich hues of his wares. A wine vendor held his leather bottle aloft. A coppersmith made clangor. An oxcart slogged through the crowds, laden with dates from the oasis. A camel grunted and shambled beneath bales of silk from beyond Aliyat's ken. A squad of Persian horsemen trotted behind a trumpeter who warned the throng to clear the way; their armor flashed, their plumes rippled. A litter bore a wealthy merchant, another a bedizened courtesan, who both looked out with indolent insolence. A black-clad Christian priest drew aside from an austere magus and crossed himself once the latter was past. Drovers who had brought sheep in from the arid steppe wandered wide-eyed among enticements that would likely send them back to their tents penniless. A flute piped, a small drum thumped, somebody sang, high-pitched and quavery.

This was her city, Aliyat knew, these were her people, and nonetheless she was ever more estranged from them.

"Lady! Lady!"

She stopped at the call and glanced about. Nebozabad forced a path toward her. The persons whom he shoved aside shook their fists and cursed him. He went on unhearing until he reached her. She read his countenance and foreknowledge became a boulder in her breast.

"Lady, I hoped I could overtake you," the young man panted. "I was with my master, your husband, when— He is stricken. He uttered your name. I sent for a physician and myself started after you."

"Lead me," said Aliyat's voice.

He did, loudly, roughly, quickly. They returned beneath the brightening, uncaring sky to the house. "Wait," Aliyat commanded at the door of the bedchamber, and went in alone.

She need not have hurt Nebozabad by leaving him out in the corridor. She had not been thinking. Of course several slaves were there, standing aside, awed and helpless. But likewise, already, was their remaining son Hairan. He leaned over the bed, holding fast to him who lay in it. "Father," he pleaded, "father, can you hear me?"

Barikai's eyes were rolled back, a hideous white against the blueness that crept below the skin. Froth bubbled on his lips. The breath shuddered in and out of him, ceased, came raggedly anew, ceased again. Beadwork curtains across the windows tried to obscure the sight. For Aliyat they only made a twilight through which she saw him the starker.

Hairan looked up. Tears ran into his beard. "I fear he is dying, mother," he said.

"I know." She knelt, brushed his hands aside, laid her arms about Barikai and her cheek on her man's bosom. She heard, she felt the life go away.

Rising, she closed his eyes and tried to wipe his face. The physician arrived. "I can see to that, my lady," he offered.

She shook her head. "I will lay him out," she answered. "It is my right."

"Fear not, mother," Hairan said unevenly. "I will provide well for you—you shall have a peaceful old age—" The words trailed off. He stared, as did the physician and the slaves. Barikai, caravan master, had not reached his full threescore and ten, but he seemed as if he had, hair mostly white, visage gaunt, muscles shriveled over the bones. His widow who stood above him could have been a woman of twenty springtimes.

3

UNTO HAIRAN the wine merchant was born a grandson, and great was the rejoicing in his house. The feast that he and the father gave for kinfolk and friends lasted far into the night. Aliyat withdrew early from the women's part of it, into the rear of the building where she had a room. No one

thought ill of this; after all, however much respect her years entitled her to, they were a burden.

She did not seek rest as everybody supposed. Once alone, she straightened her back and changed her shuffling gait. Fast, supple, she went out a back door. The voluminous black garments that disguised her figure billowed with her haste. Her head was covered as usual, which hid the blackness of her locks. Family and servitors often remarked on how amazingly youthful her face and hands were; but now she lowered a veil.

She passed a slave going about his duties, who recognized her but simply made salutation. He would not babble about what he had seen. He too was old, and knew that one must bear with the old if sometimes they grow a trifle strange.

The night air was blessedly cool and fresh. The street was a gut of shadow, but her feet knew every stone and she found her way easily to the Colonnade. Thence she strode toward the agora. A full moon had cleared surrounding roofs. Its brilliance hid the stars close to it, though lower down they swarmed and sparkled. The pillars lifted white. Her footfalls slithered loud in the silence. Most folk were abed.

She took some risk, but it was slight. Mostly, the city guards had continued under the Persians to maintain law and order. Once she hid behind a column while a squad tramped past. Their pikeheads sheened like liquid in the moonlight. Had they seen her, they might well have insisted on bringing her home—unless they took her for a harlot, which would have led to questions for which she lacked answers.

"Why do you prowl about after dark?" She could not say, she did not know, yet she *must* get away for a while or else begin screaming.

This was not the first such time.

At the Street of the Marketers she turned south. The grace of the theater fountained upward on her right. On her left, the portico and wall around the agora lay ghostly under the moon. She had heard that they were but fragments of what formerly was, before desperate men quarried them for fortification material as the Romans closed in on Zenobia. That suited her mood. She passed through an unbarred gateway onto the broad plaza.

Remembrance of its liveliness by day made it feel all the

more empty. Statues of former high officials, military commanders, senators, and, yes, caravan leaders ringed it in like sentinels around a necropolis. Aliyat walked through the moonlight to the center and stopped. Her heartbeat and breath were the only sounds she heard.

"Miriamne, Mother of God, I thank you—" The words died on her lips. They were as hollow as the place where she stood, they would be mockery did she finish them.

Why was she barren of gladness and gratitude? A son had been born to the son of her son. The life that was in Barikai lived on. Could she call his dear shade out of the night, surely it would be smiling.

A shudder went through her. She could not raise the memory. His face had become a blur; she had words for its lineaments, but no vision any longer. Everything receded into the past, her loves died and died and died, and God would not let her follow them.

She should praise Him with song, that she was hale and whole, untouched by age. How many, halt, gnarled, toothless, half blind, afire with pain, longed for death's mercy? Whereas she— But the fear of her gathered year by year, the glances askance, whispers, furtive signs against evil. Hairan himself saw in the mirror his gray hair and lined brow, and wondered about his mother; she knew, she knew. She held as much apart as she could, not to remind her kin, and understood what an unspoken conspiracy was theirs, to avoid speaking of her before outsiders. And so she became the outsider, the one forever alone.

How could she be a great-grandmother, she in whose loins burned lust? Was that why she was punished by this, or what dreadful childhood sin of hers had she forgotten?

The moon moved onward, the stars turned their wheel. Slowly, something of heaven's bleak tranquility came to her. She started homeward. She would not surrender. Not yet.

4

THE WAR devoured a generation, but in the end Heraklios prevailed. He drove the Persians before him until they sued for peace. Two-and-twenty years after they left, the Romans re-entered Tadmor.

On their heels was a new resident, Zabdas, a dealer in spices from Emesa. That was a somewhat larger city, nearer the seaboard, therefore wealthier and more closely governed. Zabdas' family firm had an affiliate in Tadmor. After the chaos of battle and the latest change of overlords it needed reorganization, a cunning hand on the reins and a shrewd eye out for such opportunities as might appear. He arrived and took charge. That required making acquaintances, alliances, among local people. He was handicapped in this by being newly widowed, and therefore soon began looking for a wife.

Nobody told Aliyat about him, and indeed when he first visited Hairan it was on business. The dignity of the house, the guest, and herself required that she be among the women who bade him welcome before the men supped. Out of sheer rebelliousness, or so she vaguely thought, she left off her shapeless grandam's clothes and dressed in modest but becoming wise. She saw his startlement on learning who she was; eyes met eyes; a thrill that she fought to control went through her. He was a short man of about fifty, but erect, alert, the white hairs few and the visage well-molded. They exchanged ritual courtesies. She went back to her room.

Though she often found it hard to pluck a single memory out of the multitude that crowded her, certain experiences repeated themselves frequently enough that she gained skill from them. She could well read the meaning of Hairan's glances when he thought she didn't notice, the words he spoke to her and the words he did not. She could sense a rising current of excitement in the wives and slaves, even the older children. Her sleep became broken, she paced and paced or stole out by dark, the comfort that she had sometimes found in books now vanished.

It was no surprise when at length Hairan asked her to see him privately. That was in winter's early night, after most of the household had gone to bed. He admitted her when she knocked, escorted her to a cushioned stool, sat down cross-legged on the rug behind a table on which stood wine, dates, cakes.

For a space there was quiet. Bronze lamps sheened in the light that their flames threw soft. It picked out floral patterns of frescos, reds and blues and browns of carpet, the

folds of his robe and the furrows in his face. He was wholly gray and had grown a pot belly. He blinked dim-sightedly at her slimness. The brocade of green and gold that she had chosen lay close over curves; above her head covering, a wreath of gold wire enclosed the clear brows.

"Will you take refreshment, mother?" he invited finally, very low.

"Thank you." She reached for a goblet. The wine glowed on her tongue. Drink and food, those were comforts too. They had not lost their savor as she aged, nor had she become fat.

"You should not thank me." He looked away. "It is my duty to provide for your well-being."

"You have been a dutiful son."

"I have tried my best." In a rush, never meeting her gaze: "You, though, you are unhappy with us. True? I am not blind or deaf so far, not quite. You seldom if ever complain, but I cannot help knowing."

She commanded her body to be still, her voice to be level: "True. No fault of yours, nor of anyone else." She must force herself to hurt him. "I daresay you feel you are a young man trapped in flesh growing old. Well, I am an old woman trapped in flesh that stays young. Why this is, only God knows."

He twined fingers together. "You are—how old? Threescore and ten? Well, some people do carry their years well and reach great ages. If you lived for a hundred years in good health, it would not be unheard of. May God grant you do so." She marked how he evaded mention of the fact that except for teeth showing wear she bore no trace of the time that had passed.

Let her encourage him to say what he intended to say. "You will understand how my uselessness makes me restless."

"It need not!" burst from him. He lifted his eyes. She saw sweat on his skin. "Hark. Zabdas, a respectable man, a merchant, has asked for your hand in marriage."

I knew this, she thought; and aloud: "I know whom you speak of." She said naught about the cautious inquiries she had contrived to make. "But he and I met just a single time."

"He has queried people about you, and talked repeatedly

with me, and— He is, I say, an honorable man, well off and with excellent prospects for the future, a widower in need of a wife. He realizes that you are older than him, but feels this is no barrier. He has children grown, grandchildren coming, what he wants is a helpmate. Believe me, I have made sure of this."

"Do you wish the union, Hairan?" Aliyat asked quietly.

She sipped while he stuttered, fumbled with his goblet, looked to and fro, before he said, "I would never compel you, mother. It simply appears to me . . . it may be in your best interests. I will not deny, he offers certain business agreements that would . . . help. My enterprise has fallen on hard times."

"I know." He showed surprise. Aliyat whetted her tone: "Did you think *me* blind or deaf? I worked closely with your father, Hairan, as you never let me work with you."

"I—mother, I did not mean—"

She laughed a little. "Oh, you have been as kindly as you know how. Let us put such things behind us. Tell me more."

5

THE WEDDING and the celebration that followed were an occasion small, almost subdued. Finally the bride was escorted to the groom's bedchamber and left with a maidservant.

The room was not large, its walls merely whitewashed, its furnishings austere. Some garlands had been hung around it. A screen blocked off one corner. A three-branched candelabrum gave light. Laid across the bed were two nightgowns.

Aliyat knew she was expected to change into hers. Mutely, she let the attendant help her. She and Barikai had frolicked naked, with wicks burning bright. Well, times changed, or perhaps it was people who differed. She had been too long cut off from gossip to say.

When she stood briefly unclad, Zabdas' slave cried: "But my lady is beautiful!"

Aliyat stroked hands down her flanks. The touch tingled. She barely stopped short of her groin. Tonight she would again know the true pleasure that had haunted her for— how many years? She smiled. "Thank you."

"I, I heard you were old," the girl stammered.

"I am." Aliyat's manner imposed fear and silence.

She had an hour or two by herself in bed. Thoughts tumbled through her head, out of control. Now and then she shivered. At least her days in the house of her son had been predictable. That, though, was what had become the horror of them.

She sat up with a start when Zabdas entered. He closed the door behind him and stood for a moment watching her. In festival garb, he was . . . dapper. Her gown was of rather thick material, loosely cut, but her bosom swelled it outward. "You are more fair than I knew," he said in his careful way.

She lowered her lashes. "I thank my lord," she replied around the tightness in her throat.

He advanced. "Still, you are a woman of discretion, with the wisdom of your years," he said. "Such a one do I require." He halted before the icon of St. Ephraem Syrus that was the chamber's sole fixed ornament and crossed himself. "Grant us a satisfactory life together," he prayed.

Taking his nightshirt, he went behind the screen. She saw how neatly he hung his clothes over the top. When he returned dressed for sleep, he bent over, cupped a hand behind each candle in turn, and blew them out. He got into bed with his usual economy of motion.

He is my husband, pulsed in Aliyat. He is my liberation. Let me be good to him.

She reached out. Her arms enclosed, her mouth went seeking. "What?" Zabdas exclaimed. "Be at ease. I shall not hurt you."

"Do, if you like." She pressed against him. "How may I please you?"

"Why, why— This is— Kindly lie still, my lady. Remember your years."

She obeyed. Sometimes she and Barikai had enjoyed playing master and slave. Or youth and whore. She felt Zabdas raise himself to an elbow. His free hand tugged at her gown. She pulled it up and spread her thighs. He climbed between. He rested his full weight on her, which Barikai had not, but then Zabdas was much lighter. She reached to guide him. Briskly, he took care of that himself, grasped her breasts through the cloth, and thrust. He did

not seem to notice how her arms and legs clasped him. It was quickly over.

He got off and lay until his breathing was again even. She could barely see him as a deeper shadow in the night. He sounded troubled: "How wet you were. You have the body of a young woman, as well as the face."

"For you," she murmured.

Through the mattress she felt him tauten. "What is your age in truth?" So Hairan had avoided saying it outright; but Zabdas had perhaps avoided asking.

Fourscore and one, she knew. "I have never kept count," was the safest reply. "But there has been no deception, my lord. I am Hairan's mother. I . . . was quite young when I bore him, and you have seen that I carry my years better than most."

"A wonder." His voice was flat.

"Uncommon. A blessing. I am unworthy, but—" It must out: "My courses have not yet ended. I can bear you children, Zabdas."

"This is—" He searched for a word. "Unexpected."

"Let us thank God together."

"Yes. We should. But now best we sleep. I have much to do in the morning."

6

To Zabdas came the caravan master Nebozabad. They must discuss a proposed shipment to Darmesek. A journey of that length could no longer be lightly undertaken. News was too ominous, of the Arabian onslaught against Persia and threat to New Rome.

The merchant received his guest well, as he did all who were of consequence, and bade him dine. Aliyat insisted on serving them with her own hands. As they sat over their dessert, Zabdas excused himself and was gone for a while. He suffered from an occasional flux of the bowels. Nebozabad waited alone.

The room was the best furnished in the house, with embroidered red hangings, four seven-branched candelabra of gilt bronze, a table of teakwood carven in foliate patterns and inlaid with nacre, the ware upon it of silver or the finest

glass. A pinch of incense in a brazier made the air, on this warm eventide, a little cloying.

Nebozabad looked up when Aliyat came in with a tray of fruits. She stopped across from him, in dark garments that muffled sight of more than hands, countenance, the big hazel eyes. "Sit down, my lady," he urged.

She shook her head. "That would be unseemly," she answered in a near whisper.

"Then I will stand." He rose from his stool. "Far too long has it been since last I saw you. How fares it?"

"Well enough." She took on expression; her words leaped. "And how is it with you? And Hairan and, oh, everybody? I hear very little."

"You do not see much of anyone, do you, my lady?"

"My husband feels it would be . . . indiscreet . . . at my age. But how goes it, Nebozabad? Tell me, I beg you!"

He repeated her phrase: "Well enough. Another grandchild born to him, a girl, have you heard? As for myself, I have two living sons and a daughter, by the grace of God. Business—" He shrugged. "This is what I've come about."

"Is the danger from the Arabs great?"

"I fear so." He paused, tugged his beard. "In your days with master Barikai, may he be happy in Heaven, you knew everything that went on. You took a hand in it yourself."

She bit her lip. "Zabdas feels differently."

"I suppose he wishes to keep rumors down, and that is why he never has Hairan, or any kinsman of yours, here— Forgive me!" He had seen what crossed her features. "I should not pry. It's only that, that you were my master's lady when I was a boy, and ever gracious to me, and—" His voice trailed off.

"You are good to be concerned." She jerked her head as if to keep it from drooping. "But I have fewer sorrows than many do."

"I heard your child died. I'm sorry."

She sighed. "That was last year. Wounds heal. We will try again."

"You have not already?— No, again I spoke badly. Too much wine. Forgive me. Seeing how beautiful you still are, I thought—"

She flushed. "My husband is not too old."

"Yet he— No. Aliyat, my lady, if ever you should need help—"

Zabdas returned and she, having set down her tray, said good night and departed.

7

WHILE ROMAN and Persian bled each other to exhaustion, afar in Makkah Muhammad ibn Abdallah saw visions, preached, must flee to Yathrib, prevailed over his enemies, gave his refuge the new name Medinat Rasul Allah, the City of the Apostle of God, and died as master of Arabia. His Khalifa, Successor, Abu Bekr suppressed rebellion and launched in earnest those holy wars that united the people and carried the faith out across the world.

Six years after the troops of Emperor Heraklios reclaimed Tadmor, the troops of Khalifa 'Omar took it. The year after that they were in Jerusalem, and the year after that the Khalifa visited the holy city, passing triumphant through a completely subjugated Syria while couriers brought accounts of Islamic banners carried deep into the Persian heartland.

On the day he spent in Tadmor, from her rooftop Aliyat witnessed magnificence, gallant horses, richly caparisoned camels, riders whose helmets and mailcoats, lances and shields turned sunlight into flame, cloaks like windblown rainbows, trumpet and drum and deep-voiced chant. The streets surged, the oasis boiled with the conquerors. Yet she noticed that the far greater number of them were lean and roughly clad. Likewise was their garrison here, and their officials lived simple lives, five times daily humbling themselves before God when the muezzin's call wailed across the sky.

Nor were they bad rulers. They levied tribute, but it was not unbearable. They turned a few churches into mosques, but otherwise left Christians and Jews in the peace that they sternly enforced. The qadi, their chief justice, held court beneath the arch at the east end of the Colonnade, near the agora, and even the lowliest could appeal directly to him. Their irruption had been too swift to damage trade much, and it soon began reviving.

Aliyat was not altogether surprised when Zabdas said to her, in the tone that meant he would banish her to a rear

room if she gave him any dispute: "I have reached a great decision. This household shall embrace Islam."

Nonetheless she stood a while quiescent, amidst the shadows with which the single frugal lamp filled their bedchamber. When she spoke it was slowly, and her eyes searched him. "This is indeed a matter of the first importance. Have they compelled you?"

He shook his head. "No, no. They do not—except pagans, I am told." He formed his thin brief smile. "They would rather most of us remain Christian, so we may own land, which believers may not, and pay tribute for it as well as the other taxes. My talks with the imam whom I approached have been difficult. But of course he may not refuse a sincere convert."

"You'll gain many advantages."

He reddened. "Do you call me a hypocrite?"

"No, no, certainly not, my lord."

Zabdas turned mild. "I understand. To you this is a terrible shock, you who have been raised to worship Christ. Think, though. The Prophet never denied that Jesus was also a prophet. He was simply not the last one, the one to whom God revealed the full truth. Islam sweeps away the superstition about countless saints, the priests who come between a man and his God, the witless commandments and restrictions. We have but to acknowledge that there is one God and Muhammad is His Prophet. We have but to live righteous lives." He lifted a forefinger. "Think. Could the Arabs have borne everything before them as they have done, as they are doing and shall do, were theirs not the cause that is blessed, the faith that is true? I am bringing us to the truth, Aliyat." He squinted, peering. "You welcome the truth, do you not? It cannot harm you, can it?"

Recklessly, she cast across the space between them: "I hear a man who becomes a Muslim must suffer what Jewish boys do."

"It will not disable me," he snapped. Curbing temper again: "I do not expect a woman to understand these deep things. Only trust in me."

She swallowed, willed ease upon herself, moved toward him. "I do, my lord, I do," she murmured. Maybe she could cause him to beget a third child on her, and maybe that one would survive to give meaning back to her life. He seldom

took her to him, mostly when she made herself coax him in that same hope. It was almost as if, more and more, he feared her.

As for the change of religion, that mattered less than he supposed. What had the saints done to help, throughout the endless years?

8

SHE HAD not foreknown what the change meant. Islam burst upon Syria too suddenly. Zabdas studied it before he made his move. Only when the thing was done did she learn.

The Prophet had laid upon women of the faith the ancient usages of Arabia. In public they must wear the yashmak, the heavy veil hiding everything but the eyes, and likewise at home in the presence of any man but father, brother, husband, or son. Unchastity was punished by death. Quarters for men and women were separate, like an invisible wall built through the house, to whose door its master had the single key. Submission of wife to husband was not bounded by law and custom as it was among Christians and Jews; while a marriage lasted it was total, his the right to mutilate or kill the disobedient. Aside from such tasks as marketing, she had nothing to do with the outside world; he, his children by her, and his dwelling were to be her universe. For her there was no church, and whatever Paradise she might hope for would not be his.

So Zabdas explained, piecemeal as occasion arose. Aliyat was not sure the Law was quite that one-sided. She was entirely sure that in most families, practice softened it. But be that as it may, she was a prisoner.

She was even denied the solace of wine. That might be just as well, she decided once the first rage had faded. She had been resorting to it much oftener than was wise.

Oddly, however, as the Muslim months passed, she found herself less alone than hitherto. Thrust together, the females of the household—not only she and the slaves, but the wives and girl-children of two of Zabdas' sons who had joined him in Tadmor—at first quarreled viciously, then began to confide in each other. Her position and her freedom from aging had set her apart. Those who now saw her shar-

ing their helplessness discovered they could overlook these things, and if they told her their troubles she would do what little she could to aid them.

For her part, she learned bit by bit that she was not utterly isolated. In some ways, she touched more of the city than she had done since Barikai's death. She might be confined, but lesser females must needs go out on various errands; and they had kinfolk with whom they gossiped at every opportunity; and nobody cared to be strict with the humble, nor stopped to think that they too possessed sharp ears, open eyes, and inquiring minds. As the touch of a fly quivers through the web to the spider that sits at its middle, so did flickers of information reach Aliyat.

She was not present when Zabdas sought the qadi soon after his conversion; but in view of what was overheard and passed on, and what happened later, eventually she believed she could reconstruct it almost as well as if she had been invisibly listening.

Normally the qadi heard pleas in the open. Everybody was free to come. She could have done so, had she had any real plaint. She thought of it, and concluded drearily that she did not. Zabdas was never abusive. He provided adequately. If he no longer came to her bed, what should a woman close to her ninetieth year expect—whether or not she had again borne him a child, and this one did keep on living? The very thought was obscene.

He asked for a private audience and the qadi granted it. The two sat in the house of Mitkhal ibn Dirdar and sipped chilled pomegranate juice while they talked. Neither paid heed to the eunuch who waited on them; but he had acquaintances outside, who in their turn knew people.

"Yes, of course you may divorce your wife," Mitkhal said. "It is easily done. However, under the Law she retains all property that was hers, and I gather she brought a fair amount to this marriage. In every event, you must see to it that she does not become destitute or lack for protection." He bridged his fingers. "Moreover, do you wish to offend her kinfolk?"

"Hairan's goodwill is worth little these days," Zabdas clipped. "His business fares poorly. Aliyat's other children—by her first marriage—scarcely know her any more.

But, hm, the requirements you describe, those could prove awkward."

Mitkhal regarded him closely. "Why do you wish to put this woman from you? In what is she at fault?"

"Proud, resentful, sullen— No," said Zabdas beneath that gaze, "I cannot in honesty call her contumacious."

"Has she not given you a child?"

"A girl. The two before, they soon died. The girl is small and sickly."

"That is shabby ground for blame, my friend. Old seed gives thin fruit."

Zabdas chose to misunderstand. "Old, yes, by . . . by the Prophet! I have inquired. I should have done so at the first, but— Sir, she nears the hundred-year mark."

The qadi's lips formed a soundless whistle. "And yet— one hears rumors—is she not yet fair? And you tell me she remains healthy and fertile."

Zabdas leaned forward. Sunlight fell through the grille over a window to dapple his balding head. Behind sparse whiskers, the wattles under his jaw wabbled as he cried in a high-pitched, cracking voice: "It's unnatural! Lately she lost a tooth or two and I believed at last, at last— But new ones are growing out, as if she were a child of six or seven! She must be a witch, or an ifrit, a demon, a— That's what I beg for. That's what I ask for, an investigation, a—an assurance I can cast her out and—not have to fear her vengeance. Help me!"

Mitkhal raised a palm. "Hold, hold." His words flowed soft. "Be calm. Truly we have a marvel here. Yet all things are possible to God the Omnipotent. She has not been impious or sinful in any way, has she? You may have done right to keep her as secluded as you could—since you, her husband, have had this terror brewing within you. If the tale went abroad and spread panic, she might have been set on in the streets. Beware of that." Severely: "Ancient patriarchs lived close to a thousand years on earth. If God the Compassionate sees fit to let—Aliyat, is that her name?— linger for close to a hundred, ageless, who are we to question His will or divine His purpose?"

Zabdas stared at his lap. What teeth remained to him gritted together. "Nevertheless," he mumbled.

"My counsel is that you keep her as long as she does no

evil, for this is both justice for her and prudence for you. My decree, upholding the Law, is that you offer her no harm when she has offered none, nor make accusations that are baseless." Mitkhal reached for his cup, sipped, smiled. "But, true, if coupling with a crone strikes you as indecent, that is a matter of your choice. Have you considered taking a second wife? You are allowed four, you know, besides concubines."

In these latter years of his, Zabdas was quick to cool down from both his angers and his fears. He sat a moment silent, looking into a corner of the room. Then his mouth tilted upward and he murmured, "I thank my lord for his wise and merciful judgment."

9

THE DAY came when he summoned Aliyat to his office.

It was a chamber bare and cramped. A window opened on the inner court, but was too high up to afford sight of water or flowers. A niche gaped white where once the image of a saint stood. At the far end, a dais held a table bestrewn with letters, records, and writing materials. Behind it, he sat on a bench.

She entered. He laid aside a papyrus sheet, which crackled, and pointed downward. She went to knees and toes on the bare tiles before him. Silence stretched.

"Well?" he snapped.

She kept her eyes lowered. "What is my lord's desire?"

"What have you to say for yourself?"

"What must your handmaiden defend?"

"Mock me not!" he shouted. "I've had my fill of your insolence. Now you have struck my wife in the face. It is too much."

Aliyat looked up, caught his glance, held fast. "I thought Furja would go whimpering to you," she said steadily. "What tale did she bear? Fetch her and let me hear."

His fist struck the desk. "I will settle this. I am the master. I am being kind. I am giving you your chance to explain why you should escape a whipping."

She drew breath. This had been foreseeable since the thing happened; she had had a pair of hours wherein to marshal words. "My lord must know that his new bride and

I are apt to quarrel." Stupid, weak-chinned, spiteful creature, forever seeking to squirm herself into the man's favor and shrill herself into sovereignty over the harem. "Alas that this should be. It is wrong." That tasted foul but had better be said. "Today she gave me an intolerable insult. I smote her once, open-handedly, across the chops. She wailed and fled—to you, who have things of importance to deal with."

"She has often complained to me. You have been overbearing ever since she came into my house."

"I have demanded no more than the respect due your senior wife, my lord." I will *not* become a slave, a dog, a thing.

"What was this insult?" asked Zabdas.

"It was vile. Must I take it in my mouth?"

"Um-m . . . describe it."

"She shrieked that I keep my looks and strength by—means unspeakable in decent company."

"Um! Are you certain? Women have flighty memories."

"I suppose if you haled her in and put the question, she would deny it. Not her first lie."

"Word against word." Zabdas sighed loudly. "What is a man to believe? When shall he find peace to get on with his work? Women!"

"I think men, too, would grow jangle-witted, were they shut away forever with nothing to do that was worth the doing," said Aliyat, for she felt she had little to lose.

"If I have left you . . . undisturbed, it has been out of consideration for your age."

"And yours, my lord?" she dared purr.

He paled. The brown spots on his skin stood plain to see. "Furja does not find me wanting!"

Not quite every night of the month, Aliyat thought. And, in sudden, surprising pity: He fears that his uneasiness about me would unman him; and likely that very fear would.

But they were moving toward deadly ground. She drew back: "I pray my lord's pardon. No doubt some of the blame does fall on me, his servant. I simply hoped to explain to him why squabbles trouble his harem. If Furja will show me courtesy, I will do likewise."

Zabdas rubbed his chin and stared beyond her. She had a

brief, eerie feeling that somehow this was a chance for which he had waited. At length he regarded her and said, his tone strained, "Life was different for you in your young days. Old people find it hard to change. At the same time, this vigor you have kept makes it impossible for you to resign yourself. Am I right?"

She swallowed. "My lord speaks truth," she answered, amazed that he showed any insight.

"And I have heard that you were helpful to your first husband in his business," he went on.

She could only nod.

"Well, I have given you much thought, Aliyat," he said faster. "My duty under God is to provide for your welfare, which should include your spirit's. If time has become empty for you, if our daughter is not enough—well, perhaps we can find something more."

Her heart sprang. Blood thundered in her ears.

Again he looked past her. "What I have in mind is irregular," he said, cautiously now. "No violation of the Law, understand, but it could cause gossip. I am willing to hazard this for your sake, but you must do your part, you must exercise the utmost discretion."

"Wha-whatever my lord commands!"

"It will be a beginning, a trial. If you acquit yourself well, who knows what may follow? But hark." He wagged his forefinger. "In Emesa is a youth, a distant kinsman of mine, who is eager to go into the business. His father will be pleased if I invite him here and train him. I, though, I lack time to teach him the ins and outs, the rules and customs and traditions peculiar to Tadmor, as well as the basic practicalities—especially where it comes to making shipments, to dealing with caravaneers. I could assign a man of mine to his instruction, but I can ill spare anyone. You, however; I suppose you remember. Of course, the utmost discretion is essential."

Aliyat prostrated herself. "Trust me, my lord!" she sobbed.

10

BONNUR WAS tall, broad in the shoulders, slim in the waist. His beard was the merest overlay of silk across the smooth features, but a man's strength rested in the hands. His movements and his eyes were like a gazelle's. Though he

was Christian, Zabdas received him cordially before sending him to find a bed among the other young men who served and learned here.

A twelvemonth back, the merchant had bought a lesser building adjacent to his home. He set workers to erect walls and roof joining the pair together, then knock out what separated them and make them one. Thus he would gain added offices, storerooms, and quarters for an expanded staff; his trade was burgeoning. Lately he had ordered a halt to the construction. He declared it was better to wait and see what effect the ongoing conquest of Persia would have on the traffic with India. The addition therefore stood unfurnished, unoccupied, dusty, and silent.

When he led her into it, Aliyat was astonished to find a room at the far end had been swept and outfitted. A plain but thick wool carpet softened the floor. Hangings flanked the second-story window. A table held a water carafe, cups, papyrus, ink, pens. Two stools waited nearby. And Bonnur did. Though Aliyat had been introduced to him earlier, her pulse quickened.

He salaamed deeply. "Be at ease," said Zabdas with unaccustomed cordiality, "at ease, my dears. If we are to be a little irregular, we may as well enjoy it."

He took a turn around the room, talking: "For my wife to explain things to you, Bonnur, and for you to ask of her, you need freedom. I am not the dry stick people take me for. I know that the folkways, the subtleties of a city cannot be entered in a ledger or parsed like a sentence. Stares and sniggers and the constraint you would feel, did you sit conferring in plain sight of every fool, those would bind your tongues, your minds. The task would become difficult, prolonged, perhaps impossible. And, to be sure, I would be considered eccentric at best for setting you to it. Men might wonder if I was near my dotage. That would be bad for trade, oh, yes.

"Therefore this retreat. At such times as I deem right, when your services are not required elsewhere, Bonnur, I will send word. You will leave the house and enter this section by its back door, on the lane behind. And I will give you a signal, Aliyat. You will betake yourself directly here. In fact, sometimes you will come here to be alone. You have desired to help me; very well, you may look over such

reports and figures as I shall lend you, undisturbed, and offer me your opinions. This will be common knowledge. At other times, unbeknownst to anyone else, you will meet Bonnur."

"But sir!" Red and white went in waves over the boyish face. "The lady and I and nobody else? Surely a maidservant, a eunuch, or—or—"

Zabdas shook his head. "The protestation does you honor," he replied. "However, a watcher would defeat my whole purpose, which is to give you a true feel of conditions in Tadmor while avoiding derision and insinuations." He looked from one to the other of them. "I never doubt I can trust my kinsman and my first wife." With a flick of a smile: "She is, after all, aged beyond the usual span of life."

"What?" Bonnur exclaimed. "Master, you jest! The veil, the gown, they cannot hide—"

"It is true," said Zabdas, a low sibilation. "You shall hear of it from her, along with things less curious."

11

A DAY approached sunset. "Well," said Aliyat, "best we stop. I have duties still before me."

"And I. And I should think upon what you have revealed to me this time." Bonnur's voice dragged.

Neither of them rose from the stools on which they sat facing. Abruptly he colored, dropped his gaze, and blurted, "My lady has a wonderful intelligence."

It felt like a caress. "No, no," she protested. "In a long life, even a stupid person learns a few things."

She saw him break down a barrier so that he could meet her eyes. "Hard to believe you are, are old."

"I carry my years well." How often had she said it precisely thus? How mechanical it had become.

"All you have seen—" Reckless impulse: "The change of faith. That you were forced away from Christ!"

"I have no regrets."

"Do you not? If only for, for the freedom you have lost—the freedom your friends have lost, the simple freedom to look upon you—"

For an instant she was about to hush him. Nothing closed off the doorway but a bead curtain. However, such a thing

muffled sound somewhat, and deserted corridors and rooms stretched between it and the inhabited part, and he had spoken softly, deep in his throat, while tears glimmered on his lashes.

"Who cares to see a hag?" she fended, and knew she was teasing.

"You are not! You shouldn't have to cower behind that veil. I've noticed when you forgot to stoop and shamble."

"You have watched me closely, it seems." She fought a dizziness.

"I cannot help myself," he confessed miserably.

"You are too curious." As if a different creature used her tongue, her hands: "Best we quench that. Behold."

She drew the yashmak aside. He gasped.

She dropped it back and stood up. "Are you satisfied? Keep silence, or we shall have to end these meetings. My lord would mislike that." She left him.

Her daughter met her in the harem. "Mama, where have you been? Gutne won't let me play with the lion doll."

Aliyat groped after patience. She ought to love this child. But Thirya was whimpery, and sick half the time, and resembled her father.

12

SOMETIMES THE sameness of the days broke, when Zabdas gave Aliyat materials to study and report on. In the room that was apart, she tried to grasp what she read, but it slipped and wriggled about like a handful of worms. Twice she met there with Bonnur. The second time she took off her veil at the outset, and she had dressed in a gown of light material. "The weather is blazing hot," she told him, "and I am only an old granny, no, great-grandmother." They accomplished little. Silences kept falling between them.

More days flowed sluggishly together. She lost count of them. What difference did their number make? Each was just like the last, save for bickerings and nuisances and, at night, dreams. Did Satan brew certain of those for her? If so, she owed him thanks.

Then Zabdas summoned her to his office. "Your counsel has gone worthless," he said peevishly. "Does your dotage come upon you at last?"

She bit back rage. "I am sorry, my lord, if no thoughts have occurred to me of late. I will try to do better."

"What's the use? No use in you any more. Furja, now, Furja warms my bed, and surely soon she'll be fruitful." Zabdas waved a hand in dismissal. "Well, be off. Go wait for Bonnur. I'll send him. Perhaps at least you can persuade him to mend those woolgathering ways he's taken on. By all the saints—by the beard of the Prophet, I regret my promises to both of you!"

Aliyat stalked through the empty part of the house with fists clenched. In the room of meetings she prowled back and forth, back and forth. It was a cage. She halted at the window and stared out through the grille. From there she could look over the walls around the ancient temple of Bel. Its limestone seemed bleached under a furious sun. The bronze capitals of the portico columns blazed. Heat-shimmer made the reliefs on the cella waver. Long had it stood unused, empty, like herself. Now it was being refurbished. She had heard at fourth or fifth hand that the Arabs planned to make a fortress of it.

But were those Powers entirely dead? Bel of the storm, Jarhibol of the sun, Aglibol of the moon—Ashtoreth of begettings and births, terrible in beauty, she who descended into hell to win back her lover—unseen, they strode across the earth; unheard, they shouted throughout heaven; the sea that Aliyat had never known thundered behind her breasts.

A footstep, a click of beads, she whirled about. Bonnur halted. Sweat sheened on him. She caught the smell of it, filling the heat and silence, man-smell. She was wet with her own; the dress clung to her.

She unfastened her veil and cast it to the floor.

"My lady," he choked, "oh, my lady."

She advanced. Her hips swung as if of themselves. Breath loudened. "What would you with me, Bonnur?"

His gazelle eyes fled right and left, trapped. He backed off a step. He raised his hands against her. "No," he begged.

"No, what?" she laughed. She stopped before him and he must needs meet her look. "We've things to do, you and I."

If he is wise, he will agree. He will sit down and begin asking about the best way to bargain with a caravaneer.

I will not let him be wise.

13

"I HAVE business in Tripolis," Zabdas said. "It may keep me several weeks. I shall go with Nebozabad, who leaves a few days hence."

Aliyat was glad she had left her veil on after reaching his office. "Does my lord wish to say what business it is?"

"No sense in that. You've grown barren of advice, as of everything else. I am informing you privately so that I can state what should be obvious, that in my absence you are to abide in the harem and occupy yourself with a wife's ordinary duties."

"Of course, my lord."

She and Bonnur had thus far had two afternoons together.

14

THIRYA STIRRED. "Mama—"

Aliya pushed fury down. "Hush, darling," she breathed. "Go to sleep." And she must wait while the child tossed and whined, until finally the bed was quiet.

Finally!

Her feet remembered the way through the dark. She clutched her nightgown to her lest it brush against something. The thought flitted: Like this do the unrestful dead steal from their graves. But it was to life that she was going. Already the juices of it ran hot. Her nostrils drank the cedary odor of her desire.

Nobody else woke, and there was no guard on as small, as drab a harem as this. Her fingers touched walls, guiding her, until she reached the last dear corridor. No, do not run, make no needless sound. The beads in the doorway snaked around her. The window framed stars. A breeze from the cooling desert drifted through it. Her pulse racketed. She pulled off the gown and tossed it aside.

He came. Her toes gripped the carpet.

"Aliyat, Aliyat." The rough whisper echoed in her head. Bonnur stumbled, knocked a stool over, panted. She gurgled laughter and slipped to him.

"I knew you would come, beloved," she sang. His arms enclosed her. She clawed herself tight to him. Her tongue thrust between his lips.

He bore her down, they were on the carpet, the thought flashed that she must take care it show no stains, he groaned and she reached after him.

Lantern light glared. "Behold!" Zabdas cackled.

Bonnur rolled off Aliyat. Both sat up, crouched back, crawled to their feet. The lantern swung in Zabdas' hand. It sent huge misshapen shadows adance over the walls. She saw him in fragments, eyeballs, nose, wet snags of teeth, wrinkles, hatred. Right and left of him were his two sons. They bore swords. The steel gleamed.

"Boys, seize them!" Zabdas shouted.

Bonnur reeled. He lifted his hands like a beggar. "No, master, my lord, no."

It tumbled through Aliyat: Zabdas had planned this from the first. He had no passage arranged with the caravan. These three waited in another room, their light muffled, for that which he knew would happen. Now he would be rid of her, and keep her property, and believe that even an ifrit—or whatever inhuman thing she might be—would not return from the punishment for adultery.

Once she would have welcomed an ending. But the weariness of the years was burned out of her.

"Bonnur, fight!" she screamed. "They'll tie us in a sack and the people will stone us to death!" She laid her hands on his back and shoved him forward. "Are you a man? Save us!"

He howled and leaped. A man swung sword. Unpracticed, he missed. Bonnur caught that arm with one hand. His fist crunched into the nose behind. The second brother edged around, awkwardly, afraid of hitting the wrong body. The struggle lurched past Aliyat. It left a smear of blood on her. She bounced clear.

Zabdas blocked the doorway. She snatched the lantern from the old man's feeble grasp and dashed it to the floor. Oil flared in yellow flame. He staggered aside. She heard him shriek as the fire licked his ankle.

She fled past the beads, down hall and stairway, out the rear door, from the lane into ghost-gray streets between blank walls. The Philippian Gate stayed open after dark

when a caravan was making ready. If she took care, if she moved slowly and kept to the shadows, its sentries might not see her.

Oh, Bonnur! But she had no breath or tears to spare for him, not yet, not if she wanted to live.

15

THOSE IN the caravan who glanced behind them saw the towers of Tadmor catch the first sun-gleam. Then they were up the valley and out on the steppe. Ahead of them the sky also brightened until the last stars faded away.

Signs of man were sparse on that day's travel. After Nebozabad left the Roman road on a short cut across the desert, there was nothing but a trail worn by the generations before him who had fared likewise. He called halt for the night at a muddy pool where the horses could drink. Men contented themselves with what they carried along in skins, camels with what scrawny shrubs were to be found.

The master strode through the bustle and hubbub to a certain driver. "I will take that bale, now, Hatim," he said. The other grinned. Like most in this trade, he considered smuggling to be a part of it, and never asked unnecessary questions.

The bale was actually a long bundle tied together with rope, which had been nestled into the load on the camel. Nebozabad's slave carried it back, into the master's tent, laid it down, salaamed, and went to squat outside, forbidding intruders. Nebozabad knelt, undid the knots, unrolled the cloth.

Aliyat crept forth. Sweat plastered her hair and the djellabah he had lent to the curves of her. The countenance was hollow-eyed, the lips cracked. Yet once he had given her water and a bite of food, she recovered with eerie quickness, well-nigh minute by minute as he watched.

"Speak low," he warned. "How have you fared?"

"It was hot and dry and gut-wrenching bumpy," she answered in a voice husky more than hoarse, "but I shall forever thank you. Did a search party come?"

He nodded. "Soon after we left. A few Arabian soldiers, rousted out—after Zabdas gained himself ill will by waking

the qadi, I gather. They were sleepy and uninterested. We need not have hidden you so well."

She sighed where she sat, knees drawn up, ran fingers through her matted tresses, gave him a smile that shone and lingered in the lamplit dusk. "*You* cared, dear friend."

Cross-legged before her, he scowled. "Reckless was I. It might cost me my head, and I've my family to think of."

She reached to stroke fingers across his wrist. "Rather would I die than bring harm on you. Give me a waterskin and a little bread, and I will strike off across the desert."

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "That would be a slower death. Unless the nomads found you, which would be worse. No, I can take you along. We'll swaddle you well in garments too large, keep you offside and unspeaking. I'll say you're a boy, kin to me, who's requested a ride to Tripolis." He grinned sourly. "Those who doubt the 'kin' part of that will snicker behind my back. Well, let them. My tent is yours to share while the journey lasts."

"God will reward you, where I cannot. Barikai in Paradise will intercede for your soul."

Nebozabad shrugged. "I wonder how much good that will do, when it's the escape of a confessed adulteress I'm aiding."

Her mouth trembled. A tear ran down the sweat and grime dried on her cheeks. "It's right, though," he said in haste. "You told me what cruelties drove you from your wits."

She caught his nearer hand in both hers and clung.

He cleared his throat. "Yet you must understand, Aliyat, I can do no more than this. In Tripolis I must leave you, with what few coins I can spare, and thereafter you are alone. Should I be charged with having helped you, I will deny all."

"And I will deny I saw you. But fear not. I'll vanish from sight."

"Whither? How shall you live, forsaken?"

"I will. I have already seen ninety years. Look. Have they left any mark on me?"

He stared. "They have not," he mumbled. "You are strange, strange."

"Nonetheless—simply a woman. Nebozabad, I, I can do somewhat to repay a morsel of your kindness. The only

things I have to offer are memories, but those you can bring home with you."

He sat motionless.

She drew closer. "It is my wish," she whispered. "They will be my memories too."

16

AND GLADSOME they are, she thought when afterward he lay sleeping. I could almost envy his wife.

Until he grew old, and she did. Unless first a sickness took one or the other off. Aliyat had never in her life been ill. Her flesh had forgotten the abuse of the day and the night that were past. A pleasant languor pervaded it, but if perchance he should awaken, she would instantly arouse to eagerness.

She smiled in the dark. Allow the man his rest. She would like to go out and walk about a while, under the moon and the high desert stars. No, too risky. Wait. Wait. She had learned how.

Pain twinged. Poor Bonnur. Poor Thirya. But if ever she let herself weep for any of the short-lived, there would be no end of weeping. Poor Tadmor. But a new city lay ahead, and beyond it all the world and time.

A woman who was ageless had one way, if none else, to live onward in freedom.

V

No Man Shuns His Doom

It is told in the saga of Olaf Tryggvason how Nornagest came to him when he was at Nidharos and abode some while in the king's hall; for many and wonderful were the tales that Gest bore. Evening after lengthening evening as the year drew toward winter, men sat by the fires and hearkened. Tales they heard from lifetimes agone and the far ends of the world. Often he gave them staves as well, for he was a skald, and was apt to strum a harp underneath the words, in English wise. There were those who muttered he must be a liar, asking how any man could have fared so widely or been so old. But King Olaf bade these be still, and himself listened keenly.

"I was living on a farm in the Uplands," Gest had said to him. "Now my last child yonder has died, and again I am weary of my dwelling—wearier than ever, lord. Word of you reached me, and I have come to see whether it is true."

"What you have heard that is good, is true," answered the priest Conor. "By God's grace, he is bringing a new day to Norway."

"But your day first broke very long ago, Gest, did it not?" murmured Olaf. "We have heard of you again and again. Everyone has—though none but your neighbors in the mountains have seen you for many years, and I supposed you must be dead." When he looked at the newcomer he saw a man tall and lean, straight in the back, gray of hair and beard but with few lines across the strong bones of his face. "You are not really aged after all."

Gest sighed. "I am older than I seem, lord."

"Guest of the Norns. A strange and heathenish nick-

name, that," said the king slowly. "How did you come by it?"

"You may not want to hear." And Gest turned the talk elsewhere.

Right well did he understand the craft of doing so. Over and over, Olaf urged him to take baptism and be saved. Yet the king did not make threats or order death, as he did with most who were stubborn about this. Gest's tales were so gripping that he wanted to keep the wanderer here.

Conor pressed harder, seeking Gest out almost daily. The priest was eager in the holy work. He had come with Olaf when the latter sailed from Dublin to Norway, overthrew Hákon Jarl, and won the land for himself. Now the king was calling in missionaries from England and Germany as well as Ireland, and maybe Conor felt a bit left out.

Gest gave him grave heed and soft answers. "I am no stranger to your Christ," Gest said. "I have met him often, or at least his worshippers. Nor am I plighted to Odin and Thor." His smile was rueful. "I have known too many different gods."

"But this is the true and only God," Conor replied. "Hang not back, or you will be lost. In just a few years a full thousand will have passed since his birth among men. Belike he will come back then, end the world, and raise the dead for judgment."

Gest stared afar. "It would be good to believe I can meet my dead anew," he whispered; and he let Conor talk on.

At eventide, however, after meat, when the trestle tables had been taken from the hall and women carried the drinking horns forth, he had other things to talk about, yarns to spin, verses to chant, questions to meet. Once a couple of guardsmen happened to speak of the great battle at Bravellir. "My forebear Grani from Bryndal was among the Icelanders who fought for King Sigurdh Ring," one boasted. "He cut his way close enough to see King Harald Wartooth fall. Starkadh himself had not strength to save the Danes that day."

Gest stirred. "Forgive me," he said. "There were no Icelanders at Bravellir. Norsemen had not yet found that island."

The warrior bristled. "Have you never heard the lay that

Starkadh made?" he flung back. "It names all the worthies who came to the fray on either side."

Gest shook his head. "I have heard, and I do not call you a liar, Eyvind. You passed on what you were told. But Starkadh never made any such lay. Another skald did, lifetimes afterward, and put it in his mouth. Bravellir was bloodied—" He sat a few heartbeats thinking, while the fires in the trenches guttered and crackled. "Was it three hundred years ago? I have lost track."

"Do you mean Starkadh was not there, and you were?" gibed the guardsman.

"Oh, he was," said Gest, "though he was not much like the stories men tell of him now, nor lamed and half blind with age when at last he went to his death."

Stillness fell anew. King Olaf peered through shifting shadows at the speaker before he asked low, "Did you, then, know him?"

Gest nodded. "I did. Indeed, it was right after Bravellir that we met."

1

His staff was a spear, for no man traveled unarmed in the North; but over the small pack on his back hung a harp in its case, and he offered harm to none. When at nightfall he found a homestead, he slept there, repaying hospitality with songs and tales and news from outside. Otherwise he rolled up in his cloak, and by dawnlight drank from a spring or brook and ate of whatever bread and cheese his latest host had given him. Thus had he fared through most of his years, from end to end of the world.

This day was cool beneath a wan sky where clouds were scant and the sun swung southward. The woods that decked the hills of Gautland stood hazed and hushed. Birches had begun to turn yellow, and the green of oak and beech was less bright than erstwhile. Firs lifted darkling among them. Ripe currants glowed in the shade. Smells of earth and damp filled every breath.

Gest saw it all, widely, from a ridge he had climbed. Below him the land rolled off to an unclear edge of sight. Mostly it was tree-clad, but meadows and plowed fields

broke it here and there. He spied two houses and their outbuildings, distance-dwindled; smoke rose straight upward from the roofs. Close by, a stream glistened on its way to a lake that shone in the offing.

He had come far enough from the battlefield that the wreckage and the dead strewn across it were blurred together in his eyes. Carrion birds swarmed aloft and about and back down, a whirling blackness, but also gone tiny for him. He could barely hear their cries. Sometimes the howl of a wolf lifted, to hang above the hills for what seemed a long while before dying away in echoes.

Living men had withdrawn, bound home. They took wounded kindred and friends along, but could merely throw a little earth over such of the fallen as they knew. A band of them whom Gest had come upon this morning did tell him that King Sigurdh had borne off the body of his foe King Harald, to give it a barrow and grave goods at Uppsala for the sake of his own honor.

Gest leaned on his spear, shook his head, and smiled sadly. How often had he beheld the like of this, after young men stormed forth to cast their lives from them? He did not know. He had lost the number somewhere in the waste of the centuries. Or else he had never had the heart to try keeping count. He was not sure which, any more. Yet as always, he felt the need to say a farewell, the only thing he or anyone else could now give the young men.

It was no skaldic drapa that came to his lips. The words were Northern, so that the dead would understand if they could hear, but he lacked all wish to praise bravery and recall mighty deeds. The verse form that he chose was from a country thousands of miles toward the sunrise. There a short, slanty-eyed folk knew much and fashioned things of wondrous beauty, though there too the sword ranged free.

"The summer fading,
Chill shall slash the leaves bloody
And the geese trek—where?
Already this ground went red
While the wind called souls away."

A brief spell more Gest lingered, then turned and departed. Those Danes he met earlier had seen the one whom

he sought leave soon after half a dozen Swedes did and follow them eastward. Thereupon Gest had gone to Bravellir and cast about until his woodsman's eye lighted on what he thought must be the tracks. He had better hurry. Nonetheless he kept to his everyday stride. It looked lazy, but in the course of a day it left as much behind it as a horse might, or more; and it let him stay aware of everything around him.

He was on a game trail. The kings had set Bravellir as their meeting place because it was a broad meadow through which a road ran north and south, about halfway between Harald in Scania and Sigurdh in Sweden. However, the land round about was thinly settled. The six going this way must be headed for the Baltic shore, where lay the ship or ships that had brought them. That they were so few bespoke how terrible the battle had been. It would be remembered, sung about, made even larger in the minds of men, for hundreds of years to come. And those who plowed yonder fields would molder forgotten.

Gest's shoes scuffed softly on soil. Branches were a roof overhead, through which sunbeams fell to make spatters of light on the shadowy hallway before him. A squirrel ran like a flame up a tree. Somewhere a dove moaned. Brush rustled on the left, a great dim shape slipped off, an elk. Gest let his soul drift into the sweet-smelling reaches. Meanwhile, though, he kept reading the traces. That was easy, footprints, broken twigs, torn spiderwebs, marks on mossy logs where men had sat down to rest. They were no hunters by trade, as he had been through much of his life. Nor was the one who followed them, never stopping, closing the gap between. Those feet were huge.

Time passed. The sunbeams lowered, lengthened, took on a golden hue. A bit of cold crept into the air.

Suddenly Gest halted. He leaned forward, head cocked, listening. Faintly to him came a noise he thought he knew.

He quickened his pace to a lope. Muffled at first by leaves, the sound swelled fast, clang and clatter, shouts, soon crackling, snapping, and harsh breath. Gest brought his spear to the ready and glided on as quietly as might be.

A slain man sprawled across the trail. He had fallen into a bush that snagged the upper half of him. Blood dripped from its stems and pooled below, screamingly bright. A blow had cloven him from the left shoulder through the

breastbone. Pieces of rib and lung poked out of him. Fair hair clung sweat-matted to cheeks whereon no beard grew, just the down of a boy. He stared and gaped emptily.

Gest drew aside and found himself treading on another body. Close by, brush churned with combat. He glimpsed men, iron, blood and more blood. Weapon banged on weapon, scraped across helmets, thudded against wooden shields. Another fighter toppled. A thigh spouted red; he threshed about and shrieked. It was the kind of noise a human throat ought not to make. A fourth warrior dropped and lay sodden in a patch of nettles. The head was nearly off him.

Gest got behind a young fir. It screened him, and he could see between its limbs. Two were left of the band that the newcomer had overtaken and attacked. Like their mates, they wore only sarks, coats, breeks. If any owned mail, he had not thought to put it on until too late. Both these did have kettle hats. One carried sword and shield, one an ax.

Their lone foe was fully outfitted, in knee-length byrnie, conical helmet with noseguard, an iron-rimmed shield in his left grip and a sword of uncommon size in his right. He was more than big, overtopping Gest's goodly height by a head, shoulders as wide as a doorframe, arms and legs like oak boughs. An unkempt black beard reached to his chest.

The pair had recovered from the shock of his onslaught. They worked together, barking words to and fro. The swordsman went straight at the giant. Blades clashed, agleam when they rose into a sunbeam, a blur as they hissed downward or sideways. The Swede caught a blow on his shield that made him lurch, but stood fast and struck back. The axman circled behind their enemy.

The huge man must have known it. Blindingly fast, he spun on his heel and plunged at the axman, offside, so that the stroke missed him by inches. His blade whipped. The axman staggered, dropped his weapon, stared at a right forearm laid open and bone-shattered. The giant leaped on past him. There was a grassy patch between him and the other swordsman. At its end he turned and burst into a run at that fellow. Shields boomed together, with weight and speed behind his. Overborne, the Swede went on his back. Somehow he kept hold of his sword and got his shield up.

The giant sprang high and landed on him. Shield was driven against ribs. Gest thought he heard them crack. Breath whoofed out. The giant straddled the writhing body and made his kill in two strokes.

He glared around. The wounded axman was in flight, blundering off among the boles. The winner dashed after and cut him down.

The shrieks of the thigh-slashed man ebbed off to cawing, to rattling, to silence.

Laughter boomed from a cavern of a breast. The huge man rammed his blade thrice into the earth, wiped it clean on the shirt of a fallen, and sheathed it. His breathing eased. He doffed helmet and coif, dropped them, swept a hairy hand over the sweat that runneled off his brow.

Gest came out from behind the fir. The giant snatched at his hilt. Gest leaned spear in the crotch of a tree and spread his palms. "I am peaceful," he said.

The warrior stayed taut. "But are you alone?" he asked. His voice was like heavy surf on a strand of stones.

Gest looked into the rugged face, the small ice-blue eyes, and nodded. "I am. Besides, after what I have just seen, I would not think Starkadh need be wary of anyone or anything."

The warrior grinned. "Ah, you know me. But we have not met erenow."

"Everybody in the North has heard of Starkadh the Strong. And . . . I have been in search of you."

"You have?" Surprise turned into a glower. "Then it was a nithing's trick to stand aside and give me no help."

"You had no need," said Gest in his mildest tone. "Also, the battle went so fast. Never have I seen such weapon-wielding."

Pleased, Starkadh spoke friendlier. "Who are you that seek me?"

"I have borne many names. In the North it has oftenest been Gest."

"What would you of me?"

"That is a long tale. May I first ask why you hounded these men down and slew them?"

Starkadh's gaze went elsewhere, toward the sun whose light shot in yellow beams between trees turning dark

against heaven. His lips moved. After a bit he nodded, met Gest's look again, and said:

"Here shall wolves not hunger.
Harald fed the ravens.
Honor won we. Only
Odin overcame us.
Ale I lack, but offer
All these foes to Harald.
Never was he niggard.
Now I've shown I'm thankful."

So it was true what they said, Gest thought. As well as being the foremost of warriors, Starkadh had some gift as a skald. What else might he be?

"I see," Gest acknowledged slowly. "You fought for Harald, and wished to avenge your lord after he fell, though the war be done with."

Starkadh nodded. "I hope I have gladdened his ghost. Still more do I hope I have gladdened his forebear King Frodhi, who was the best of lords and never stinted me of gold or weapons or other fine things."

A tingle went through Gest, a chill along his backbone. "Was that Frodhi Fridhleifsson in Denmark? They say Starkadh was of his household. But he died lifetimes ago."

"I am older than I seem," answered Starkadh with renewed roughness. He shook himself. "After this day's work, thirst is afire in me. Would you know where there is water?"

"I know how to find water, if you will come with me," Gest told him. "But what of these dead men?"

Starkadh shrugged. "I'm no scaldcrow to pick them clean. Leave them for the ants." Flies buzzed around blind eyes, parched tongues, clotting blood. Stenches hung heavy.

Gest had grown used to such sights, but he was ever happy to lay them behind him, and tried not dwell on thoughts of widows, children, mothers. The lives he had shared were short at best, the merest blink of years, and afterward, for most, a span hardly longer before they were wholly forgotten by all but him. He took his spear and led the way down the trail.

"Will you be returning to Denmark?" he asked.

"I think not," rumbled Starkadh at his back. "Sigurdh

will make sure the next king in Hleidhra is beholden to him, and that the under-kings are at odds with each other."

"Chances for a fighting man."

"But I'd mislike watching the realm fall asunder that Frodhi built and Harald War-Tooth rebuilt."

Gest sighed. "From what I have heard, the seed of something great died at Bravellir. What will you do?"

"Take ships that I own, gather crews for them, and go in viking—eastward to Wendland and Gardhariki, I think. Is that a harp you bear above your pack?"

Gest nodded. "I've put my hand to sundry kinds of work, but mainly I am a skald."

"Then come with me. When we reach a lord's hall, make a drapa about what I wrought this day. I'll reward you well."

"We must talk about that."

Silence fell between them. After a while Gest saw the signs he had been awaiting and took a side trail. It opened on a glade starred with clover. A spring bubbled up at the middle; water trickled off through the grass, to lose itself under the trees. They made a wall around, dark beneath, still golden-green on top where the last sunbeams touched them. The eastern sky was violet-blue. A flight of rooks winged homeward.

Starkadh cast himself belly down and drank with mighty slurps. When at length he raised his dripping beard, he saw Gest busy. The wanderer had lain down his cloak, opened his pack, spread things out. Now he gathered deadwood below the trees and bushes that surrounded the glade. "What are you doing?" Starkadh asked.

"Making ready for night," Gest told him.

"Does nobody dwell nearby? A swineherd's hut would do."

"I know not, and belike darkness would overrun us while we searched. Besides, here is better rest than on a dirt floor breathing smoke and farts."

"Oh, I've slept under the stars often enough, and gone hungry too. I see you've a little food with you. Will you share?"

Gest gave the warrior a close look. "You'd not simply take it from me?"

"No, no, you are neither foeman nor quite a stranger." Starkadh laughed. "Nor a woman. Too bad."

Gest smiled. "We'll halve what there is, though it's not much for a man your size. I'll set snares. By morning, with luck, we'll have voles to cook, or even a squirrel or hedgehog." He paused. "Would you like to help me? If you'll work as I show you, we can make ourselves snug before nightfall."

Starkadh rose. "Do you think me a coalbiter? Of course I'll take a hand. Are you a Finn, or have you dwelt among Finns, to know these woodsrunner's tricks?"

"No, I was born in Denmark like you—a long time ago. But I learned the hunter's craft in my boyhood."

Gest found, unsurprised, that he must pick his words with care when giving orders. Starkadh's haughtiness was likely to flare. Once he roared, "Am I a thrall?" and half drew blade. He resheathed it, smacked fist into palm, and did as he was bidden. For that moment, pain had twisted his face.

Daylight drained from the west. More and more stars glittered forth. When dusk had seeped upward to fill the glade, the men had their camp ready. A brushwood shelter, bracken and boughs heaped within, would allow rest free of dew, night mists, and rain if any fell. Turfs piled outside its mouth cast back into it the warmth of a fire that Gest had kindled with a drill. Besides nuts and berries, he had found pine cones, sedges, and roots to eke out the bread and cheese. After he had roasted them in the ways that were needful, he and Starkadh would bed down fairly full.

He hunkered at the fire, with his knife whittling a green stick into part of a cooking tool. It was a fire more low than the warrior would have built, softly sputtering, its slight smoke savory of resin. Though air cooled fast at this season, Starkadh learned he could stay comfortable by sitting close. The red and yellow flames cast wavery light over Gest's cheekbones and nose; it glinted from his eyes and made shadows in the gray beard. "These are good skills you own," Starkadh said. "Indeed you shall fare with me."

"We will talk of that," Gest answered, watching his work.

"Why? You told me you were in search of me."

"Yes, I was." Gest drew breath. "Long and long had I been away, until at last memories of the North overwhelmed me and I must come back to see if the aspens still

quivered in the light nights of midsummer." He did not speak of a woman who died after he and she fared thirty years together over the vast plains of the East with her herder tribesfolk. "I had lost hope in my quest, I had stopped seeking—until as I walked through the woods and over the heaths of Jutland and the old tongue reawakened in me, not too much changed since I left, I began to hear about Starkadh. Him I must meet! I followed word of him to Hleidhra, where they said he had gone across the Sound to join King Harald and thence onward to war. I followed that trail to Bravellir, and reached it at sunset when the day's slaughter had ended. In the morning I found men who had seen him go from it, and I took the way they pointed, and here we are, Starkadh."

The huge man shifted about. "What would you of me?" he growled uneasily.

"First I would ask for the tale of your life. Some of the stories I heard were wild."

"You're a news-greedy one."

"I have sought knowledge throughout the world. M-m-m . . . how shall a storyteller repay a night's lodging or a skald make staves for chieftains, unless he have something word-worthy behind his teeth?"

Starkadh had unbuckled his sword, but dropped hand to knife. "Is this the beginning of witchcraft? Uncanny are you, Gest."

The wanderer locked gaze with the warrior and answered, "I swear to cast no spell. What I am after is more strange than that."

Starkadh quelled a shiver. As if charging at fear to trample it underfoot, he said in a rush: "What I have done is well known, though belike no man save me knows all of it. But sooth it is, wild and sometimes ugly tales have mushroomed over the years. I am *not* of Jotun birth. That's old wives' chatter. My father was a yeoman in the north of Zealand, my mother came of honest fisher folk, and they had other children who—grew up, lived like anybody else, grew old, and were laid in howe, those that battle or sickness or the sea had spared—also like anybody else."

"How long have they lain in the earth?" Gest asked softly.

Starkadh ignored the question. "I was big and strong, as

you see. From childhood I lacked wish to muck and plow the fields or haul nets full of stinking fish. Twelve years old, I went off in viking. Some neighborhood men had a ship in common. They met with other ships and harried a while along the Norse shores. When they went back for hay harvest, I stayed behind. I sought out a skipper who was going to stay the winter; and thereafter my fame waxed fast.

"Shall I tell you of battles, reavings, burnings, feasts, hunger, cold, shipmates, women, offerings to the gods, strife against storm and bad luck when the gods grew angry with us, kings we served and kings we overthrew? The years lie jumbled and awash in me like flotsam on a skerry.

"Frodhi, king at Hleidhra, took me in after I suffered shipwreck. He made me the head of his household troops, and I made him the greatest of lords in his day. But his son Ingjald proved a weakling, sluggard, glutton. I upbraided him and quit the land in disgust. Yet from time to time I have been back and wielded blade for worthier men of the Skjoldung house. Harald was the best of them, he became first among kings through all of Denmark and Gautland and well into Sweden; but now Harald is fallen, and his work broken, and I am alone again."

He cleared his throat and spat. That may have been his way of not weeping.

"They told me Harald was aged," Gest said. "He must ride to Bravellir in a wagon, and was well-nigh blind."

"He died like a man!"

Gest nodded and spoke no further, but busied himself with the food. They ate wordlessly. Afterward they slaked their thirst anew at the spring and went aside, left and right, to piss. When Starkadh came back to the fire he found Gest already there, squatting on his haunches. The night was wholly upon them. Thor's Wain gleamed enormous, barely over treetops, the North Star higher like a spearpoint.

Starkadh loomed above the fire, legs astraddle, fists on hips, and nearly snarled, "Too long have you slyly fended me off, you. What do you want? Out with it, or I'll hew you down."

Gest looked up. The light slipped to and fro along the shadows in his face. "A last question," he said. "Then you shall know. When were you born, Starkadh?"

The giant coughed forth a curse. "You ask and ask and

ask, and naught do you give! What kind of being are you? You sit on your hams like a Finnish warlock."

Gest shook his head. "I learned this much farther east," he replied mildly, "and many things else, but none of them are wizardry."

"You learned womanishness, you who took care to arrive late at the battlefield and stood by while I fought six men!"

Gest rose, straightened his back, stared across the flames, and said in a voice like steel sliding from sheath: "That was no war of mine, nor would I have hunted men who boded me no further harm." In the dim and restless light, under the stars and Winter Road, suddenly he seemed of a tallness with the warrior, or in some way taller still. "A thing I heard said about you is that though you be foremost in battle, you are doomed to do ill deeds, nithing's work, over and over and over. They say Thor laid this on you because he hates you. They say the god who bears you good will is Odin, father of witchcraft. Could this be true?"

The giant gasped. It was as if he shrank back. He raised hands and thrust at air. "Empty talk," he groaned. "Naught more."

Gest's words tramped against him. "But you have done treacheries. How many, in those lifetimes that have been yours?"

"Hold your jaw!" Starkadh bellowed. "What know you of being ageless? Be still, ere I smite you like the dayfly you are!"

"That might not be so easy," Gest purred. "I too have lived a long time. Far longer than you, my friend."

The breath rattled in Starkadh's throat. He could merely gape.

Gest's tone went dry. "Well, nobody in these parts would keep count of years, as they do in the South or the East. What I heard was that you have lived three men's lifetimes. That must mean simply that folk remember their grandfathers telling of you. A hundred years is a good enough guess."

"I—have thought—it was more."

Again Gest's eyes caught Starkadh's and held them. His voice softened but bleakened, trembled the least bit, like a night breeze. "I know not myself how old I am. But when I was a boy, they did not yet ken metal in these lands. Of

stone did we make our knives, our axheads and spearheads and arrowheads, our burial chambers. It was not Jotuns who raised those dolmens that brood over the land. It was us, your own forebears, laying our dead to rest and offering to our gods. Though 'we' are no more. I have outlived them, I alone, as I have outlived all the generations of men after—until today, Starkadh."

"You have grayed," said the warrior in a kind of sob, as if that could be a denial.

"I went gray in my young manhood. Some do, you know. Otherwise I have not changed. I have never been sick, and wounds heal swiftly, without scars. When my teeth wear out, new ones grow. Is it the same for you?"

Starkadh gulped and nodded.

"Belike you've taken more hurts than me, such a life as you've led," said Gest thoughtfully. "Myself, I've been as peaceful as men let me be, and as careful as a roamer may. When the charioteers rolled into what these days we call Denmark—" He scowled. "That is forgotten, their wars and their deeds and their very speech. Wisdom lasts. It is what I have sought across the world."

Starkadh shuddered. "Gest," he mumbled. "I remember now, in my own youth there went tales of a wayfarer who—*Nornagest.* Are you he? I thought he was but a story."

"Often have I left the North for hundreds of years. Always it called me home again. My last stay here ended maybe fourscore years ago. Less of an absence than formerly, but—" Once more Gest sighed. "I feel myself grow ever wearier of roving the earth among the winds. So folk remembered me for a while, did they?"

Starkadh shook his head dazedly. "And to think that I, I was alive then. But I must have been faring about. . . . Is it true that the Norns told your mother you would die when a candle burned down, and she snuffed it out and you carry it still?"

Gest grinned. "Do you yourself believe you have your lifespan from Odin?"

He turned grave: "I know not what has made us twain what we are. That is a riddle as dark as the death of all other mankind. Norns or gods in truth? The hunger to know drove me to the far ends of the world, that and the hope of finding more like myself. Oh, seeing a beloved wife wither

into the grave, and seeing our children follow her— But nowhere did I come on any else whom time spares, nor did I come on any answer. Rather, I heard too many answers, I met too many gods. Abroad they call on Christ, but if you fare southward long enough it is Muhammad; and eastward it is Gautama Buddha, save where they say the world is a dream of Brahm, or offer to a host of gods and ghosts and elves like ours in these Northlands. And almost every man I asked told me that *his* folk know the truth while the rest are benighted. Could I but hear a word I felt even half sure of—"

"Fret not yourself about that," said Starkadh, boldness rising anew in him. "Things are whatever they are, and no man shuns his doom. His freedom is to leave a high name behind him."

"I wondered if I was altogether alone, and my deathlessness a curse laid on me for some horrible guilt I have forgotten," Gest went on. "That seemed wrong, though. Strange births do happen. Oftenest they are weak or crippled, but now and then something springs up that can flourish, like a clover with four leaves. Could we ageless be such? We would be very few. Most could well die of war or mischance before discovering they are different. Others could well be slain by neighbors who come to fear they are witches. Or they may flee, take new names, learn how to hide what they are. I have mostly done this, seldom abiding at length in any single place. Once in a while I have met folk who were willing to take me for what I am—wise men in the East, or raw backwoods dwellers like my Northerners—but in the end there was always too much sorrow, too heavy a freight of memories, and I must leave them also.

"Never did I find my own sort. Many and many a trail did I follow, sometimes for years, but each led to naught. At last hope faded out of me, and I turned my footsteps homeward. At least the Northern springtime is forever young.

"And then I heard about you."

Gest came around the fire. He reached to lay hands on Starkadh's shoulders. "Here my quest ends, where it began," he said. Tears trembled on his lashes. "Now we are two, no more alone. And by this we *know* there must be more, women among them. Together, helping and hearten-

ing each other, we can search till we begin to find. Starkadh, my brother!"

The warrior stood unmoving before he said, "This . . . comes . . . suddenly."

Gest let go. "It does that. I've had the whole while to think since the first word I got about you. Well, take your time. We have more time than most men, you and I."

Starkadh stared off into the dark. "I thought someday I must grow old and strengthless like Harald," he breathed. "Unless first I fell in battle, and I thought I would see to it that I did . . . But you tell me I shall always be young. Always."

"A load that on me has often felt well-nigh unbearable," Gest told him. "Shared, though, it will be light."

Starkadh clenched oak-burl fists. "What shall we do with it?"

"Ward the gift well. It may, after all, be from Beyond, and those who bear it singled out for deeds that will change the world."

"Yes." Glee began to throb in Starkadh's voice. "Fame undying, and I alive to enjoy it. War-hosts to rally round me, kingdoms to take, royal houses to found."

"Hold, hold," said Gest. "We're not gods, you know. We can be slain, drowned, burned, starved like any other men. I've stayed on earth these uncounted years by ganging warily."

Starkadh gave him a cold look. Scorn snorted: "I understand that. Do you understand honor?"

"I don't mean we should skulk. Let us make sure of our safety, both in strength and in boltholes, lest luck go awry. After that we can make known what we are, piece by piece, to such folk as we can trust. Their awe of us will help, but that is not enough; to lead, we must serve, we must give."

"How can we give unless we have gold, treasures, a hoard such as deathless vikings can heap up?"

Gest frowned. "We draw near to quarreling. Best we speak no further tonight, but sleep on it. Tomorrow, refreshed, we'll think more clearly."

"You can sleep—after this?"

"What, are you not worn out?"

Starkadh laughed. "After reaping a goodly harvest." He failed to see how Gest winced. "As you wish. To bed."

However, in the shelter he thrashed and muttered and flung his arms around. Finally Gest slipped back outside.

He found a dry spot close to the spring, but decided he would take his rest in meditation rather than sleep. Having assumed the lotus position, he raised calm within himself. That came easily. He had far surpassed his gurus in lands east of the sunrises over Denmark: for he had had centuries to practice the disciplines of mind and body that they taught. Yet without those teachings, he doubted he could have endured his lot. How fared those masters, those fellow chelas? Had Nadha or Lobsang at last won free of the Wheel?

Would he ever? Hope bound him. He could never quite bring himself to loosen it. Did that mean he spurned the faith? "Om mani padme hum." No such words had seized him by the soul; but was that because he would not let them? Could he only find a God to Whom he could yield—

At least he had become like the sages in control of the body and its passions. Rather, in this he had won to the power for which they had striven. Breath and heartbeat dwindled at his command until he was unaware of them. Chill ceased to be a thing invading his skin; he was of it, he was the night world, he became the stave that unfolded.

"Slowly the moon
Slides aloft.
Keen is its edge,
Cutting the dark.
Stars and frost,
As still as the dead,
Warn of another
Waning year."

A noise recalled him. Hours had passed. The east stood gray above the trees. Dew spread the only brightness in a hueless half-light. Mists smoked above it and along men's breath. The clear gurgle of the spring sounded much louder than it was.

Starkadh hunched at the shelter. He had knocked it apart, blundering out. He carried the sheathed sword that had lain across his doffed mail. A bloodshot and dark-

rimmed gaze jumped about until it landed on Gest. He grunted and stalked that way.

Gest rose. "Good morning," he greeted.

"Did you spend the night sitting?" Starkadh wondered. His voice grated. "Sleep fled me too."

"I hope you got some rest anyway. I'll go see what's in the snares."

"Wait. Ere I take more at your hands—"

Cold pierced Gest from within. "What's wrong?"

"You. Your slippery tongue. I tossed as in a nightmare, fighting to grasp what you meant yesterday. Now you'll make it plain to me."

"Why, I thought I did. We are two ageless men. Our loneliness is at an end. But there must be others, women among them, for us to find and . . . and hold dear. For this, we'll swear oaths, become brothers—"

"Of what kind?" rasped Starkadh. "I the chieftain, later the king; you my skald and redesman— But that's not what you said!" He swallowed. "Or do you also want to be a king?" Brightening: "Surely! We can divide the world between us."

"We would die trying."

"Our fame will never die."

"Or worse, we would fall out with each other. How shall two stay together when always they deal in death and betrayal?"

At once Gest saw his mistake. He had intended to say that such was the nature of power. Seizing it and holding it were alike filthy. But before he could go on, Starkadh clapped hand to hilt. The rocky face went dawn-pale. "So you besmirch my honor," he said from the bottom of his gullet.

Gest lifted a hand, palm outward. "No. Let me explain."

Starkadh leaned close. His nostrils flared. "What have you heard about me? Spew it out!"

Gest knew starkly that he must. "They tell how you took one small king captive and hanged him for an offering to Odin, after you had promised him his life. They tell how you murdered another in his bath house, for pay. But—"

"I had to!" Starkadh yelled. "Ever was I an outsider. The rest were, were too young, and—" He uttered a bawl like an aurochs bull's.

"And your loneliness lashed you till you struck back, blindly," Gest said. "I understand. I did when first I heard about you. How often have I felt thus? I remember deeds of mine that hurt me worse than fire. It's merely that I am not a killer."

Starkadh spat on the ground. "Right. You've hugged your years to you like a crone wrapping herself in her blanket."

"But don't you see," Gest cried, "things have changed for us both? Now we've better work to do than attack folk who never harmed us. It was the lust for fame, wealth, power that brought you to dishonor."

Starkadh screamed. His sword flew free. He hewed.

Gest shifted like a shadow. Nonetheless the edge ripped down his left arm. Blood poured forth, drenched the cloth, dripped into the streamlet that ran from the spring.

He drifted back, drew his knife, halted in half a crouch. Starkadh stood fast. "I should . . . chop you in twain . . . for what you said," he panted. Gulping air: "But I think you will die soon enough of that stroke." Laughter clanked. "A shame. I did hope you'd be a friend. The first real friend of my life. Well, the Norns will it otherwise."

Our natures do, Gest thought. And: How easily I could kill you. How open you stand to a hundred martial tricks I know.

"Instead, I shall have to go on as erstwhile," said Starkadh, "alone."

Let it be so, thought Gest.

With the fingers of his right hand he searched below his torn shirt and pushed together the lips of his wound. Pain he made into something apart from himself, like the mists that broke under the strengthening light. He gave his mind to the blood flow.

Starkadh kicked the shelter aside, fetched his mail, drew it over the underpadding in which he had spent the night. He donned coif and helmet, belted on sword, picked up shield. When he was ready to leave, he stared in astonishment at the other man. "What, are you still on your feet?" he said. "Shall I make an end of you?"

Had he tried that, it would have been the end of him. But he stopped, shivered, turned away. "No," he mumbled. "This is all too spooky. I'm off to my own doom, Nornagest."

He lumbered up the trail, into the woods and beyond sight.

Then Gest could sit down and bring a whole heed to the steering of his body. He had stopped the bleeding before he suffered overmuch loss, though he would be weak for a few days. No matter. He could stay here until he was fit to travel; the earth would provide for him. He began to hasten the knitting of the flesh.

He dared not wish he were able to heal the wound inside.

2

"HOWEVER, WE only met fleetingly, Starkadh and I," Gest went on. "Afterward hearsay about him reached me now and then, until I went abroad again; and when I came back he was long dead, slain as he had wanted."

"Why have you fared so widely?" asked King Olaf. "What have you sought?"

"What I never found," Gest answered. "Peace."

No, that was not wholly right, he thought. Over and over had he been at peace, in the nearness of beauty or wisdom, the arms of a woman, the laughter of children. But how short the whiles! His latest time as a husbandman, in the Uplands of Norway, seemed already the dream of a single night: Ingridh's youthful gladness, its rebirths in the cradle he had carved, her heart that stayed high while she grew more gray than he, but then the shriveling years, and afterward the burials, the burials. Where now wandered Ingridh? He could not follow, not her nor any of those who glimmered on the rim of memory, not that first and sweetest of all, garlanded with ivy and in her hand a blade of flint. . . .

"In God is peace," said the priest.

It could be, it could be. Today church bells rang in Norway, as they had done for a lifetime or more in Denmark, yes, above that halidom of the Mother where he and the garland girl had offered flowers . . . He had seen the charioteers and their storm gods come into the land, he had seen bronze and iron, the wagon trains bound south for Rome and the viking ships bound west for England, sickness and famine, drought and war, and life patiently beginning anew; each year went down into death and awaited the homecoming of the sun that would bring it to rebirth; he too

could let go if he would, and drift away on the wind with the leaves.

King Olaf's priest thought that soon every quest would end and the dead arise. How good if that was true. Ever more folk believed so. Why should not he?

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Days later, Gest said, "Yes, I will take your baptism." The priest wept for joy. Olaf whooped.

But when it was done, that evening in the hall Gest took forth a candle and lighted it at a torch. He lay down on a bench where he could see it. "Now I may die," he told them.

Now I have yielded.

He let the candleflame fill his vision, his being. He made himself one with it. The light waxed for him until he almost thought it shone on those lost faces, brought them back out of the dark, nearer and nearer. His heartbeat heeded him, slowing toward quietness.

Olaf and the young warriors stood dumb with awe. The priest knelt in shadow and prayed without uttering the words aloud.

The candleflame flickered to naught. Nornagest lay still. Through the hall sounded a wind of the oncoming winter.

VI

Encounter

FROM AFAR the gold shone like a daylight evenstar. Sometimes trees hid it, a woodlot or a remnant of forest, but always as the travelers moved west they saw it again, brilliant in a vastness of sky where a few clouds wandered, above a plain where villages and freshly greening croplands lay tiny beneath the wind.

Hours wore on, sunbeams now tangled themselves in Svoboda Volodarovna's brows, and the hills ahead loomed clear, the city upon the highest of them. Behind its walls and watchtowers lifted domes, spires, the smoke from a thousand hearths; and over all soared the brightness. Presently she heard chimes, not the single voice of a countryside chapel but several, which must be great ones to sound across this distance, ringing together in music such as surely sang among the angels or in the abode of Yarilo.

Gleb Ilyev pointed. "The bell tower, the gilt cupola, belongs to the cathedral of Sviataya Sophia," he said. "That's not any saint's name but means 'Holy Wisdom.' It comes from the Greeks, who brought the word of Christ to the Rusi." A short, somewhat tubby man with a pug nose and a scraggly beard turning gray, he was given to self-importance. Yet leathery skin bespoke many years of faring, often through danger, and goodly garb told of success won by it.

"Then all this is new?" asked Svoboda in amazement.

"Well, that church and certain other things," Gleb replied. "Grand Prince Yaroslav Vladimirovitch has built them since these lands fell to him and he moved his seat here from Novgorod. But of course Kiyiv was already great. It was founded in Rurik's time—two centuries ago, I believe."

And to me this was only a dream, Svoboda thought. It would have been less real than the old gods that we suppose still haunt the wilderness, did not merchants like Gleb pass through our little settlement once in a while, bringing their goods that few of us can afford but also their tales that everyone is eager to hear.

She clucked to her horse and nudged it with her heels. These lowlands near the river were still wet after the spring floods, and the mire of the road had wearied the horse. Behind her and her guide trailed his company, half a dozen hirelings and two apprentices leading the pack animals or driving a pair of laden wagons. Here, safe from bandits or Pecheneg raiders, they had laid weapons aside and wore merely tunics, trousers, tall hats. Gleb had put on good clothes this morning, to make a proper show when he arrived; a fur-trimmed cloak was draped over a brocaded coat.

Svoboda was well-clad too, in a gown of gray wool bordered with embroideries. Hiked up across the saddle, her skirts revealed finely stitched boots. A headcloth covered flaxen braids. Weather had only tinged her with bronze, work had built strength without stooping the back or coarsening the hands. Well-figured enough that the big bones did not stand forth, she looked at the world out of blue eyes set widely in a face of blunt nose, full mouth, square chin. Lineage and fortune showed; her father had been headman of the village in his day, and each of her husbands had been better off than most men—blacksmith, hunter-trapper, horse breeder and dealer. Nonetheless she must keep herself reined in if she would appear calm, and the heart in her breast kept breaking free of that grip.

When she came in clear sight of the Dniepr, she could not help catching her breath. Brown and mighty rolled the river: easily five hundred paces across, she guessed. To her right a low, grassy island divided it. Lesser streams flowed in from either side. The far shore was surprisingly much forested, though houses and other buildings led up from the water to the city and clustered around its ramparts, while orchards or small farmsteads and pastures nestled elsewhere in the hills.

On this bank was just a muddy huddle of dwellings. Its laborers and peasants gave the travelers scant heed; they were used to such. What did draw some stares and mutters

was her. Few women accompanied any traders, and those who did were seldom of an honorable kind.

A ferry waited. Its owner hastened to meet Gleb and chaffer with him, then went about calling for crew to man the sweeps. Three trips would be necessary. The gangway was steeply pitched, for the wharf was built high against the yearly rise. Gleb and Svoboda were among the first to cross. They took stance near the bows, the better to watch. Voices barked, wood creaked, water lapped and splashed, the vessel started off. The breeze was cool, wet, full of silty smells. Fowl winged about, ducks, geese, lesser birds, once a flight of swans overhead, but not so many as at home; here they were hunted more.

"We come at a busy time," Gleb warned. "The city is crammed with strangers. Brawls are common, and worse than that can befall, despite everything the Grand Prince does to keep order. I shall have to leave you alone while I attend to my work. Be very careful, Svoboda Volodarovna."

She nodded impatiently, barely hearing words he had spoken over and over, her gaze and her heed aimed forward. As they approached the west bank, the ships gathered there seemed to breed until they were past counting. She caught hold of her senses and told herself that now the outer hulls, riding at anchor, did not hide those at the docks from her, and the number must be scores rather than hundreds. It took away none of the wonder. Here were no barges such as she was on, nor rowboats and dugout punts such as her own folk used. These were long and lean, clinker-built, gaudily painted, many with stemposts carved into fantastic figureheads. Oars, yards, and unstepped masts lay on trestles above the benches. How their sails must spread like wings when they came to the sea!

"Yes, the famous merchant fleet," said Gleb. "Most likely all are now gathered. Tomorrow, perhaps, they leave for Constantinople, New Rome."

Again Svoboda scarcely listened. She was trying to imagine that sea the ships would find at the river's end. It reached farther than a man could look; it was rough and dark and salt of taste; huge snakes and people who were half fish beset its waves. So the tales went. She strove to form the vision, but failed. As for the city of the Basileus,

how could the claim be true that it made Kiyiv, *Kiyiv,* look small and poor?

To go and find out, to be there!

She sighed once, then shoved longing aside. Quite enough newness lay straight ahead. What she might gain and what she might suffer were alike unforeseeable. Even in fireside stories, no woman had ever ventured this that she was venturing. But none had ever been driven by a need like hers.

Memories flitted through her, secret thoughts that had come when she was alone, working in house or garden, gathering berries or firewood in the outskirts of the forest, lying wakeful in the night. Could she also be special, a princess stolen from the crib, a girl chosen for destiny by the old gods or the Christian saints? No doubt every child nursed daydreams of that sort. They faded away as one grew up. But in her they had slowly rekindled—

No prince came riding, no fox or firebird uttered human words, life simply went on year by year by year until at last she broke free; and that was her own, altogether ordinary doing. And here she was.

Her heart quickened afresh. It hammered fear out of her. Wonders in truth!

The ferry knocked against bollards. Its crew made fast. The passengers debarked into racket and bustle. Gleb pushed through the crowd of workers, hawkers, sailors, soldiers, idlers. Svoboda stayed close at his side. She had always taken care to uphold self-command in his presence, bargain rather than appeal, be friendly rather than forlorn; but today he knew what he did while she was bewildered. This was nothing like a fair at the town she knew, which was little more than a fort for villagers to take refuge in.

She could watch, though, hearken, learn. He talked to a man of the harbormaster's and a man of the Prince's, he left orders with a man of his about where to bring the rest of his band, and finally he led her up the hill into the city.

Its walls were massive, earthen, whitewashed. An arched gateway, flanked by turrets and crowned with a tower, stood open. Guards in helmet and chain mail leaned on their pikes, no hindrance to the traffic that thrust to and fro, on foot, on horseback, donkey cart, ox-drawn wagon, sometimes sheep or cattle herded toward slaughter, once a monstrous beast, like a thing out of nightmare, that Gleb called

a camel. Beyond, streets twisted steep. Most of the vividly painted buildings that lined them were timber, below roofs of mossy shingle or blossoming turf. Often they stood two, even three stories high. In the windows of those that were brick, there gleamed glass. Above them she glimpsed the golden cupola where the bells dwelt, surmounted by a cross.

Noise, smells, surge and push of bodies overwhelmed Svoboda. Gleb must raise his voice when he pointed out some new kind of person. The priests she knew at once, black-gowned and long-bearded, but a man more coarsely clad was a monk, sent into town from his nearby cave on an errand, while a magnificently robed elder borne in a litter was a bishop. Townsfolk—housewives who dickered on a market square overflowing with goods and people, portly merchants, common workers, slaves, children, peasants from the hinterland—wore an endlessness of different garbs, and nowhere the dear decorations of home. Tarry sailors, tall blond Northmen, Poles and Wends and Livonians and Finns in their various raiments, high-cheeked tribesmen off the steppes, a pair of Byzantines clothed with elegance and disdain, she was lost among them, and at the same time she was upraised, carried along, drunk on marvel.

At a house near the south wall, Gleb halted. "This is where you will stay," he said. She nodded. He had told her about it. A master weaver, whose daughters had married, earned extra money by taking in trustworthy lodgers.

A maidservant answered Gleb's knock. The goodwife appeared. Gleb's followers brought in Svoboda's baggage, and he paid the woman. They went to the room that would be hers. Cramped, it held a narrow bed, stool, pot, basin, water jug. Above the bed hung a picture, a man with a halo, letters around him to spell out a name that the wife said was St. Yuri. "He slew a dragon and saved a maiden," she explained. "A fine guardian for you, my dear. You have come to be married, I believe?" The sharp, hasty accent forced Svoboda to listen closely.

"So we trust," Gleb replied. "Arranging the betrothal will take days, you understand, Olga Borisovna, and then there will be the wedding preparations. Now this lady is tired after a long, hard journey."

"Of course, Gleb Ilyev. What else? Hungry too, I'm sure.

I will go see that the soup is hot. Come to the kitchen when you are ready, both of you."

"I must be straightway off, myself," he said. "You know how a trader has to watch and pounce at this season, like a sparrowhawk, if he would strike any bargains worth half his trouble."

The woman bustled off. So did his men, at a gesture from him. For a moment he and Svoboda were alone.

Light was dim; this room had only a small window covered by membrane. Svoboda searched Gleb's face as best she could, where he stood in the doorway. "Will you meet Igor Olegev today?" she asked low.

"I doubt that," he sighed. "He is an important man, after all, his voice strong in the folkmoot, and—and very busy while the fleet is here, not just as a chandler but—well, when you deal with men of many nations, it becomes politics and schemes and—" He was not wont to speak thus awkwardly. "I'll leave word, and hope he can receive me tomorrow. Then we'll set a time for you to meet with him, and—and I'll pray for a good outcome."

"You said that was sure."

"No, I said I think it likely. He is interested. And I know him and his situation well. But how could I make you any outright promise?"

She sighed in her turn. "True. At worst, you said, you can find somebody less well off."

He stared down at the rushes on the floor. "That . . . need not happen either. We are friends of old, you and I. Right? I could—look after you—better than, than you have thus far let me do."

"You have been more than kind to me," she said gently. "Your wife is a lucky woman."

"I had better go," he mumbled. "Get my whole party together, everyone quartered, wares stored, and then— Tomorrow, whenever I can, I'll stop here and give you the news. Until then, God be with you, Svoboda Volodarovna." He turned and hurried off.

She stood a while, her thoughts atumble, before she found her way to the kitchen. Olga gave her a bowl of rich beef broth, crowded with leeks and carrots, black bread and ample butter on the side. She settled herself on the bench

across the table and chattered away. "Gleb Ilyev has told me so much about you—"

With a wariness that the years had taught her, Svoboda steered the talk. Just how much had the man said? It was a relief to learn he had been as shrewd as usual. He had described a widow with no dependent children alive and no prospect of remarriage in her distant, rude neighborhood. Out of charity, and in hope of earning credit in Heaven, Gleb had suggested her to the chandler Igor Olegev of Kiyiv, himself lately left bereaved among several youngsters. The prospect appeared good; a woodlander could learn city ways if she was clever, and this woman had other desirable qualities as well. Therefore Gleb helped Svoboda convert her inheritance to cash, a dowry, and took her along on his next trip.

"Ah, poor darling, poor little one." Olga dabbed at tears. "No child of yours above the earth, and no man to wed one so young and beautiful? I cannot understand that."

Svoboda shrugged. "There was ill feeling. Please, spare me talking about it."

"Yes, village feuds. People can indeed get nasty, hemmed in by themselves all their lives. And then, pagan fears prey on them. Do they imagine you're unlucky, cursed by a witch perhaps, just because you've had many sorrows? May God now, at last, prosper your life."

So Gleb had told truth, while holding back truth. A trader skill. For an instant, Svoboda wondered about him. They got along well together, she and he. They could do more than that, if this marriage scheme fell through. Let the priests call it sin. Kupala the Joyous would not, and maybe the old gods did linger on earth . . . But no. Gleb was already gray. Too little time remained for him that she could bring herself to hurt the wife whom she had never met. She knew how loss felt.

Having eaten, and Olga gone back to a housewife's work, Svoboda sought her room. She unpacked, stowed her possessions, and wondered what to do next. There had always been some task, if only to spin thread. But she had left the things of home behind, with home itself. Nor could she just sink into blessed idleness, savoring it, or into sleep, as countryfolk were apt to when the rare, brief chance came. That

was not the way of a headman's daughter, wife to a man of weight.

Restlessness churned in her. She paced the floor, flung herself onto the bed, bounced up again, yawned, glowered, paced anew. Should she go help Olga's household? No, she wouldn't know her way about. Moreover, Igor Olegev might well think it demeaned his bride. If anything was to come of that. What *was* he like? Gleb called him a good fellow, but Gleb would never see him from a woman's side, not even well enough that what he said of Igor's looks called forth anything real for Svoboda.

St. Yuri, there on the wall, she could at least take the measure of, gaunt, big-eyed— She knelt before him and tried to ask his blessing. The words stuck in her throat. She had been dutiful but not devout, and today proper meekness was beyond her.

She paced. Decision came slowly. Why must she stay penned between these walls? Gleb had told her to be careful, but she had often gone alone into the woods, fearless of wolf or bear, and taken no harm. Once she caught a runaway horse by the bridle and dragged him to a stop, once she killed a mad dog with an ax, once she and her neighbors crowded into the stockaded town and stood off a Pecheneg raid. Besides, while the hours dribbled away here, life pulsed out there, newness, wonder. The bell tower shone tall . . .

Of course! The church of the Holy Wisdom. There, if any place, she could feel prayerful; there God would hear and help.

Yes, surely.

She threw a cloak on, pinned it fast, drew up the hood, glided forth. Nobody could forbid her to leave, but it would be best if she went unnoticed. She did pass a servant, maybe a slave, but he gave her a dull glance and continued scrubbing out a tile stove in the main room. The door closed behind Svoboda. The street swept her off.

For a while she wandered, shyly at first, then in a daze of delight. Nobody offered her any rudeness. Several young men did stare, and a couple of them grinned and nudged each other, but that just made her tingle. Now and then somebody jostled her by chance. It was less often than ear-

lier, the ways were less thronged, as the sun sank westward. Finally she got a clear sight of the cathedral and steered by it.

When she saw St. Sophia full on, she caught her breath. Sixty paces long it was, she guessed dizzily, rising white and pale green in walls and bays, arched doorways and high glass windows, up and up to, yes, ten domes in all, six bearing crosses and four spangled with stars. For a long time she could only stand and look. At last, mustering courage, she went on past workmen who were adding to the splendor. Her heart thudded. Was this forbidden? But besides priests, commoners went in and out. She passed the entrance.

After that, for a time during which time was not, she drifted like a rusalka beneath the water. Almost she wondered if she too had drowned and become such a spirit. Twilight and hush enfolded her, windows glowed with colors and images, walls with gold and images . . . but no, that stern strange face overhead was Christ, Lord of the World, in the ring of his apostles, and yonder giantess made of little stones was his Mother, and . . . the song, the deep moaning tones that finally lifted from behind a carven screen, while bells rang high above, those were in praise of his Father. . . . She prostrated herself on cold flags.

Awareness seeped into her much later. The church had become a cavern of night; she was alone, except for a few clergy and many candles. Where had the day gone? She crossed herself and hastened out.

The sun was down, the sky still blue but swiftly darkening, the streets full of dusk between walls in whose windows flamelight fluttered yellow. They were well-nigh deserted. Her breath, footfalls on cobbles, rustle of skirts sounded loud in the quiet. Turn right at this corner, left at the next— no, wait, that was wrong, she had never seen yonder house with the rafter ends carved into heads— She was lost.

She stopped, filled her lungs and eased them again, grinned wryly. "Fool," she whispered. "At your age you should have known better." She glanced about. Roofs stood black against a heaven gone almost as dark, where three stars trembled. Opposite, paleness crept upward, the moon rising. So, west and east. Her lodging stood near the south wall. If she kept on that way, as closely as these crooked lanes allowed, she should reach it. Then she could knock on

a door and ask directions. No doubt Olga would make a fuss and tomorrow Gleb would chide her.

She stiffened her back. She was headman Volodar's daughter. Picking her steps carefully, gown held above ankles, to avoid the worst muck, she set off.

Twilight thickened toward night. Air lay chilly. The moon gave wan light when she saw it, but mostly it was still behind roofs.

Lampglow, smoke, smells of kvass and cookery, spilled from a half-open door. Voices barked, laughter bayed. She scowled and went by on the far side of the street. An inn, where men were getting drunk. She had seen that sort of thing when she visited the town with a husband. Rostislav had grown too fond of it, he'd reel back to her, all stench and sweat—

Boots thudded behind her, louder, nearer.

She quickened her steps. The other did too, and drew alongside. "Ha," he growled, "greeting to you." She could barely understand him.

They entered a patch of moonlight and he became more than a shadow. A head taller than she, he blocked the gathering western stars out of her sight. She saw a pate shaven except for a lock on the right side, a bristle of mustache under a nose that had once been broken, tattoos over the shaggy breast and down the thick arms. He wore a shirt half unlaced, broad trews, short cloak, everything stiff with old grease. The knife at his belt was nearly of sword size, a weapon forbidden to everyone but the Prince's guards within this city.

A demon! flashed ice-sharp through her, and then: No, a Varyag. I've heard about them, Northmen and Rusi who ply the rivers, walking stormwinds— She pulled her look from him and sought to go on.

A hand clamped on her right arm. "Now, now, not be hasty," he laughed. "You out for fun this late, no? I give you fun."

"Let me be!" she cried, and tugged at the grip. He wrenched. Pain stabbed sickeningly through her shoulder. She stumbled. He held her fast.

"Come," he said, "there's an alley, you like it." The smell of him caught at her gorge. She must gag before she could scream.

"Quiet, you! Nobody come." His free hand cuffed. Her head rocked. Darkness roared through. Nonetheless, somehow, she dug her heels down and screamed again.

"Quiet or I— Ha-a-a." He cast her to the cobbles. When she could see upward, he had turned to meet two others.

They must have been on a side street and heard, she thought amidst the dizziness. Let them help me. Christ, Dazhbog, Yarilo, St. Yuri, help them help me.

The Varyag's knife was out. "Go," he snarled. "No need you. Go." She realized that he was drunk, and that that made him the more dangerous.

The smaller of the two men advanced, cat-footed. "I think best you go cool that noggin of yours, friend," he replied mildly. His own knife slipped forth. It was a tool for eating and ordinary cutting, a sliver against that great blade. Nor did its bearer seem any kind of warrior. His slender frame bore a fur-lined coat and trousers smoothly tucked into soft boots. Svoboda made out that much because his companion carried a lantern, which threw a dull glow on them both and a puddle of it at their feet.

The Varyag grinned beneath the moon. "Dainty lordling and cripple," he jeered. "You tell me what to do? Scoot, or I find how white your tripes be."

The second new man put down the lantern. It had been in his left hand. His right was missing. From a leather cup strapped to that forearm reached an iron hook. Otherwise he was muscular, his garb stout but plain. He drew his small knife. "We two," he rumbled. "You alone. Cadoc say go, you go." Unlike the slim man, he could barely speak Russian.

"Two cockroaches!" the Varyag yelled. "Perun thunder me, enough!"

He made a long step forward. His weapon flashed. The slim man—Cadoc?—swayed aside. He thrust out an ankle and gave a push. The Varyag tripped, crashed to the stones. The man with the hook laughed. The Varyag roared, sprang up, charged him.

The hook slashed. Its curve ended in a point that went deep into the attacker's upper arm. The Varyag yelled. The opponent's knife cut his wrist. His own iron clattered loose. Cadoc danced in and, half playfully, seized his hairlock and sliced it across. "The next trophy comes from between your

legs," Cadoc said with a leer. The Varyag howled, whirled, fled. Echoes died away.

Cadoc hunkered down by Svoboda. "Are you well, my lady?" he asked. "Here, lean on me." He helped her rise.

His companion stooped for the Varyag's knife. "No, leave that," Cadoc ordered. His Russian must be for her benefit. "I wouldn't want the guard to find it on us. That oaf's carcass would scarcely be as inconvenient. Let's get away. The racket may well have drawn attention we can do without. Come, my lady."

"I, I'm unhurt." The breath sobbed in Svoboda's throat. She had, in fact, suffered nothing but possible bruises. A measure of daze remained. She went blindly along, Cadoc's hand on her elbow.

The man with the lantern and the hook asked something that must mean, "Where to?"

"Our lodging, of course," Cadoc snapped in Russian. "If we should meet a patrol, then nothing has happened, we've simply been out for a little drink and merriment. Will you agree to that, my lady? You do owe us something, and we'd hate to miss the fleet's departure tomorrow because Yaroslav's officers wanted to question us."

"I must get home," she pleaded.

"You shall. We'll see you safely back, never fear. But first—" Shouts lifted to the rear. "Hark! Somebody did come. They've found the knife, and if they have a lantern too, they'll have seen the blood and scuffled offal. Here." Cadoc led them into an alley, a tunnel of murk. "Roundabout, but it avoids trouble. We'll lie low for an hour or two and then escort you, my lady."

They emerged on a broad street, moon-bright. Svoboda's wits had returned. She wondered how far she could trust the pair. Might it be wisest to insist she go back to Olga's at once? If they refused, she could strike out by herself, no worse off than earlier. But that had not been well off at all. And—a throbbing, a warmth—never had she known anybody like this. Never again would she, perhaps. They were to sail in the morning and she, she was once more to become a wife.

Then Cadoc plucked his companion's sleeve and said merrily, "Whoa, Rufus. Don't go on past." A house bulked before them. The door was unbarred. They wiped their feet

and trod through, into a space where she could barely see tables, benches, a couple of night lamps burning. "The common room," said Cadoc in her ear. "This is a hostel for those who can afford it. Quiet, please."

She peered. Rufus' lantern showed him to be lumpy-featured, freckled, the dense whiskers and thin hair a bright yellowish-red. Cadoc was altogether foreign, his face narrow and aquiline, the eyes slightly aslant like a Finn's but large and brown, hair shoulder-length and as raven-black as the beard he kept trimmed to a point. A golden finger ring was equally alien in its workmanship, a snake that bit its tail. Seldom had she met as ready a smile as was his.

"Well, well," he murmured. "I had no idea that the lady in distress was so comely." He bowed, as if she were a princess. "Fear not, I repeat. We'll take proper care of you. Alas for your raiment." Glancing down, she saw filth smeared over it.

"I, I could tell people I fell," she stammered. "That is true."

"I think we can do better," Cadoc said.

Rufus followed them upstairs to a second-floor chamber. It was large, wainscoted, drapes by a glazed window and a rug on the floor, with four beds, a table, several stools, and whatever else comfort required. Rufus took the candle from his lantern and used it to light the tapers in a seven-branched brass holder. His deftness told Svoboda he must have lost his hand long ago, to have learned so well how to do without it.

"We are the only two," Cadoc told Svoboda. "It's worth the cost. Now—" He squatted by a chest, took a key from his pouch, opened the lock. "Most of our goods are on our ship, naturally, but here are some especially valuable, whether from abroad or acquired in Kiyiv. They include—" He rummaged. "Ah, yes." The fabric he drew out shone in the candlelight. "I regret we can't prepare a hot bath at this hour, my lady, but yonder you'll find a basin, water jug, soap, towels, slop jar. Make free, and afterward don this. Meanwhile, of course, Rufus and I will absent ourselves. If you'll open the door a crack and hand out your soiled things, he'll see what he can do toward cleansing them."

The redbeard made a mouth. He grumbled in an un-

known tongue. Cadoc replied and, somehow, jollied him till he nodded. They took single candles in holders and left.

Svoboda stood alone with her bewilderment. Did she dream? Had she blundered into elvenland, or had she met a pair of gods, here in this Christian stronghold? Suddenly she laughed. Whatever befell, it was new, it was a wonder!

She unfastened brooches and laces, pulled clothing over her head, held it around the door as Cadoc had suggested. Somebody took it. She closed the door again and went to wash. The cloth caressed a nakedness that the cool air seemed to flow across. She dawdled at the task. When a knock sounded, she called, "Not yet," and hurried to dry herself. The garment, tossed onto a bed, drew a gasp from her. It was a robe of sheening, baby-smooth material, gold-trimmed blue, secured by silver buttons. Her feet were now bare. Well, peeping from beneath the skirt, they would catch glances, she thought, and flushed hot. Quickly she combed locks fallen astray around her coiled braids, and knew their amber color would show well above the dress. "Enter," she said, not quite evenly.

Cadoc appeared, a tray balanced on his left hand. He shut the door behind him and put the tray on the table. It bore a flagon and two cups. "I never knew silk could be this beautiful," he said.

"What?" asked Svoboda. She wished her pulse would slow.

"No matter. I'm often rather brash. Please sit and enjoy a stoup with me. I woke the potboy to give me of the landlord's choicest. Take your ease, recover from that foul experience."

She lowered herself to a stool. Before he did likewise, Cadoc poured out a red liquid with a summery odor. "You are very kind," she whispered. As Gleb is kind, she thought; then, unwillingly: No, Gleb is a countryside trader growing old. He can read and write, but what else does he know, what has he seen and done beyond his narrow rounds? "How can I repay you?" Immediately: That was a foolish thing to say!

However, Cadoc only smiled, raised his cup, and replied, "You can tell me your name, my lady, and whatever else

you care to. You can gladden me with your company for a short while. That is ample. Drink, I pray you."

She sipped. Deliciousness flowed over her tongue. This was no berry wine of the backwoods, it was—was— "I, I am—" Almost, she gave him her baptismal name. But of course that would be unwise. She believed she could trust this man, but if a sorcerer somehow learned it she would be open to spells. Besides, she seldom thought about it. "Svoboda Volodarovna," the name she used at home. "From . . . afar. Where is your friend?"

"Rufus? Oh, I've put him to getting your clothes as clean as possible. Afterward he won't disturb us. I gave him a flagon of his own to keep him company. A loyal man, brave, but limited."

"Your servant, then?"

Did a shadow flit across his face? "An associate of mine for a long, long time. He lost his hand fighting once, warding my back, when a gang of Saxons ambushed us. He kept on fighting, left-handed, and we escaped."

What were Saxons? Robbers? "Such a wound should have disabled him, at least. Most men would soon have died of it."

"We're a tough pair. But enough. How did you happen to be abroad after dark, Svoboda Volodarovna? You're clearly not the kind who ordinarily would. It was sheer luck that Rufus and I were in earshot. We'd been having a last cup with a Rus factor I've come to know; bade him goodnight since we must rise betimes tomorrow, set off, and then— Ah, it seems God would not let a lady such as you come to sordid grief."

The wine glowed and thrilled in her blood. She remembered caution, but did find herself blurting out as much as Gleb had revealed on her behalf to Olga Borisovna and . . . and, as her voice ran on, to Igor Olegev. Cadoc's shrewd, quiet questions made it easy.

"Ah," he murmured at length. "Thank the saints, we did save you from ruin. That besotted mercenary would have left you in no state to hide what had befallen, if he left you alive at all." He paused. "Whereas you can tell your landlady, and afterward that man who's playing father to you, that you stayed too late at the church, lost in prayer. It's nothing unusual hereabouts."

She bridled. "Shall I give them a falsehood? I have my honor."

He grinned. "Oh, come now. You're not fresh out of a cloister." She didn't know what that might be, but caught his drift. "How often in your life has a lie been more than harmless, been a shield against hurt? Why put the good Gleb in an awkward position, when he has worked so hard on your behalf?" Impudently: "As the go-between who brought Igor the chandler a superb new wife, Gleb can await excellent business deals. Spoil it not for him, Svoboda."

She covered her confusion by draining her cup. He refilled it. "I understand," he said. "You are young, and the young are apt to be idealistic. Nevertheless, you have imagination and boldness beyond your years, more than most men do, that you would set forth into an altogether different life. Use that wisdom."

Sudden desolation welled up in her. She had learned how to turn it into mirth of a sort. "You talk as my grandfather might have," she said. "How old are *you?*"

His tone bantered. "Not yet worn out."

Eagerness to know surged like lust. She leaned forward, aware of his awareness of her bosom. The wine buzzed, bees in a clover meadow. "You've told nothing of yourself. What are you?" A prince or boyar, ending his father's name not in "ev" but in "vitch"? The byblow of a forest god?

"A merchant," he said. "I've followed this route for years, building my wealth till I own a ship. My stock is fine things: amber and furs from the North, cloths and delicacies from the South, costly without being too bulky or heavy." Maybe the drink had touched him a bit also, for he added, puzzlingly, half under his breath, "It lets me meet people of many different kinds. I am curious about them."

"Where are you from?"

"Oh, I came through Novgorod, as traders from my parts do, by river, lake, portage, to here. Ahead lie the great Dniepr and its falls—hardest of the portages, that, and our military escort much needed in case of raiders off the steppe—then the sea, and at last Constantinople. Not that I make the journey every year. It's long both ways, after all. Most cargoes are transshipped here at Kiyiv. I return to Swedish and Danish ports, or ofttimes to England. How-

ever, as I said, I want to travel as much as I'm able. Have I answered you windily enough?"

She shook her head. "No. I meant, what is your nation?"

He spoke with more care. "Rufus and I—Cymriu, the dwellers call that country. It is part of the same island as England, is the last of the ancient Britain, best for me because nobody there would mistake me for English. Rufus doesn't matter, he's my old retainer, he's gone by the nickname so long that he's well-nigh forgotten any else. I, though—Cadoc ap Rhys."

"I've never heard of those lands."

"No," he sighed, "I didn't expect you had."

"I've a feeling you've traveled more than you just said."

"I have wandered quite widely, true."

"I envy you," burst from her. "Oh, I envy you!"

He raised his brows. "What? It's a hard life, often dangerous, always lonely."

"But free. Your own master. If I could fare like you—" Her eyes stung. She swallowed hard and tried to lay hold on the tears before they broke loose.

Turned grave, he shook his head in his turn. "You do not know what becomes of camp followers, Svoboda Volodarovna. I do."

Understanding washed over her. "Y-you are a lonely man, Cadoc," she said around a thickness. "Why?"

"Make the best of that life you have," he counselled. "Each in our own way, we are all of us trapped in ours."

"You too." Your strength must fade, your pride shall crumble, in one more blink of time you will go down into the earth and soon after that your very name will be forgotten, dust on the wind.

He winced. "Yes. Thus it seems."

"I'll remember you!" she cried.

"What?"

"I— Nothing, nothing. I am shaken and weary and, and I think a little drunk."

"Do you wish to sleep till your clothes are ready? I'll stay quiet— Svoboda, you weep." Cadoc came around the table, stooped over her, laid an arm across her shoulders.

"Forgive me, I'm being weak and, and foolish. Not myself, please believe me, not myself."

"No, certainly not, dear venturer. I know how you feel."

His lips brushed her hair. Blindly she turned her head toward him, and knew he would kiss her. It was gentle. Her tears made it taste like the sea.

"I am an honorable man, of sorts," he said against her cheek. How warm were his breath, his body. "I'd not force you to anything."

"You need not," she heard through the great soft thunders.

"I depart shortly after dawn, Svoboda, and your marriage awaits you."

She gripped him hard, nails into his coat. "Three husbands I have had already," she told him, "and sometimes, at the lakeside, the spring feast of Kupala— Oh, yes, Cadoc."

For an instant she saw that she had let out too much. Now she must somehow answer his questions, with her head awhirl. . . . But he gave her his hand, it was as if he lifted her to her feet, and went by her side to a bed.

Thereafter she was again in a dream. Her wanting him had come over her as a torrent. If she foresaw anything whatsoever, it was a slaking. He was not a big man, but he might be strong, he might take a while to finish, long enough, and then she could topple into sleep. Instead, he took the robe from her through a time that swayed on and on, and guided her to help him off with his garb, always his fingers and his mouth knowing what to do, what to evoke; and though the bed was narrow, when he brought her down upon it he still stroked and touched and kissed until she wailed for him to open the heavens and unloose the suns.

Afterward they caressed, laughed, japed, spread two straw ticks on the floor that they might have real room to move about, played, loved, his head rested between her breasts, she urged him anew and yet anew, he swore he had never known the match to her and the believing of him was a tall fire.

—The glass in the window grayed. Candles had burned down to stubs. The smoke of them drifted bitter through a chill that she finally began to feel.

"I must see you to your lodging," he said in her arms.

"Oh, not at once," she begged.

"The fleet leaves soon. And you have your own world to meet. First you will need rest, Svoboda, dear."

"I am weary as if I'd plowed ten fields," she murmured. A giggle. "But you did the plowing. You rascal, I'm hardly able to walk." She nuzzled the silky beard. "Thank you, thank you."

"I'll sleep soundly on the ship, myself. Afterward I'll wake and remember you. And long for you, Svoboda. But that is the price, I suppose."

"If only—"

"I told you, the trade I follow these days is a bad one for a woman."

"You come home from it after the season, don't you?"

He sat up. His face seemed as gray as the light. "I have no home any more. I dare not. You couldn't understand. Come, we must hurry, but we needn't ruin this that we've had."

Dumbly, she waited while he dressed and went to get her clothes from Rufus. The thought trickled through her: He's right, the thing is impossible, or at least it would be too brief and become too full of pain. He does not know, however, why he is right.

Her garments were wet after washing. They hung clammily. Well, with luck she could get to her room unnoticed. "I wish I could give you the silk robe," Cadoc said. "If you can explain it away— No?" Maybe he would think of her when it passed to some girl somewhere else. "I also wish I could feed you. We're under time's whip, you and I. Come." Yes, she was hungry, faint with hunger and weariness and ache. That was good. It pulled her spirit back down to where she belonged.

Fog hazed and hushed the streets. The sun had belike risen, but barely, in the east that Svoboda had forsaken. She walked hand in hand with Cadoc. Among the Rusi, that simply meant friendship. Nobody outside would know when the clasp tightened. Few people were around thus far, anyhow. From a passerby Cadoc learned the way to Olga's dwelling.

They stopped before it. "Fare gladly, Svoboda," he said.

"And you," was all she could answer.

"I will remember you—" his smile twisted— "more than is wise."

"I will forever remember you, Cadoc," she said.

He took both her hands in his, bowed above them,

straightened, let her go, turned, and walked off. Soon he was lost in the fog.

"Forever," she said into the emptiness.

A while she remained standing. The sky overhead was clear, brightening to blue. A falcon, early aloft, caught the light of the hidden sun on his wings.

Maybe it's best that this was what it was and nothing more, she thought. A moment snatched free, for me to keep beyond the reach of the years.

Three husbands have I buried, and I think that was release, to pray them goodbye and see them shoveled under, for by then they had wasted and withered and were no longer the men who proudly stood beside me at the weddings. And Rostislav had peered at me, wondered, accused, beaten me when he got drunk. . . . No, burying my children, that was the worst. Not so much the small ones, they die and die and you have no time to know them except as a brightness that goes by. Even my first grandchild, he was small. But Svetlana, now, she was a woman, a wife, it was my great-grandchild who killed her in the birthing.

At least that was the final sorrow. The villagers, yes, my living children, they could no longer endure this thing that is I, that never grows decently old. They fear me, therefore they hate me. And I could no longer endure, either. I might have welcomed the day when they came with axes and clubs to make an end of the thing.

Gleb Ilyev, ugly, greedy little Gleb—he has the manhood to see past strangeness, see the woman who is neither child of the gods nor creature of Satan but is the most lost and bewildered of any. I wish I could reward Gleb with better than silver. Well, I wish for much that cannot be.

Through him, I have found how to stay alive. I will be the best wife to Igor Olegev that I am able. But as the years pass, I will befriend somebody else like Gleb, and when the time comes, he will find a new place, a new beginning for me. The widow of *one* man can marry again, in some town or on some farm well distant, and nobody she knew will think it is altogether outlandish, and nobody she comes to know will think of questions she dares not answer. Of

course, the children must be left provided for, such as are not grown. I will be the best mother that I am able.

A smile winged by.

Who can tell? A few husbands of mine may even be like Cadoc.

Her dress clung and dripped. She felt how cold she was, shivered, and walked slowly to the door of the house.

VII

The Same Kind

1

HABIT DIES hard, and then from time to time will rise from its grave. "What do you really know about this drab, Lugo?" asked Rufus. He spoke in Latin such as had not been heard for centuries, even among churchmen of the West.

Nor had Cadoc used that name for a span longer yet. He replied in Greek: "Practice your living languages more. Get your terminology right. The word you used scarcely fits the most fashionable and expensive courtesan in Constantinople."

"A whore be a whore," said Rufus stubbornly, though he did change to the modern tongue of the Empire. "You been, uh, in-vest-igating her, talking with people, sounding 'em out, damn near since we got here. Weeks. And me left to twiddle my thumb." He glanced down at the stump of his right wrist. "When're we going to *do* something?"

"Perhaps quite soon," Cadoc answered. "Or perhaps not. It depends on what further I can learn about the lovely Athenais, if anything. And on much else, to be sure. I am not only overdue for a change of identity, we are both overdue for a change of occupation. The Rus trade is spinning faster and faster toward ruin."

"Yah, yah, you've said that plenty often. I've seen for myself. But what about this woman? You haven't told me nothing about her."

"That is because patience in disappointment is not among your excellences." Cadoc paced to the single window and stared out. It stood open on summer air, odors of smoke

and tar and dung and hinted fragrances, noise of wheels and hoofs and feet and voices. From this third-floor inn room the view swept over roofs, streets, the city wall, the gate and harbor of the Kontoskalion. Masts raked upward from the docks. Beyond glittered the Sea of Marmora. Craft danced on its blueness, everything from bumboats shaped like basins to a freighter under sail and a naval dromond with oars in parade-ground step. It was hard to imagine, to feel, the shadow under which all this lay.

Cadoc clasped his hands behind his back. "However, I may as well inform you now," he said. "Today I have hopes that I'll reach the end of the trail, or find that it was a false scent. It's been maddeningly vague, as you'd expect. So-and-so tells me that somebody else once told him this-and-that. With difficulty, because he's moved, I track down Kyrios Somebody Else to verify it, and to the best of his dim recollection that is not quite what he told So-and-so, but from a third party he did once hear— Ah, well.

"Basically, 'Athenais' is the latest name the lady has taken. No surprise there. Name changes are quite usual in her profession; and of course she prefers to obscure her origins, the fact that she was not always the darling of the city. I've established that, earlier, she worked as Zoë in one of the better brothels over in Galata; and I am practically certain that before then she was on this side of the Golden Horn, in the Phanar quarter, as a less elegant girl calling herself Eudoxia. Beyond that, the information is slight and unreliable. Too many people have died or otherwise disappeared.

"The pattern has been the same, though, an outwardly affable but actually secretive woman who avoids pimps—at worst, formerly, she paid off as necessary—and spends no more on fanciments than she must. Instead, she saves—invests, I suspect—with an eye to moving up another rung on the ladder. Now she is independent, even powerful, what with her connections and the things she doubtless knows. And—" Despite the dull houndwork that lay behind, despite the coolness he kept in his tone, a tingle went along Cadoc's backbone, out to his scalp and fingertips. "The trail reaches at least thirty years into the past, Rufus. It may well be fifty or more years long. Always she is youthful, always she is beautiful."

"I knew what you was after," said the redbeard, unwontedly low, "but I'd stopped thinking you'd ever find it."

"I too, almost. Seven centuries since I came on you, and nobody before and nobody afterward, for all my searching. Yes, hope wears thin. Maybe today, at last—" Cadoc shook himself, turned about, and laughed. "I'm soon due at her place. I dare not tell you what a few hours there cost!"

"Have a care," Rufus grunted. "A whore be a whore. I go find me a cheap 'un, ha?"

Impulsively, Cadoc reached into his pouch and gave him a fistful of silver miliarisions. "Add this to your own coins and enjoy yourself, old fellow. A shame that the Hippodrome isn't open just now, but you must know several odeions where the performances are bawdy enough for your less elevated moments. Just don't talk too loosely."

"You taught me that, you did. Have fun. I hope she turns out to be what you want, master. I'll use a bit o' the money to buy you a good-luck spell." That seemed to be about as much as the prospect could move Rufus' stolidity. But then, Cadoc thought, he lacks the wit to understand what it will mean to find another immortal—a woman. At least, immediately; it may dawn on him later.

I don't suppose I quite understand it yet myself.

Rufus went out. Cadoc took an embroidered mantle off its hanger and fitted it over the fine linen sakkos and bejeweled dalmatic that enrobed him. On his feet were curly-toed shoes from far Córdova. Even for an afternoon appointment, one went to Athenais appropriately dressed.

He had already gotten his hair cut short and his beard shaven off. Fluent in Greek and familiar, after much prowling, with the byways of the city, he could pass for Byzantine. Not that he would try to do so unnecessarily. It wasn't worth the risk. Rus merchants were supposed to stay in the St. Mamo suburb on the Galata side of the Horn, crossing the bridge to the Blachernae Gate by day and returning at evening. He was still listed among them. It had taken a substantial bribe as well as persuasive chatter to get permission to take lodging here. He was not actually a Rus, he told the officials, and he was ready to retire from the trade. Both statements were true. He had gone on, mendaciously but persuasively, about certain new arrangements he had in mind, which would be to the profit of local magnates as well

as himself. In the course of generations, given an innate talent for it, one learns how to convince. Thus he won freedom to pursue his inquiries with maximum efficiency.

The streets throbbed and clamored with traffic. He followed their steepnesses to the Mesè, the avenue that, branching, ran from end to end of the city. Down its width on his right he spied the column that upbore Justinian's equestrian statue in the Forum of Constantine and beyond it, just glimpsed, the walls of the Imperial palace grounds, senate house, law courts, Hippodrome; the domes of Hagia Sophia; the gardens and shining buildings on the Acropolis: glories raised through lifetime after transient lifetime.

He turned left. Brilliance flowed with him and glowed from the arcades that lined the thoroughfare. Plainness was nearly lost in it, workmen, porters, carters, farmers in from the countryside, priests of the lower orders. Even hawkers and strolling entertainers flaunted fantastic colors as they shouted what wonders they offered; even slaves wore the liveries of great households. A nobleman passed by in his palanquin, young dandies whooped in a wineshop, a troop of guardsmen tramped with mail agleam, a cavalry officer and his attendant cataphracts cantered haughtily behind a runner who shouted and elbowed people aside, banners flew, cloaks and scarfs billowed in a brisk wind off the sea, New Rome seemed immortally young. Religion yielding to commerce and diplomacy, foreigners were plentiful, be they suave Muslim Syrians, boorish Catholic Normans, or from lands farther and stranger yet. Cadoc was content to vanish into the human flood.

At the Forum of Theodosius he crossed over to its northern corner, ignoring the sellers who cried their wares and the beggars who cried their need. Where the Aqueduct of Valens overlooked the roof-decked hollow it spanned, he paused for a moment's breath. The view swept before him, down to rampart and battlements, the Gate of the Drungarii, the Golden Horn full of its own farings, and across those waters hills green with growth, white with the houses of Pera and Galata. Gulls yonder made a living snowstorm. You can tell a rich harbor by its gulls, thought Cadoc. How much longer will this many fly and mew here?

He thrust sadness from him and continued north, downhill, until he found the house he wanted. Outwardly it was

an unpretentious three-story building, hemmed in by its neighbors, the façade rosy-plastered. But that was ample for one woman, her servants, and the revelries over which she presided.

A bronze knocker was made in the form of a scallop shell. Cadoc's heart skipped a step. Had she recalled that this Western Christian emblem of a pilgrim once belonged to Ashtoreth? The fingers with which he rattled it were damp.

The door opened and he confronted a huge black man in Asian-like shirt and trousers—an entire male, likelier hireling than slave, well able to remove anyone whom his employer found objectionable. "Christ be with you, kyrie. May I ask what is your desire?"

"My names is Cadoc ap Rhys. The lady Athenais awaits me." The visitor handed over a piece of parchment bearing the identification, given him when he paid the price to her broker. That woman had had to decide first that he was suitably refined, and still she had told him no time was available for a week. Cadoc slipped the doorman a golden bezant—a little extravagant, perhaps, but impressiveness might help his chances.

It certainly got him deference. In a twittering cloud of pretty girls and two eunuchs he passed through an anteroom richly furnished, its walls ornamented with discreetly erotic scenes, up a grand staircase to the outer chamber of a suite. This was hung in red velvet above a floral Oriental carpet. Chairs flanked a table of inlaid ebony whereon stood a flagon of wine, figured glass goblets, plates of cakes, dates, oranges. Light fell dim through small windows, but candles burned in multiple holders. Sweetness wafted from a golden censer. A lark dwelt in a silver cage. Here Athenais was.

She put aside the harp she had been strumming. "Welcome, Kyrie Cadoc from afar." Her voice was low, scarcely less musical than the strings had been—carefully trained. "Twice welcome, bearing news of marvels, like a fresh breeze."

He bowed. "My lady is too gracious to a poor wanderer."

Meanwhile, keenly as if she were an enemy, he assessed her. She sat on a couch, displaying herself against its white-and-gold back, in a gown that enhanced rather than revealed. Her jewelry was a bracelet, a pendant, and three rings, small but exquisite. It was her person, not her wealth,

and her spirit more than her person, that she had the intelligence to emphasize. Her figure was superb in a voluptuous Eastern fashion, but he judged that suppleness and strength underlay it. Her face he would simply have called handsome: broad, straight-nosed, full-lipped, eyes hazel beneath arching brows, blue-black hair piled thick around the tawny complexion. It was not looks that had brought her to this house, it was knowledge, skill, perception, the harvest of—how long an experience?

Her laugh chimed. "No poor man enters here! Come, be seated, take refreshment. Let us get to know each other."

She never rushed to the bedroom, he had heard, unless a patron insisted, and such a one was seldom allowed back. Conversation and flirtation beforehand were part of a delight that was said to have a climax unrivalled.

"Marvels have I seen," Cadoc declared, "but the finest of them today." He let a servant remove his upper garment and sat down beside her. A girl knelt to fill their glasses. At a tiny gesture from Athenais, all attendants bowed out.

She gave him a subtle flutter of lashes. "Certain men of Britannia are more polished than news of it led me to expect," she murmured. "Have you come directly from there?" He observed the sharpness of the demure glance and knew she was taking his measure. If he wanted a woman who had more in her head than a mouth, that was what she would provide.

Therefore—

His pulse stammered. The self-control of centuries underlay the calm wherewith he regarded her, took a sip of the estimable wine, and smiled. "No," he said, "I have not been in Britannia, or England and Wales as they call it nowadays, for a rather long time. But then, though I told your ancilla that is my country when she asked, I am not really a native of it. Or of anywhere else, any longer. On my last visit here I heard rumors about you. They caused me to return as soon as possible."

She half shaped a reply, aborted it, and sat cat-watchful, too wise to exclaim, "Flatterer!"

He calculated his grin. "I daresay your . . . callers . . . number some with various peculiarities. You gratify them or not according to your inclination. It must have been a cruel struggle to win this independence. Well, then, will you in-

dulge my whim? It is perfectly harmless. I only wish to talk for a short span. I would like to tell you a story. You may find it amusing. That is all. May I?"

She failed to quite hide her tautness. "I have heard many stories, kyrie. Do continue."

He leaned back and let the words flow easily while he looked before him, observing her from the corner of an eye. "Call it the kind of yarn that sailors spin during calm watches or in taverns ashore. It concerns a mariner, though afterward he did numerous different things. He thought himself an ordinary man of his people. So did everybody else. But bit by bit, year by year, they noticed something very odd about him. He never fell sick and he never grew old. His wife aged and finally died, his children turned gray and then white-haired, their children begot and raised children and likewise fell prey to time, but everything in this man since the third decade of his life stayed changeless. Was that not remarkable?"

He had her, he saw, and exulted. Her gaze was utterly intent.

"At first it seemed he might be blessed of the gods. Yet he showed no other special powers, nor did he do any special deeds. Though he made costly sacrifices and later, approaching despair, consulted costly magicians, to him came no revelation, nor any solace when those he loved went down into death. Meanwhile the slow growth of awe among the people had, with equal slowness, become envy, then fear, then hatred. What had he done to be thus condemned, or what had he sold to be thus spared? What *was* he, sorcerer, demon, walking corpse, what? He barely evaded attempts on his life. Finally the authorities moved to investigate him and he fled, for he suspected they would question him under torture and put him to death. He knew he could be wounded, although he recovered fast, and felt sure that the worst injuries would prove as fatal to him as to anybody else. Despite his loneliness, he kept a young man's desire for life and the savoring of it.

"For hundreds and hundreds of years he was a rover on the face of the earth. Often he let his yearnings overcome him and settled down somewhere, married, raised a family, lived as mortals do. But always he must lose them, and after a single common lifetime disappear. Between whiles, which

was mostly, he plied trades where a man can come and go little remarked. His old seamanship was among these, and it took him widely across the world. Ever he sought for more like himself. Was he unique in the whole creation? Or was his kind simply very rare? Those whom misfortune or malice did not destroy early on, they doubtless learned to stay hidden as he had learned. But if this be the case, how was he to find them, or they him?

"And if his was a hard and precarious lot, how much worse must it be for a woman? What could she do? Surely none but the strongest and cleverest survived. How might they?

"Does that conundrum interest my lady?"

He drank of his wine, for whatever tranquility might lie within it. She stared beyond him. Silence lengthened.

At last she drew breath, brought her look back to engage his, and said slowly, "That is a curious tale indeed, Kyrie Cadoc."

"A tale only, of course, a fantasy for your amusement. I do not care to be locked up as a madman."

"I understand." A smile ghosted across her countenance. "Pray continue. Did this undying man ever come upon any others?"

"That remains to be told, my lady."

She nodded. "I see. But say more about him. He's still a shadow to me. Where was he born, and when?"

"Let us imagine it was in ancient Tyre. He was a boy when King Hiram aided King Solomon to build the Temple in Jerusalem."

She gasped. "Oh, long ago!"

"About two thousand years, I believe. He lost count, and later when he tried to consult the records they were fragmentary and in disagreement. No matter."

"Did he—meet the Savior?" she whispered.

He sighed and shook his head. "No, he was elsewhere at that time. He did see many gods come and go. And kings, nations, histories. Perforce he lived among them, under names of their kind, while they endured and until they perished. Names he lost track of, like years. He was Hanno and Ithobaal and Snefru and Phaon and Shlomo and Rashid and Gobor and Flavius Lugo and, oh, more than he can remember."

She sat straight, as if ready to spring, whether from him or at him. Low in her throat, she asked, "Might Cadoc be among those names?"

He kept seated, leaned back, but eyes now full upon hers. "It might," he answered, "even as a lady might have called herself Zoë, and before that Eudoxia, and before that—names which are perhaps still discoverable."

A shudder passed through her. "What do you want of me?"

He set his glass down, most carefully, smiled, spread his hands, palms up, and told her in his softest voice, "Whatever you choose to give. It may be nothing. How can I compel you, supposing that were my desire, which it is not? If you dislike harmless lunatics, you need never see or hear from me again."

"What . . . are you . . . prepared to offer?"

"Shared and lasting faith. Help, counsel, protection, an end of loneliness. I've learned a good deal about surviving, and manage to prosper most of the time, and have my refuges and my hoards against the evil days. At the moment I command modest wealth. More important, I stay true to my friends and would rather be a woman's lover than her overlord. Who knows but what the children of two immortals will themselves prove deathless?"

She studied him a while. "But you always hold something back, don't you?"

"A Phoenician habit, which a rootless life has strengthened. I could unlearn it."

"It was never my way," she breathed, and came to him.

2

THEY LOUNGED against pillows at the headboard of the huge bed. Talk grew between them like a blossoming plant in spring. Now and then a hand stroked across flesh gone cool again, but those were gentle caresses. A languor possessed them, as if part of the lingering odors of incense and love. Their minds roused first. The words were calm, the tone tender.

"Four hundred years ago I was Aliyat in Palmyra," she said. "And you, in your ancient Phoenicia?"

"My birthname was Hanno," he answered. "I used it the oftenest, afterward, till it died out of every language."

"What adventures you must have had."

"And you."

She winced. "I would rather not speak of that."

"Are you ashamed?" He laid a finger under her chin and brought her face around toward his. "I would not be," he said gravely. "I *am* not. We have survived, you and I, by whatever means were necessary. That's now behind us. Let it drift into darkness with the wreckage of Babylon. We belong to our future."

"You . . . do not . . . find me sinful?"

He laughed a bit. "I suspect that if we both grew quite candid about our pasts, you'd be the one shocked."

"Nor do you fear God's curse?"

"I have learned much in two thousand years, but nothing about any gods, except that they too arise, change, age, and die. Whatever there is beyond the universe, if anything, I doubt it concerns itself with us."

Tears trembled on her lashes. "You are strong. You are kind." She nestled close. "Tell me of yourself."

"That would take a while. I'd grow thirsty."

She reached for a bell on an end table and rang it. "That we can do something about," she said with a flash of smile. "You're right, however. We have the whole future wherein to explore our past. Tell me first of Cadoc. I do need to understand him, that we may lay our plans."

"Well, it began when Old Rome departed from Britannia— No, wait, I forgot, in all this joy. First I should tell you about Rufus."

A maidservant entered. She dipped her glance, otherwise seemed unperturbed by the two naked bodies. Athenais ordered the wine and refreshments brought in from the anteroom. While this was done, Cadoc marshalled his thoughts. When they were alone, he described his companion.

"Poor Rufus," she sighed. "How envious he will be."

"Oh, I expect not," Cadoc replied. "He's grown used to being my subordinate. In return, I do his thinking for him. Give him adequate food, drink, and swiving, and he's content."

"Then he has been no balm for your aloneness," she said softly.

"Not much. But I owe my life to him, several times over, and therefore this day's magnificence."

"Glib scoundrel." She kissed him. He buried his visage in her fragrant hair until she guided him to a glassful, a sweet cake, and sober discourse.

"—the western Britons preserved some vestige of civilization. Yes, I frequently thought of making my way here, where I knew the Empire continued. But for a long time, the likelihood of arriving with any money, or arriving at all, was slight. Meanwhile life among the Britons was not too bad. I had come to know them. It was easy to move among identities and to stay reasonably well-off. I could wait for the English, the Franks, the Northmen to acquire milder ways, for civilization to be reborn throughout Europe. After that, as I've mentioned, the Rus trade route let me make a good living and meet a variety of people, both along it and down here in the Mediterranean world. You understand that that seemed my only hope of finding anyone else like me. Surely you've cherished the same hope, Athenais—Aliyat."

He could barely hear: "Until it grew too painful."

He kissed her cheek, and she brought her lips to his, and presently she crooned, "It has ended. You have found me. I keep striving to believe that this is real."

"It is, and we'll keep it so."

With that practicality which bespoke her intelligence, she asked, "What do you propose we do?"

"Well," he said, "it was about time anyhow for me to finish with Cadoc. He's been in sight longer than he should have been; some old acquaintances must be starting to wonder. Besides, since the Norman duke made himself king of England, more and more young English, ill content, have been coming south to join the Emperor's Varangian Guard. Those who happened to hear of Cadoc would know how unlikely it is that a Welshman be a trader of his sort.

"Worse, when the Rus lord Yaroslav died his realm was divided among his sons, and they are now falling out with each other. The barbarian plainsmen take advantage. The routes grow dangerous. Fresh Rus attacks on Constantinople are quite conceivable, and could hurt the trade even more. I well remember what difficulties previous forays caused.

"So, let Athenais and Cadoc retire from their businesses, move away, and drop out of touch with everybody they knew. First, naturally, Aliyat and Hanno will have liquidated their possessions."

She frowned. "You talk as if you meant to leave Constantinople. Must we? It is the queen of the world."

"It will not remain that," he told her grimly.

She gave him a startled glance.

"Think," he said. "The Normans have taken the last Imperial outpost in Italy. The Saracens hold everything south of there from Spain through Syria. They have not been totally hostile of late. However—the Imperial defeat at Manzikert last year was more than a military disaster that led to an abrupt change of Emperors. The Turks had already taken Armenia from you, remember. Now Anatolia lies open to them. It will be touch and go whether the Empire can hold the Ionian littoral against them. Meanwhile the Balkan provinces chafe and the Normans venture east. Here at home, commerce shrinks, poverty and unrest grow, corruption at court vies for mastery with incompetence. Oh, I daresay the catastrophe will be a while in coming full upon New Rome. But let us get out well ahead of it."

"Where? Is any place safe and, and decent?"

"Well, certain of the Muslim capitals are brilliant. Far eastward, I hear, an emperor reigns over a realm vast, peaceful, and glorious. But those are alien folk; the ways to them are long and beset. Western Europe would be easier, but it's still turbulent and backward. Also, since the churches openly split apart, life there has been hard for people from Orthodox countries. We'd have to make a show of conversion to Catholicism, and we'd best avoid conspicuousness like that. No, on the whole I'd say we should stay within the Roman Empire for another century or two. In Greece, nobody knows us."

"Greece? Hasn't it gone barbarian?"

"Not quite. There's a heavy population of Slavs in the north and Vlachs in Thessaly, while the Normans are plaguing the Aegean Sea. But such cities as Thebes and Corinth remain well off, well defended. A beautiful country, full of memories. We can be happy there."

Cadoc raised his brows. "But haven't you given thought to this yourself?" he went on. "You could only have contin-

ued as you are for another ten years at best. Then you'd have had to withdraw, before men noticed that you don't grow old. And as much in the public eye as you've been, you could scarcely stay on in these parts."

"True." Athenais smiled. "I meant to announce I'd had a change of heart, repented my wickedness, and would retire afar to a life of poverty, prayer, and good works. I've already made arrangements for the quick, quiet transport of my hoard—against any sudden need to escape. After all, that has been my life, to drop from one place and start afresh in another."

He grimaced. "Always like this?"

"Need forces me," she answered sadly. "I'm not fit by nature to be a nun, a she-hermit, any such unworldly being. I often call myself a well-to-do widow, but at last the money is spent, unless some upheaval—war, sack, plague, whatever—brings ruin first. A woman cannot very well invest her money like a man. Whatever pulls me down, usually I must begin again among the lowliest and . . . work and save and connive to become better off."

His smile was rueful. "Not unlike my life."

"A man has more choices." She paused. "I do study things beforehand. I agree, on balance Corinth will be best for us."

"What?" he exclaimed, sitting straight in his astonishment. "You let me rattle on and on about what you perfectly well knew?"

"Men must show forth their cleverness."

Cadoc whooped laughter. "Superb! A girl who can lead me, *me,* by the nose like that is the girl I can stay with forever."

He sobered: "But now we'll make the move as soon as may be. At once, if I had my wish. Out of this . . . filth, to the first true home we've either of us had since—"

She laid fingers across his lips. "Hush, beloved," she said low. "If only that could be. But we can't simply disappear."

"Why not?"

She sighed. "It would rouse too much heed. A search for me, at least. There are men, highly placed men, who care for me, who'd be afraid I'd met with foul play. If then we were tracked down— No." A small fist clenched. "We must go on with our pretenses. For another month, perhaps,

while I prepare the ground with talk of, oh, making a pilgrimage, something like that."

A little while passed before he could say, "Well, a month, set against centuries."

"For me, the longest month I ever knew. But we'll see each other during it, often, won't we? Say we will!"

"Of course."

"I will hate making you pay, but you can see I must. Never mind, the money will be ours once we are free."

"Hm, we do need to lay plans, make arrangements."

"Let that wait till next time. This while we have today is so short. Then I must make ready for the next man."

He bit his lip. "You cannot tell him you've fallen sick?"

"I'd best not. He's among the most important of them all; his good will can spell the difference between life and death. Bardas Manasses, a manglabites on the staff of the Archestrategos."

"Yes, someone that high in the military, yes, I understand."

"Oh, my dearest, inwardly you bleed." Athenais embraced him. "Stop. Forget everything but the two of us. We still have an hour in Paradise."

She was wholly as knowing, as endlessly various and arousing, as men said.

3

A MINIATURE procession crossed the bridge over the Horn and approached the Blachernae Gate. They were four Rusi, two Northmen, and a couple in the lead who were neither. The Rusi carried a chest that was plainly heavy, suspended on two poles. The Northmen were off-duty members of the Varangian Guard, helmed and mailed, axes on their shoulders. Though it was clear that they were earning some extra pay by shepherding a valuable freight, it was also clear that this was with official permission, and the sentries waved the party through.

They went on by streets under the city wall. Heights soared above them to battlements and heaven. The morning was yet young and shadow lay deep, almost chill after the brightness on the water. Mansions of the wealthy fell behind and the men entered the humbler, busier Phanar quarter.

"This be muckwit," grumbled Rufus in Latin. "You've even sold your ship, haven't you? At a loss, I'll bet, so fast you got rid of everything."

"Turned it into gold, gems, portable wealth," Cadoc corrected merrily. He used the same language. While he had no reason to distrust their escort, caution was alloyed with his spirit. "We're leaving in another pair of weeks, or had you forgotten?"

"Meanwhile, though—"

"Meanwhile it'll be stored safely, secretly, where we can claim it at any hour of the day or night and no beforehand notice. You've been too much sulking when you weren't off bousing, old fellow. Have you never listened to me? Aliyat arranged this."

"What'd she tell their high and mightinesses, to make the way so smooth for us?"

Cadoc grinned. "That I let slip to her what a glorious deal I stand to make with certain other high and mightinesses—a deal which these men can have a slice of if they help me. Women, too, can learn how to cope with the world."

Rufus grunted.

The building in which Petros Simonides, jeweler, lived and had his shop was unprepossessing. However, Cadoc had long had some knowledge of what trade went through it, besides the owner's overt business. Several members of the Imperial court found it sufficiently useful that the authorities turned a blind eye. Petros received his visitors jovially. A pair of toughs whom he called nephews, though they resembled him not in the least, helped bring the chest to the cellar and stow it behind a false panel. Money passed. Cadoc declined hospitality on the grounds of haste and led his own followers back to the street.

"Well, Arnulf, Sviatopolk, all of you, my thanks," he said. "You may go where you like now. You will remember your orders about keeping silence. That need not keep you from drinking my health and fortune." He dispensed a second purseful. The sailors and soldiers departed gleefully.

"You didn't think Petros' food and wine be good?" asked Rufus.

"They doubtless are," said Cadoc, "but I really have need to hurry. Athenais keeps this whole afternoon for me, and first I want to get myself well prepared at the baths."

"Huh! Like this whole while since you met her. Never seen you lovesick before. You could as well be fifteen."

"I feel reborn," said Cadoc softly. His vision dwelt on distances beyond the bustle and narrowness around. "You will too, when we've found you your true wife."

"With my luck, she'll be a sow."

Cadoc laughed, clapped Rufus on the back, and slipped a bezant into his single palm. "Go drown that gloom of yours. Or better yet, work it off with a lively wench."

"Thanks." Rufus showed no change of mood. "You do toss money these days."

"A strange thing about pure joy," Cadoc murmured. "One wants to share it."

He sauntered off, whistling. Rufus stood with hunched shoulders and stared after him.

4

STARS AND a gibbous moon gave light enough. The streets, gone mostly quiet, were swept clean. Occasionally a patrol marched by, lantern-glow shimmering on metal, embodiment of that power which held the city at peace. A man could walk easy.

Cadoc drank deep of the night air. Heat had yielded to mildness, and smoke, dust, stenches, pungencies lain down to rest. As he neared the Kontoskalion, he caught a ghost of tar on the breeze, and smiled. How smells could rouse memories. A galley lay at the Egyptian Harbor of Sor, weathered and salt-streaked by fabulous seas, and his father towered over him, holding his hand. . . . He raised that same hand to his nostrils. The hair on it tickled his lip. A scent like jasmine, Aliyat's perfume, and was there still some of her own sweetness? That had been such a long farewell kiss.

And so happily weary. He chuckled. When he arrived, she told him a message had come from the great Bardas Manasses, he was unable to visit her this evening as planned, she and her dearest had that added time as a free gift of Aphrodite. "I have discovered what immortal strength means," she purred at the last, close against his breast.

He yawned. Sleep would be very welcome. If only it were

at her side— But her servants already saw how she favored this foreigner. Best not give them further cause for wonderment. Gossip might reach the wrong ears.

Soon, though, soon!

Abruptly darkness deepened. He had turned into a lesser street near the harbor and his lodging. Brick walls hulked on either side, leaving just a strip of sky overhead. He slowed, careful lest he stumble on something. Silence had also grown thick. Were those footfalls behind him? It crossed his mind that he had several times glimpsed the same figure in a hooded cloak. Bound the same way by mere chance?

Light gleamed, a lantern uncovered in an alley as he passed it. For an instant he was dazzled. "That's him!" struck through. Three men came out of the gut into the street. A sword slipped free.

Cadoc sprang backward. The men deployed, right, left, in front. They had him boxed, up against the opposite wall.

His knife jumped forth. Two of the attackers were armed like him. He wasted no breath in protest or scream for help. If he couldn't save himself, he'd be dead in minutes. His left hand ripped his mantle loose from its brooch.

The swordsman swung back to strike. The lantern, set down at the alley mouth, made him a featureless piece of night, but Cadoc saw light ripple along his hip. He was mail-clad. The steel whirred. Cadoc swayed aside. He snapped the mantle at the unseen face. It drew a curse and tangled the weapon. Cadoc leaped right. He hoped to dodge past the foeman there. That wight was too skillful. His bulk stepped in the way. His dagger thrust. Cadoc would have taken it in the belly, had he possessed less than immortal vigor. He parried with his own knife and retreated.

Bricks gritted against his shoulderblades. He was trapped anyhow. He showed teeth and feinted, side to side. The daggermen prowled beyond his reach. The swordsman prepared to hew afresh.

Sandals thudded on stones. Light glimmered on a coppery beard. Rufus' hook caught the swordsman's throat. It went in. Rufus worked it savagely. The man dropped his blade, clawed at the shaft, went to his knees. He croaked through the blood.

Cadoc scrambled, snatched up the sword, bounced back

erect. He was no grand master of this weapon, but he had tried to acquire every fighting art that the centuries brought. A knifeman scuttered clear. Cadoc whirled in time to smite the second, who was nearly at his back. The blade struck an arm. Through the heavy impact, Cadoc thought he felt bone give. The man shrieked, stumbled, and fled.

Snarling, Rufus pulled his hook out and went for the first stabber. That one vanished too, down the street and into night. Rufus halted. He turned about. "You hurt?" he panted.

"No." Cadoc was as breathless. His heart banged. Yet his mind had gone wholly cold and clear, like ice afloat in the sea off Thule. He glanced at the mailed man, who writhed and moaned and bubbled blood. "Let's go . . . before somebody . . . comes." He discarded the telltale sword.

"To the inn?"

"No." Cadoc trotted away. His wind returned to him, his pulse slowed. "They knew me. Therefore they knew where to wait and must know where I'm staying. Whoever sent them will want to try again."

"I guessed it might be a good idea to tail after and keep an eye on you. That be a pile o' treasure you left with that Phanariot son of a pig."

"I shouldn't pride myself on my wits," said Cadoc bleakly. "You showed a barrelful more than I did."

"Haw, you be in love. Worse'n drunk. Where should we go? I s'pose the main streets be safe. Maybe we can wake 'em at another inn. I've still got money on me, if you don't."

Cadoc shook his head. They had emerged on a thoroughfare, bare and dim under the moon. "No. We'll slink about till sunrise, then mingle with people bound out of the city. Those can't have been common footpads, or even killers for hire. Armor, sword—at least one of them was an Imperial soldier."

5

VSEVOLOD THE Fat, who stood high among the Rus merchants, owned a house in St. Mamo. It was small, since he only used it when he was at Constantinople, but furnished with barbaric opulence and, during his stays, a wanton or

two. The servants were young kinsmen of his, whose loyalty could be relied on, and upstairs was a room whose existence was not obvious.

He entered it near the close of day. Gray-shot, his beard fell to the paunch that swelled his embroidered robe. A fist clutched a jug. "I brought wine," he greeted. "Cheap stuff, but plenty. You will want plenty, and not care how fine it is. Here." He shoved it toward Cadoc.

The latter rose, paying it no heed. Rufus took it instead and upended it over his mouth. He had snored for hours, while Cadoc prowled to and fro between the barren walls or stared out a window at the Golden Horn and the many-domed city beyond.

"What have you found, Vsevolod Izyaslavev?" Cadoc asked tonelessly, in the same Russian.

The merchant plumped his bottom down on the bed, which creaked. "Bad news," he rumbled. "I went to the shop of Petros Simonides and met guards posted. It cost me to get an honest answer out of them, and they don't know anything anyhow. But he is arrested for interrogation, they said." A sigh like a steppe wind. "If that is true, if they don't let him off, there goes the best smuggling outlet I ever had. Ah, merciful saints, help a poor old man earn the bread for his little wife and darling children!"

"What about me?"

"You understand, Cadoc Rhysev? I dared not push too hard. I am not young like you. Courage has leaked out with youth and strength. Remember now the Lord, in these high days of your life, before age and woe come on you too. But I did talk with a captain in the city guard that I know. Yes, it is as you feared, they want you. He does not know just why, but spoke of a brawl near your rooming place and a man killed. Which I knew already, from you."

"I thought as much," said Cadoc. "Thank you."

Rufus lowered the jug. "What do we do?" he grated.

"Best you stay here, where you have sought refuge," Vsevolod replied. "Before long I go home to Chernigov, you know. You can ride with me. The Greeks shall not know you in my ship. Maybe I disguise you as a beautiful Circassian slave girl, Rufus, ha?" He guffawed.

"We don't have the cost of our passage," Cadoc said.

"No matter. You are my friend, my brother in Christ. I

trust you to pay me back later. Thirty percent interest, agreed? And you tell me more about how you got into this trouble. That might forewarn me."

Cadoc nodded. "Once we're outbound, I will."

"Good." Vsevolod's eyes flickered between his guests. "I thought we would have a jolly time tonight, get drunk, but you are not in the mood. Yes, a terrible sorrow, all that money gone. I will have your supper sent up. We shall meet tomorrow. God cheer your sleep." He rose and lumbered out. The panel slid shut behind him.

Constantinople was a blue shadow above golden-shining water, against golden-red sunset. Dusk filled the room in St. Mamo like smoke. Cadoc raised the wine jug, swallowed, set it down again.

"You really going to tell him?" wondered Rufus.

"Oh, no. Not the truth." Now they spoke Latin. "I'll invent a story that he'll believe and that will do him no harm. Something about an official who decided to get rid of me and seize my gold rather than wait for his share of the profit."

"The swine could've been jealous o' you, too," Rufus suggested. "Vsevolod might know you was seeing that Athenais."

"I have to make up a story in any case." Cadoc's voice cracked. "I can't understand what happened, myself."

"Hunh? Why, plain's a wart on your thumper. The bitch put one o' her customers onto it. Shut your mouth for aye—they'd've gone after me next—and divvy your money. Maybe she's got a hold on a fellow high in the gover'ment, like something she knows about him. Or maybe he was just glad to oblige her and take his share. We was lucky and lived, but she's won. The hunt is out for us. If we want to stay alive, we won't come back for twenty-thirty years." Rufus took the wine and glugged. "Forget her."

Cadoc's fist struck the wall. Plaster cracked and fell. "How could she? How?"

"Ah, 'twas easy. You wove the snare for her." Rufus patted Cadoc's shoulder. "Don't feel bad. You'll swindle yourself another chest o' gold inside a ge-ne-ration."

"Why?" Cadoc leaned against the wall, face buried in arm.

Rufus shrugged. "A whore be a whore."

"No, but she—immortal—I offered her—" Cadoc could not go on.

Rufus' mouth drew tight, invisibly in the gloom. "You ought to could see. You can think better'n me when you put your mind to it. How long's she been what she be? Four hundred years, you said? Well, now, that be a lot o' men. A thousand a year? Maybe less these days, but likely more than that earlier."

"She told me she, she takes as . . . much freedom from the life . . . as she can."

"Shows you how fond she be of it. You know the sort o' things a lot o' fellows want from a whore. And all the times a girl gets roughed up, or robbed, or kicked out, or knocked up and left to handle that however she can—leave it on a trash heap, maybe? Four hundred years, Lugo. How d'you s'pose she feels about men? And she'd never've got to watch you growing old."

VIII

Lady in Waiting

RAIN FELL throughout the day. It was very light, soundless, and lost itself in the mists that smoked over the ground; but it closed off the world like sleep. From the verandah Okura looked across a garden whose stones and dwarf cypresses had gone dim. Water dripped off the shingles above her and filmed the whitewash of the enclosure wall. There sight ended. Though the broad south gate stood open, she barely glimpsed the avenue outside, a puddle, a leafless cherry tree. Fog had taken away the minor palace beyond. All Heian-kyo might never have been.

She shivered and turned back toward her quarters. The two or three servants whom she passed by were bulky in wadded garments. Her overlapping kimonos kept some warmth of their own and the carefully matched winter colors preserved a forlorn elegance. Breath drifted ghostly. When she entered the mansion, twilight enfolded her. It was as if cold did also. Shutters and blinds could hold off wind, but dankness seeped through and braziers availed little.

Yet comfort of a sort awaited her. Masamichi had been kind enough to allot her a sleeping platform to herself in the west pavilion. Between the sliding screens that marked the room off, a pair of chests and a gō table hunched on the floor. She had a fleeting fancy that they wished they could creep under the thick tatami that covered the platform. No one else was about, so its curtains were drawn back. By the flicker of a few tapers, futon and cushions lay as black lumps.

She opened the cupboard where her koto stood. It was among the heirlooms not yet removed; its name was Cuckoo Song. How right for such a day as this, she thought: the bird

that is the inconstant lover, that can bear word between the living and the dead, that embodies the ineluctable passage of time. She had in mind a melody well-liked when she was a girl. Afterward she had sometimes played it for her men—those two among her lovers whom she truly cared for— But no, she remembered that the instrument was now tuned for a winter mode.

A maid came into the section, approached, bowed, and piped, "A messenger has arrived from the noble Lord Yasuhira, my lady." Her manner took it for granted. The liaison between Chikuzen no Okura, lady in waiting in the household of Ex-Emperor Tsuchimikado, and Nakahari no Yasuhira, until lately a Minor Counselor to self-reproclaimed Emperor Go-Toba, went back many years. Her own name for him was Mi-yuki, Deep Snow, because that had been his first excuse for staying the night with her.

"Bring him." Okura's pulse quivered.

The maid left. She returned as the courier showed himself on the verandah. With the light from outside at his back, Okura could not only see through the translucent blind that he was a boy, she made out that his brocade coat was dry, his white trousers hardly sullied. Besides wearing a straw cape, he must have gone on horseback. The least of smiles touched her lips. Deep Snow would preserve appearances until the end.

Her smile died. The end was upon them both.

With proper ritual, the messenger reached that which he carried under the blind to the maid and knelt, waiting for the reply. The maid brought the letter to Okura and went out. Okura released and unrolled it. Yasuhira had used a pale green paper, tied to a willow switch. His calligraphy was less fine than erstwhile; he had grown farsighted.

"With dismay I learn that you have lost your position at court. I hoped the Ex-Emperor's consort would shelter you from the wrath that has fallen on your kinsman Chikuzen no Masamichi. What shall become of you, deprived of his protection when I too am made well-nigh helpless? This is a sorrow such as only Tu Fu could express. To my own poor attempt I add the wish that we may at least meet again soon.

"In the waning year
My sleeves, which lay over yours,
Are wet as the earth,
Though the rain on them is salt
From a sea of grief for you."

His poetry was indeed not to be named with any line of the great Chinese master, Okura thought. Nevertheless a desire for his presence struck with astonishing suddenness. She wondered why. Whatever ardor they once felt had long since cooled to friendship; she could not recall just when they had last shared a mattress.

Well, seeing one another might strengthen them by the knowledge that each was not uniquely alone in misfortune. True, she had heard that the new military governor was confiscating thousands of estates from families who had supported the Imperial cause; but that was a mere number, as unreal as the inner life of a peasant or laborer or dog. True, this house would be taken over by a follower of the Hojo clan; but to her it had simply meant lodging given her out of a sense of duty toward common ancestors. Her dismissal was the sword-cut she actually felt. It lopped her from her world.

Still, she would shortly have left in any case. Surely Yasuhira's isolation was worse. Let them exchange what solace they could.

One must cling to form, even in answering what she recognized as an appeal. Okura knelt silent, thinking, composing, deciding, before she called for a servant. "I will have a sprig of plum," she instructed. That should complement her reply more subtly than cherry. From her writing materials she selected a sheet colored pearl-gray. By the time she had the ink mixed, her words stood clear before her. They were only another poem.

"Blossoms grew fragrant,
Then faded and blew away,
Leaving bitter fruit.
It fell, and on bare branches
Twig calls to twig through the wind."

He would understand, and come.

She prepared the package with the artistry it deserved and gave it to a maid to bring to the courier. He would fare swiftly across the city, but his master's ox-drawn carriage, the only suitable conveyance for a nobleman, would take the better part of an hour. Okura had time to prepare herself.

Holding a taper close, she examined her face in a mirror. It had never been beautiful: too thin, cheekbones too strong, eyes too wide, mouth too large. However, it was properly powdered, the brows well plucked, the cosmetic brows painted just sufficiently far up the forehead, the teeth duly blackened. Her figure also left much to be desired, more bosom and less hip than should be there. It did carry its clothing well; the silks flowed gracefully when she walked with the correct gait. Her hair redeemed many faults, a jet cataract trailing on the floor.

Thereafter she ordered rice wine and cakes made ready. Her karma and Yasuhira's could not be altogether bad, for she was alone with a few of the servants precisely now. Masamichi had taken his wife, two concubines, and children to settle in with a friend who offered them temporary shelter. Their private possessions were going along for storage. He had said Okura and hers could come too, but was noticeably relieved when she told him she had her own plans for the future. Well-bred, the family had never said anything unseemly about the men who called on her and sometimes spent the night. Nonetheless, the fact that somebody who mattered was bound to overhear things would have inhibited conversation on this day when, of all days, it must be either frank or useless.

With the clepsydra taken away and the sun obscured, it was impossible to tell time. Okura guessed that Yasuhira's arrival occurred about midday, the Hour of the Horse. Because of the servants, she had one of them place her screen of state conveniently, and upon hearing his footsteps on the verandah she knelt behind it. Also for his sake, she thought wryly. Their world falling to pieces around them, the old proprieties mattered perhaps more than ever.

He and she spent a while in formalities and small talk. Thereupon she broke convention and pushed the screen aside. Once that would have implied lovemaking to come. Today a poetic reference or two among the banalities had

made it clear that such was the intent of neither. They only wished to speak freely.

The maids Kodayu and Ukon might well be more taken aback by this than by any union of bodies so daylit blatant. They preserved blank deference and brought in the refreshment. Good girls, Okura thought as they went away. What would become of them? Slightly surprised, she found herself wishing the new master would keep the staff on and treat them gently. She feared he would not, being the kind of creature he was.

She and her visitor settled onto the floor. While Yasuhira courteously contemplated the floral pattern on his wine cup, she thought how he seemed to have aged overnight. He went gray years ago, but moon face, slit eyes, bud of a mouth, tiny tuft of beard had remained as handsome as in his youth. Many a lady sighed and compared him to Genji, the Shining Prince of Murasaki's two-hundred-year-old story. Today rain had streaked the powder and blurred the rouge, revealing darkened lower lids, blotchy sallowness, deepened lines, and his shoulders were slumped.

He had not lost the courtier grace with which, in due course, he sipped. "Ah," he murmured, "that is most welcome, Asagao."—Morning Glory, the name for her that he used in private. "Savor, aroma, and warmth. 'Resplendent light—'"

She was compelled to cap the literary allusion by saying, "But not, I fear, 'everlasting fortune,'" and whetted that a little by adding, "As for Morning Glory, at my age might not Pine Tree be better?"

He smiled. "So I have kept some of my touch in guiding conversation. Shall we get unpleasant topics out of the way at once? Then we can discourse of former times and their joys."

"If we have the heart to." If *you* do, she meant. I never had any choice but to make myself strong.

"I had hoped the Lord Tsuchimikado would retain you."

"Under these circumstances, dismissal may be less than the worst thing that could happen to me," she said. He failed to completely hide puzzlement. She explained: "Without a family holding rice land, I would be scarcely more than a beggar, lacking even a place of my own like this to

retire to when off duty. The others would despise and soon abuse me."

"Indeed?"

"Women are as cruel as men, Mi-yuki."

He nibbled a cake. She realized that was cover for the collecting of his thoughts. At length he said, "I must confess, the knowledge of the situation made thin my expectations for you."

"Why so?" She knew the answer perfectly well, but also knew that explaining to her would help him.

"It is true that Lord Tsuchimikado stayed at peace during the uprising," he said, "but if he did not work against the Hojo chieftains, neither did he assist them. Now I daresay he feels a need to curry favor, the more so because they may then make one of his line the next Emperor when our present sovereign dies or abdicates. Ridding himself of every member of any family that was in revolt seems a trivial gesture. Just the same, it is a gesture, and Lord Tokifusa, whom they have set as military governor over Heian-kyo, will take due note of it."

"I wonder what sin in a past life caused Lord Go-Toba to try to seize back the throne he had quitted," Okura mused.

"Ah, it was no madness, it was a noble effort that should have succeeded. Remember, his brother, the then Emperor Juntoku, was with him in it, and so were not only families like ours and their followers, but soldiers of the Taira who would fain avenge what the Minamoto did to their fathers; and many a monk also took up arms."

A bleakness passed through Okura. She knew how the monks of Mount Hiei repeatedly descended on this city and terrorized it, not only by threats but by beatings, killings, looting, burning. They came to enforce political decisions they wanted; but were they any better than the outright criminal gangs who effectively ruled over the entire western half of the capital?

"No, it must have been because of our own former sins that we failed," Yasuhira continued. "How far have we fallen since the golden days! We might have won to an Emperor who truly ruled."

"What do you mean?" asked Okura, sensing how he needed to express his bitterness.

It erupted: "Why, what has the Emperor been for generations but a doll in the hands of the mighty, enthroned as a child and made to step down and retire into a life of idleness when he reached manhood? And meanwhile the clans have made earth sodden with blood as they fought out who should name the Shogun." He gulped for air and explicated in the same rush of words: "The Shogun is the military head in Kamakura who is the real master of the Empire. Or who was. Today—today the Hojo have won the clan wars; and *their* Shogun is himself a boy, another doll who says what their lords want him to say."

He reined himself in and apologized: "I beg Asagao's pardon. You must be shocked at my bluntness; and needlessly, for of course a woman cannot understand these things."

Okura, who had kept her ears open and her mind awake amply long enough to know everything he had told her, replied, "True, they are not for her. What I do understand is that you grieve over what we have lost. Poor Mi-yuki, what shall become of you?"

Somewhat calmed, Yasuhira said, "I was in a better position to bargain for leniency than Masamichi or most others. Thus I have leave to occupy my mansion in Heian-kyo for a short time yet. After I must depart, it will be to a farm in the east, well beyond Ise, that I am allowed to keep. The tenants will support me and my remaining dependents."

"But in poverty! And so far away, among rude countryfolk. It will be like passing over the edge of the world."

He nodded. "Often will my tears fall. Yet—" She could not readily follow his quotation, having had scant opportunity to practice spoken Chinese, but gathered that it was about maintaining a serene spirit in adversity. "I hear there is a view of the sacred mountain Fuji. And I can take some books and my flute with me."

"Then you are not wholly destroyed. That is one bright dustmote in the dark air."

"What of you? What has happened to this household?"

"Yesterday came the baron who will take possession here. The worst kind of provincial, face unpowdered and weathered like a peasant's, hair and beard abristle, uncouth as a monkey and growling a dialect so barbarous that one could barely comprehend him. As for the soldiers in his train, oh, they could almost have been wildfolk of Hok-

kaido. Yes, knowledge of what I leave behind may temper my longing for Heian-kyo. He gave us a few days to make our preparations."

Yasuhira hesitated before he said, "Mine will be no fitting existence for a well-born lady. However, if you have nothing else, come with my party. For the rest of our days we can strive to console each other."

"I thank you, dear old friend," she answered mutedly, "but I do have my own road before me."

He emptied his cup. She refilled it. "Indeed? Let me be glad on your account, not disappointed on mine. Who will take you in?"

"No one. I will seek the temple at Higashiyama—that one, for I have often been there with the Ex-Imperial consort and the chief priest knows me—I will go and take vows."

She had not expected him to show dismay. He almost dropped his cup. Wine slopped forth to stain his outer robe. "What? Do you mean full vows? Become a nun?"

"I think so."

"Cut off your hair, your beautiful hair, don coarse black raiment, live— How will you live?"

"The fiercest bandit dares not harm a nun; the poorest hovel will not deny her shelter and some rice for her bowl. I have in mind to go on perpetual pilgrimage, from shrine to shrine, that I may gain merit in whatever years of this life are left me." Okura smiled. "During those years, perhaps I can call on you from time to time. Then we will remember together."

He shook his head, bemused. Like most courtiers, he had never traveled far, seldom more than a day's journey from Heian-kyo. And that had been by carriage—to services that for his kind were occasions more social than religious; to view blossoms in the springtime countryside or the maple leaves of autumn; to admire and make poems about moonlight on Lake Biwa . . . "Afoot," he mumbled. "Roads that wet weather turns into quagmires. Mountains, gorges, raging rivers. Hunger, rain, snow, wind, fiery sun. Ignorant commoners. Beasts. Demons, ghosts. No." He set down his cup, straightened, firmed his voice. "You shall not. It would be hard for a young man. You, a woman, growing old, you will perish miserably. I won't have it."

Rather than remind him that he lacked authority over her, for his concern was touching, she asked gently, "Do I seem feeble?"

He fell silent. His eyes searched, as if to pierce the garments and look at the body that had sometimes lain beneath his. But no, she thought, that would never cross his mind. A decent man, he found nudity disgusting, and in fact they had always kept on at least one layer of clothing.

Finally he murmured, "It is true, it is eerie, the years have scarcely touched you, if at all. You could pass for a woman of twenty. But your age is—what? We have known each other for close to thirty years, and you must have been about twenty when you came to court, so that makes you only a little younger than me. And my strength has faded away."

You speak aright, she thought. Bit by bit I have seen you holding a book farther from your eyes or blinking at words you do not quite hear; half your teeth are gone; more and more fevers come upon you, coughs, chills; do your bones hurt when you rise in the mornings? I know the signs well, and well I should, as often as I have watched them steal over those I loved.

The impulse had seized her days before, when the bad news broke and she began to think what it meant and what to do. She had curbed it, but it stayed restlessly alive. If she yielded, what harm? She could trust this man. She was unsure whether it would help or hinder him against his sorrow.

Let me be honest with him, she decided. At least it will give him something to think about besides his great loss, in the solitude that awaits him.

"I am not the age you believe, my dear," she said quietly. "Do you wish the truth? Be warned, at first you may suppose I have gone mad."

He studied her before replying with the same softness, "I doubt that. There is more within you than you have ever manifested. I was vaguely but surely conscious of it. Perhaps I dared never inquire."

Then you are wiser than I believed, she thought. Her resolution crystallized. "Let us go outside," she said. "What I have to tell is for no ears but yours."

Not troubling about cloaks, they went forth together, onto the verandah, around this pavilion, and along a cov-

ered gallery to a kiosk overlooking the pool. Near its placidity rose a man-high stone in whose ruggedness was chiseled the emblem of the clan that had lost this home. Okura halted. "Here is a good spot for me to show you that no evil spirit uses my tongue to speak falsehoods," she said.

Solemnly, she recited a passage she had chosen from the Lotus Sutra. Yasuhira's manner was as grave when he told her, "Yes, that suffices me." He was of the Amidist sect, which held that the Buddha himself watches over humankind.

They stood gazing out at things of chaste beauty. Mist from the rain filled the kiosk and covered hair, clothes, eyelashes with droplets. The cold and the silence were like presences, whose awareness was remote from them.

"You suppose I am about fifty years old," she said. "I am more than twice that."

He caught a breath, looked sharply at her, looked away, and asked with closely held calm, "How can this be?"

"I know not," she sighed. "I know only that I was born in the reign of Emperor Toba, through whom the Fujiwara clan still ruled the realm so strongly that it lay everywhere at peace. I grew up like any other girl of good birth, save that I was never ill, but once I had become fully a woman, all change in me ceased, and thus it has been ever since."

"What karma is yours?" he whispered.

"I tell you, I know not. I have studied, prayed, meditated, practiced austerities, but no enlightenment has come. At last I decided my best course was to continue this long life as well as I was able."

"That must be . . . difficult."

"It is."

"Why have you not revealed yourself?" The voice trembled. "You must be holy, a saint, a Bodhisattva."

"I know I am not. I am troubled and unsure and tormented by desire, fear, hope, every fleshly evil. Also, as my agelessness first came slowly to notice, I have encountered jealousy, spite, and dread. Yet I could never hitherto bring myself to renounce the world and retreat to a life of sacred poverty. So whatever I am, Mi-yuki, I am not holy."

He pondered. Beyond the garden wall swirled formlessness. Eventually he asked her, "What did you do? What have your years been like?"

"When I was fourteen, an older man—his name no longer matters—sought me out. He being influential, my parents encouraged him. I cared little for him, but knew not how to refuse. In the end he spent the three nights at my side and thereafter made me a secondary wife. He also got me a position at the court of Toba, who by then had abdicated. I bore him children, two of whom lived. Toba died. Soon after, my husband did.

"By then the wars between the Taira and the Minamoto had broken out. I made an occasion to retire from the service of Toba's widow and, taking my inheritance, withdrew to the family from which I sprang. It helped that a lady not at court lives so secluded. But how empty an existence!

"At last I confided in a lover I had gotten, a man of some wealth and power. He brought me to a rural estate of his, where I spent several years. Meanwhile he got my daughter married off elsewhere. He took me back to Heian-kyo under her name—such people as remembered marveled at how much she resembled her mother—and through his patronage I came again into service at a royal household. Gradually I outlived the scorn they have for provincials; but when they gradually observed how I kept my youth—

"Do you wish to hear it all?" she asked in an upsurge of weariness. "This has been my third such renewal. The tricks, the deceptions, the children I have borne and, one way or another, managed to have adopted elsewhere, lest it become too plain that they grow old while I do not. That has hurt most. I wonder how much more I could endure."

"Therefore you are leaving everything behind," he breathed.

"The time was already overpast. I hesitated because of the strife, the uncertainty about what would become of my kindred. Well, that has been settled for me. It feels almost like a liberation."

"If you take nun's vows, you cannot return here as you did before."

"I have no wish to. I have had my fill of the petty intrigues and hollow amusements. Fewer are the midnight stars than the yawns I have smothered, the hours I have stared into vacancy and waited for something, anything to happen." She touched his hand. "You gave me one reason

to linger. But now you too must go. Besides, I wonder how much longer they can keep up the pretense in Heian-kyo."

"You choose a harder way than I think you imagine."

"No harder, *I* think, than most in times to come. It is a cruel age we are bound into. At least a wandering nun has people's respect, and . . . nobody questions her. Someday I may even win to understanding of why we suffer what we do."

"Could I ever show courage like hers?" he asked the rain.

Once more she touched his hand. "I feared this tale might distress you."

Still he looked before him, into the silvery blindness. "For your sake, perhaps. It has not changed you for me. While I live, you will remain my Morning Glory. And now you have helped me remember that I am safely mortal. Will you pray for me?"

"Always," she promised.

They stood a while in silence, then went back inside. There they spoke of happy things and summoned up happy memories, pleasures and lovelinesses that had been theirs. He got a little tipsy. Nevertheless, when they said farewell it was with the dignity becoming a nobleman and a lady of the Imperial court.

IX

Ghosts

DID SMOKE rouse her? Bitter in her nostrils, sharp-edged in her lungs, at first it was all that was. She coughed. Her skull flew asunder. The shards fell back with a crash. They ground against each other like ice floes on a lake under storm. Again she coughed, and again. Amidst the noise and the sword-blade hurt she began to hear a crackling that loudened.

Her eyes opened. The smoke savaged them. Through it, blurrily, she saw the flames. That whole side of the chapel was coming ablaze. Already the fire licked up to the ceiling. She could not make out the saints painted there, nor any icons on the walls—were they gone?—but the altar abided. As the smoke drifted and the half-light leaped, its bulk wavered in her sight. She had a wild brief sense that it was adrift, would soon reach her and crush her under its weight or else float away forever on the smoke.

Heat billowed. She crept to hands and knees. For a while she could not lift her head. It was too heavy with pain. Then something at the edge of vision drew her in a slow shamble. She slumped above and groped after comprehension.

Sister Elena. Sprawled on her back. Very still, more than the altar was, altogether empty of movement. Eyes open, firelight ashimmer in them. Mouth agape, tongue half out of it, dry. Legs and loins startlingly white against the clay floor and the habit pulled up over them. White flecks likewise catching the light across her groin. Blood-spatters bright on thighs and belly.

Varvara's insides writhed. She threw up. Once, twice, thrice the vomit burst forth. The surges ripped through her head. When they were done, though, only the foul taste and

the burning left in her, more awareness had awakened. She wondered in a vague way whether this had been the final violation or a sign of God's grace, covering the traces of what had been done to Elena.

You were my sister in Christ, Varvara thought. So young, oh, how young. I wish you had not been in such awe of me. Your laughter was sweet to hear. I wish we could sometimes have been together, only the two of us, and told secrets and giggled before we went to prayers. Well, you have won martyrdom, I suppose. Go home to Heaven.

The words wavered over pain and throbbing and great swoops of dizziness. The fire roared. Its heat thickened. Sparks danced through the smoke. Some landed on her sleeves. They winked out, but she must flee, or else burn alive.

For a moment, weariness overwhelmed her. Why not die, here with little Elena? Make an end of the centuries, now when everything else had come to an end. If she breathed deeply, the agony would be short. Afterward, peace.

Sunlight struck long, brass-yellow, through haze and whirling soot. While she wondered about death, her body had crawled out the door. Astonishment jolted her more fully back to herself. She swung her gaze to and fro. Nobody was nigh. Mostly wood, the cloister buildings were afire all around. Somehow she got to her feet and stumbled from them.

Beyond the enclosure, animal wariness took hold. She crouched back down, next to a wall, and peered. Monastery and nunnery stood a distance from the town, as was usual. The religious should have found shelter behind the defenses. They had not had time. The Tatars arrived too soon, were *there,* horses between them and safety. They scrambled back and beseeched the Virgin, the saints and angels. Presently some of the wild men came to them, yelping like dogs.

It made no difference, Varvara saw. Pereyaslavl had fallen. No doubt the Tatars stormed it before they troubled about the house of the Virgin. A monstrous black cloud rose from its walls, up and up into the sky, where it broke apart into smears across eventide purity. Flames stabbed into view beneath. They tinged the gloom with restless red. She remembered dimly how the Lord went before the Is-

raelites as a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. Did His voice roar like the pyre that had been Pereyaslavl?

Here and there across the rolling farmlands, villages burned too, smaller darknesses taking flight. The Tatars seemed to be assembling near the town. Squads galloped through grainfields toward the main body of horsemen. Warriors afoot herded captives along, not many—but then, Varvara saw, the invaders were no huge army, not the locust swarm of rumor, several hundred perhaps. They weren't steel-clad either, it was mostly leather and fur on those stocky forms, now and then a blink but that was likelier off a weapon than a helmet. One at their van bore the standard, a pole from whose cross-arm hung—tails of oxen? The mounts were just ponies, dun-colored, shaggy, long-headed.

Yet these men had come as a runaway blaze over the land, driving all before them or trampling it down. Even cloister dwellers had heard, years ago, how the Pechenegs themselves fled to the Rusi, begging for succor. Riders who attacked like a single dragon with a thousand thunderous legs, arrows that flew like a sleetstorm—

Otherwise the countryside reached green, outrageously peaceful, eastward from the sun. Light streamed into the Trubezh, so that the river became a flow of gold. Flocks of waterfowl winged toward the marshes along its shores.

Yonder is my refuge, Varvara knew, my one tiny hope.

How to reach it? Her flesh was a lump of pain, splintered in places with anguish, and her bones were weights. Nevertheless, with the fire at her back, go she must. Knowledge made up for awkwardness. She could advance a bit, freeze, wait till it appeared safe to gain a few more feet. That meant a long time till she reached her goal, but time remained to her, oh, yes. She choked off a crazy laugh.

At first a cloister orchard gave concealment. How often had these trees blossomed amazing pink and white in spring, rustled green in summer, offered crisp sweetness in autumn, stood skeletally beautiful against winter's gray, for her sisters and her? The number of years was lost somewhere in Varvara's head. Certain of their people flitted through, Elena, shrewish Marina, plump and placid Yuliana, Bishop Simeon grave behind his huge bush of beard—dead, today

or years since, ghosts, she herself perhaps dead too but denied quietness, a rusalka creeping back to its river.

Beyond the orchard was pasture. Varvara thought for a while she would do best to wait among the trees for nightfall. Terror whipped her onward. She found herself slipping along more and more snakishly. Skill returned, indeed it did, when you had gained it in your girlhood. Before Christ came to the Rusi, and for generations afterward, women often ranged the forest as freely as men. Not the deep forest, no, it was dark, trackless, a place where beasts and demons prowled: but the verge, where sunlight reached and you could gather nuts and berries.

That lost greenwood felt closer than the cloister. She had no recollection of what happened after the enemy drew near the sanctuary.

At a sudden thudding, she went flat in the grass. Despite utter weariness, her heart banged and a thin singing lifted between her temples. It was well she had not stayed in the orchard. Several Tatar horses trotted among the trees and out onto the slope. She glimpsed one rider clearly, his broad brown face, slant slit eyes, wispy whiskers. Did she know him? Had he known her, back in the chapel? They passed close by but onward, they had not noticed her.

Thanks welled in her breast. Only later did she recall that they had not been to God or any saint but to Dazhbog of the Sun, the Protector. Another ancient memory, another strong ghost.

Dusk softened horizons by the time she reached the marsh for which she aimed. Fitful reddenings still touched the smoke of Pereyaslavl; the outlying villages must be entirely ash and charcoal. Tatar campfires began to twinkle in ordered clusters. They were small, like their masters, and bloody.

Mud oozed cool over Varvara's sandals, between her toes, up her ankles. She found a hummock where the grass was merely damp and sank down, curled onto its springiness. Her fingers dug into the turf and the sod beneath. Earth, Mother of All, hold me close, never let me go, comfort your child!

The first stars glimmered forth. She grew able to weep.

Thereafter she pulled off her clothes, layer by layer. A breeze nuzzled her nakedness. Having left the garments

bundled, she pushed through reeds till she waded in the stream. Here she could wash out her mouth and gullet, drink and drink. The water was slow to reach every parched finger-end. Meanwhile she crouched and scrubbed herself, over and over. The river laved, licked, caressed. She squatted and opened her loins to it. "Make me clean," she begged.

Light of stars and the Heaven Path gleamed off its current, enough for her to find her way back. She stood on the hummock so the breeze could dry her. That made her shiver but didn't take long. Her lips quirked for a moment—cropped hair was a legacy of the cloister, useful tonight. Afterward she took up her clothes, and nearly retched. Now she caught their stench of sweat, blood, Tatar. It took almost the last of her strength to put them back on. Maybe she couldn't have, were it not for the overlay of smoke-smell. Another legacy, another remembrance. She must keep covered against the night chill. Though she had never been sick in her life, she might well be too weakened to stave off a fever.

Slumping back onto the hummock, she dropped into a half-sleep wherein ghosts gibbered.

Dawn roused her. She sneezed, groaned, shuddered. However, as brightness lengthened across the land, the same cold clarity waxed within. Cautiously moving about her hiding place, she felt the stiffness work out of her joints, the aches dwindle. Wounds still hurt, but lesseningly as day warmed them; she knew they would heal.

She kept well down amidst the reeds, but from time to time ventured a look outward. She saw the Tatars water their horses, but the river blotted up any filth before it reached her. She saw them ride from horizon to horizon. Often they returned with burdens, loot. When the shifting masses at camp chanced to part before her eyes, she spied the captives, huddled together under mounted guard. Boys and young women, she supposed, those worth taking for slaves. The rest lay dead in the ashes.

She still lacked memory of her last hours in the cloister. A blow to the head could do that. She had no wish for the knowledge. Imagination served. When the raiders broke in, the religious must have scattered. Quite likely Varvara seized Elena's hand and led her, a dash into the chapel of

St. Eudoxia. It was small and offside, without treasures, the devils might overlook it. Of course they hadn't.

But what then? How had Elena died? Varvara—well, she dared hope she had fought, forced three or four to hold her down by turns. She was big, strong, a survivor of much, used to looking after herself. At last, she guessed, a Tatar, maybe when she bit him, smashed her head against the floor. Elena, though, Elena was slight and frail, gentle, dreamy. She could only have lain where she was while the thing went on and on and on. Maybe the last man, seeing what his fellow did to punish Varvara, had grinned and done the same to Elena. It killed her. Did they take her companion for dead also, belt up their breeches, and go? Or did they simply not care?

At least they hadn't used knives. Varvara would not have outlived that. Indeed, while her skull seemed amply hard, she might not have roused in time to escape, save for the vitality that kept her ageless. She should thank God for it.

"No," she breathed, "first I thank You for letting Elena die. She would have been broken, haunted all her days, hounded all her nights."

Further gratitude slipped her mind.

The river and the hours muttered past. Birds clamored. Flies buzzed thick as smoke, drawn by her stinking garb. Hunger began to gnaw. She recollected another old skill, lay belly down in the mud by a backwater that some drifted brushwood had formed, waited.

She was no longer alone. Ghosts crowded close. They touched and tugged at her, whispered, beckoned. At first they were horrible. They took her against her will, drunken husbands and two different ruffians who had caught her during the years when she wandered. With a third she had been lucky and gotten a knife into him first. "Burn in hell with those Tatars," she snarled. "I outlived you. I shall outlive them."

Yes, and the memories of them. If nothing else, she would humble the new ghosts as she had overcome the old ones. It might take years—she had years—but at last the strength that had kept her alive this long would again make her able to live gladly.

"Good men, come back to me. I miss you. We were happy together, were we not?"

Father. White-bearded Grandfather, from whom she could wheedle anything. Elder brother Bogdan, how they used to fight but how splendid he later grew, before a sickness ravaged his guts and tore him down. Younger brother, yes, and sisters, who teased her and became dear to her. Neighbors. Dir, who kissed her so shyly in a clover meadow where bees buzzed; she was twelve years old, and the world wobbled. Vladimir, first of her husbands, a strong man until age gnawed him hollow but always gentle with her. Husbands later, those she had liked. Friends who stood by her, priests who consoled her, when sorrow returned to her house. How well she recalled ugly little Gleb Ilyev, but then, he was the first of those who helped her escape when a home turned into a trap. Oh, and her sons, her sons, grandsons, daughters and granddaughters too, great-grandchildren, but time took them away. Every ghost had a face that changed, grew old, finally was the mask that the dead wear.

No, not quite every one. Some she had known too fleetingly. Strange, how vivid remained that trader from abroad—Cadoc, his name? Yes, Cadoc. She was glad she had not watched him crumble—when? Two hundred years, more or less, since their night in Kiyiv. Of course, he might have perished early, in the beauty of his youth.

Others were misty. Certain among them she was unsure of, whether they had been real or were fragments of dreams that had clung to memory.

With a splash and splatter, a frog jumped from among the rushes, onto the brushwood. He settled himself, fat, green-white, to lurk for flies. Varvara stayed moveless. She saw his attention turn from where she lay. Her hand pounced.

He struggled, cool and slippery, till she knocked him on the head. Then she plucked him apart, gnawed and sucked his meat off the bones, cast them into the river with muttered thanks. Ducks bobbed in midstream. She could have shed her clothes, slid into the water, swum carefully underneath to seize one by the legs. But no, the Tatars might glimpse it. Instead, she grubbed sedges of a kind with edible roots. Yes, the forest skills lived on in her, had never really faded.

Otherwise— She supposed it was a growing despair, a sense of her soul slipping from her, that brought her to the

sanctuary. No, that wasn't the whole reason. She had said too many farewells. In the house of God was refuge that would endure.

Surely there was peace, around her if not always within. The lusts of the flesh refused to die, among them the wish to feel again a small warmth in her arms, a small mouth milking her. She reined them in, but then sometimes they kicked up mockeries of the Faith, memories of old earthy gods, longings to see beyond walls and fare beyond horizons. And petty sins too, anger at her sisters, impatience with the priests and the endlessly same tasks. Nonetheless, on the whole, peace. Between the chores, the chafings, and the puzzled search for sanctity were hours in which she could bit by bit, year by year, rebuild herself. She discovered how to order memories, have them at her beck rather than let them fade to nothing or else overwhelm her with their manyness. She tamed her ghosts.

A wind made the sedges rustle. She shivered likewise. What if she had failed? If she was not alone in the world, was the common fate of her kind to go mindless and perish helpless?

Or was she in truth alone, whether blessed or damned? Certainly the cloister had no record of such folk, ever, since the Methuselan morning of the world. Not that she had told anybody beforehand. The caution of centuries forbade. She came as a widow, taking the veil because the Church encouraged widows to do so.

To be sure, when the decades slipped by and her flesh continued young—

Noise thrust into the marsh, shouts, whinnies, drumbeats. She scuttered to look. The Tatars had trussed up their loot and marshalled their ranks. They were departing. She saw no captives, but guessed they were bound astride pack horses with the rest of the baggage. Smoke still blew thinly out of the blackened, broken walls of Pereyaslavl.

The Tatars were headed northeasterly, away from the Trubezh, toward the Dniepr and Kiyiv. The great city was a day's march in that direction, less on horseback.

O Christ, have mercy, were they off to take Kiyiv?

No, they were too few.

But others must be raging elsewhere across the Russian land. Their demon king must have a plan. They could join

together, resharpen swords blunted by butchery, and go on as a conquering horde.

In the house of God I sought eternity, passed through Varvara. Here I have seen that it also has an end.

I too?

Yes, I can die, if only by steel or fire or famine or flood; therefore someday I shall die. Already, to those among whom I was ageless, those that live, I am a ghost, or less than a ghost.

First the nuns, later the monks and secular priests, finally the layfolk began to marvel at Sister Varvara. After some fifty years, peasants were appealing to her for help in their woes and pilgrims arriving from places quite far. As she had feared from the outset, there was no choice but to tell her confessor the truth about her past. With her reluctant leave, he informed Bishop Simeon. The latter planned to inform the Metropolitan. If they did not have an actual saint in the cloister of the Virgin, and Sister Varvara said she could not possibly be one, they had a miracle.

How was she to live with that?

She would never have to. The bishop, the priests, the believers were dead or fled. The annals of the cloister were burned. Anything elsewhere was likewise destroyed, or soon would be, or was doomed to molder away forgotten now when people had so much death to think about. A memory of her might linger in a few minds, but seldom find utterance, and it would die with them.

Had the Tatars come as God's denial, His decision that she was unworthy—or as His release from a burden no child of Adam should bear—or was she, defiled and torn, nonetheless so full of worldly pride that she dared imagine she mattered?

She clung to the hummock. Earth and sun, moon and stars, wind and rain and human love, she could understand the old gods better than she understood Christ. But they were forsaken by man, remembered only in dances and feasts, fireside tales and fireside spirits; they were ghosts.

Yet lightning, thunder, and vengeance forever walked the skies above Russia, be they of Perun or of St. Yuri the dragonslayer. Varvara drank strength from the soil as a babe drinks milk. When the Tatars were out of sight, she sprang to her feet, shook her fist after them, and shouted, "We will

abide! We will outlast you, and in the end we will crush you and take back what is ours!"

Calmer, then, she removed her clothes, washed them in the river, spread them on a slope to dry. Meanwhile she cleansed herself again and gathered more wild food. Next morning she sought the ruins.

Ash, charred timber, snags of brick and stone lay silent under heaven. A pair of churches were left, foul with soot. Inside them sprawled corpses. The slain outside were many more, and in worse condition. Carrion birds quarreled over them, flying off with a blast of wingbeats and shrieks whenever she approached. There was nothing she could do but offer a prayer.

Searching about, she found clothes, shoes, an undamaged knife, and such-like needs. Taking each, she smiled and whispered, "Thank you" to its owner's ghost. Her journey would be hard and dangerous at best. She did not mean it to end until she had reached the kind of new home she wanted—whatever that was.

In the dawn that followed, before setting forth, she told the sky: "Remember my name. I am Varvara no more. I am again Svoboda." Freedom.

X

In the Hills

1

WHERE MOUNTAINS began their long climb toward Tibet, a village nestled. On three sides its dell lifted steeply, making horizons high and close. A stream from the west rushed through upper woods of cypress and dwarf oak, gleamed as a waterfall, passed among the buildings, and lost itself in bamboo and ruggedness eastward. The people cultivated wheat, soybeans, vegetables, melons, some fruit trees on the floor of the vale and on small terraces above. They kept pigs, chickens, and a fishpond. This, their score or so of turf-roofed earthen houses, and they themselves had been there so long that sun, rain, snow, wind, and time had made them as much a part of the land as the pheasant, the panda, or the wildflowers in spring.

On the east the view opened, a wrinklescape manifoldly green and tawny with forest, to right and left a sight of snowpeaks afloat in heaven. Through it wound a road, scarcely more than a track, the village its terminus. Traffic was sparse. Several times a year, men undertook a journey of days, to market in a little town and home again. There they also paid taxes in kind. Thus the governor very seldom thought to send a man to them. When he did, the inspector only stayed overnight, inquired of the elders how things were going, received ritual answers, and departed eagerly. The place had a somewhat uncanny reputation.

That was in the eyes of orthodox outsiders. To others it was holy. Because of this awe, whether vague or devout, as well as its loneliness, war and banditry had passed the village by. It followed its own ways, enduring no more than

the ordinary sorrows and calamities of life. Once in a while a pilgrim overcame the obstacles—distance, hardship, danger—to visit it. In the course of generations, a few among those had remained. The village took them into its peace. Thus things were. Thus had they always been. Their beginnings were unknown save to myth and the Master.

Great, therefore, was the excitement when a herdboy came running and shrilled that a traveler was on the way. "Shame, bad, that you left your ox unattended," chided his grandfather, but gently. The boy explained that he had first tethered the beast; and, after all, no tiger arrived. He was forgiven. Meanwhile folk bustled and shouted about. Presently a disciple struck the gong in the shrine. A metal voice toned forth, rang off the hillsides, mingled with shush of waterfall and murmur of wind.

Autumn comes early in the high hills. Woodlands were dappled brown and yellow, grass was turning sere, fallen leaves crunched underfoot near puddles left by last night's rain. Overhead the sky arched unutterably blue, empty of all but wings. Bird cries drifted faint through air flowing down the mountainside. Smoke from hearthfires sharpened its chill.

As the stranger trudged up the last stretch of road, the gathered villagers saw with astonishment that this was a woman. Threadbare and oft mended, her gown of coarse cotton had faded to gray. Her boots were equally near the end of their service, and use had worn smooth the staff that swung in her right hand. From her left shoulder hung a rolled-up blanket, just as wayworn, which held a wooden bowl and perhaps one or two other things.

Yet she was no beggar granny. Her body was straight and slim, her stride firm and limber. Where a scarf fluttered loose, one could see hair like a crow's wing, hacked off just below the earlobes; and her face, though weathered, drawn close over the bones, was unlined. Never had such a face appeared in these parts. She did not even seem of quite the same breed as the lowlanders from whose country she fared.

Elder Tsong trod forward. For lack of a better thought, he greeted her according to the ancient rite, despite every newcomer hitherto having been male. "In the name of the Master and the people, I bid you welcome to our Morning Dew Village. May you walk in the Tao, in peace, and the

gods and spirits walk with you. May the hour of your advent prove lucky. Enter as a guest, depart as a friend."

"This humble person thanks you, honorable sir," she replied. Her accent was like none that anybody had heard before, but that was no surprise. "I come in search of . . . enlightenment." The word shook. Fervent must her hope be.

Tsong turned and bowed toward the shrine and the Master's house behind it. "Here is the home of the Way," he said. Some persons smiled smugly. *Their* home.

"May we know your name, that it be borne to the Master?" Tsong asked.

She hesitated, then: "I call myself Li, honorable sir."

He nodded. The wind ruffled his thin white beard. "If you have chosen that, you have likely chosen well." In her pronunciation, it could mean the measure of distance. Ignoring whispers, mutters, and stirrings among the folk, he forbore to inquire further. "Come. You shall take refreshment and stay with me."

"Your . . . leader—"

"In due course, young miss, in due course. Pray come."

Her features settled into an aspect no one could fathom, something between resignation and an ageless determination. "Again, my humble thanks," she said, and accompanied him.

The villagers moved aside. Several uttered words of goodwill. Beneath a natural curiosity, they were as alike in their mildness—the very children were—as in their padded garments and work-hardened hands. Alike, too, were many faces, broad and rather flat-nosed above sturdy frames. After Tsong, his family, and Li disappeared, they chatted for a while, then piecemeal went back to their cookfires, handmills, looms, tools, animals, all that kept them alive as it had kept their ancestors alive from time out of mind.

Tsong's oldest son, with wife and offspring, lived with him. They stayed in the background, except for serving tea and food. The house was larger than most, four rooms inside rammed-earth walls, darksome but comfortably warm. While homes were poorly and rudely furnished, there was no real want; rather, contentment and cheerfulness prevailed. Tsong and Li sat on mats at a low table and enjoyed

broth flavored with ruddy peppercorns, fragrant amidst the savors of other foodstuffs hung under the roof.

"You shall wash and rest before we meet with my fellow elders," he promised.

Her spoon trembled. "Please," she blurted, "when may I see the teacher? I have come, oh, a long and weary way."

Tsong frowned. "I understand your desire. But we really know nothing about you, ah, Miss Li."

Her lashes lowered. "Forgive me. I think what I have to tell is for his ears alone. And I think—I, I pray he will want to hear me soon. Soon!"

"We must not be overhasty. That would be irreverent, and maybe unlucky. What do you know about him?"

"Hardly more than rumors, I confess. The story—no, different stories in different places as I wandered. At first they sounded like folk tales. A holy man afar in the west, so holy that death dares not touch him— Only as I came nearer did anyone tell me that *this* is his dwelling ground. Few would say that much. They seemed afraid to speak, although . . . I never heard ill of him."

"No ill is there to hear," said Tsong, softened by her earnestness. "You must have a great soul, that you ventured the pilgrimage. Quite alone, too, a youthful woman. Surely your stars are strong, that you took no harm. That bodes well."

Dim of eye and in smoky dusk, he failed to see how she winced. "Nevertheless our wizard must read the bones," he continued thoughtfully, "and we must offer to the ancestors and spirits, yes, hold a purification; for you are a woman."

"What has the holy man to fear, if time itself obeys him?" she cried.

His tone calmed her somewhat: "Nothing, I daresay. And certainly he will protect us, his beloved people, as he always has. What do you wish to hear about him?"

"Everything, everything," she whispered.

Tsong smiled. His few stumps of teeth glistened in what light passed through a tiny window. "That would take years," he said. "He has been with us for centuries, if not longer."

Again she tautened. "When did he come?"

Tsong sipped his tea. "Who knows? He has books, he can

read and write, but the rest of us cannot. We tally the months, but not the years. Why should we? Under his good sway, lifespans are alike, as happy as the stars and the spirits may grant. The outside world troubles us never. Wars, famines, pestilences, those are gnat-buzz borne in from the market town, which itself hears little. I could not tell you who reigns in Nanking these days, nor do I care."

"The Ming drove out the foreign Yuan some two hundred years ago, and the Imperial seat is Peking."

"Ah, learned, are you?" the old man chuckled. "Yes, our forebears did hear about invaders from the north, and we know they are now gone. However, the Tibetans are much closer, and they have not attacked these parts for generations, nor ever our village. Thanks be to the Master."

"He is your true king, then?"

"No, no." The bald head shook. "To rule over us would be beneath his dignity. He counsels the elders when we ask, and of course we heed. He instructs us, during our childhoods and throughout our lives, in the Way; and of course we gladly follow it as well as we are able. When someone falls from it, the chastisement he orders is gentle—though quite enough, since real evildoing means expulsion, exile, homelessness for life and ever afterward."

Tsong shuddered slightly before going on: "He receives pilgrims. From among them and from among our own youths who wish it, he accepts a few disciples at a time. They serve his worldly needs, listen to his wisdom, strive to attain a small part of his holiness. Not that this keeps them from eventually having households of their own; and often the Master honors a family, any family in the village, with his presence or his blood."

"His blood?"

Li flushed when Tsong answered, "You have much to learn, young miss. Male Yang and female Yin must join for the health of the body, the soul, and the world. I am myself a grandson of the Master. Two daughters of mine have borne him children. One was already married, but her husband kept from her until they were sure it would indeed be a child of Tu Shan that blessed their home. The second, who is lame in one leg, suddenly needed only a bedspread for her dowry. Thus is the Way."

"I see." He could barely hear her. She had gone pale.

"If you cannot accept this," he said kindly, "you may still meet him and receive his blessing before you leave. He forces no one."

She gripped the spoon in her fist as if its handle were a post to which she clung lest she be whirled off the earth. "No, I will surely do his will," stumbled from her throat, "I who have been seeking over all these li, all these years."

2

HE COULD have been a peasant man of the village—but then, every one of them was closely or distantly descended from him—with the same strong frame clad in the same thick coat and trousers, the same grime and calluses on feet that indoors were bare. His beard hung thin, youthfully black, his hair was drawn into a topknot. The house he inhabited with his disciples was as big as any, but no bigger, also of plain earth above a clay floor. The room to which one of the young men admitted her before bowing and leaving was scarcely better furnished. There was a bedstead, wide enough for him and whatever woman might attend him; straw mats, stools, table; a calligraphic scroll, gone brown-spotted and flyspecked, on the wall above a stone altar; a wooden chest for clothing, a smaller brass one that doubtless held books; a few bowls, cups, cloths, and other everyday things. The window was shuttered against a blustery wind. A single lampflame did little to relieve murkiness. Coming in from outdoors, Li was first aware of the smell. It was not unpleasant, but it was heavy, blent of old smoke and grease, manure tracked in on shoes, humanity, centuries.

Seated, he lifted a hand in benison. "Welcome," he said in the hill dialect. "May the spirits guide you along the Way." His gaze was shrewd. "Do you wish to make offering?"

She bowed low. "I am a poor wanderer, Master."

He smiled. "So they have told me. Fear not. Most who come here believe gifts will win them the favor of the gods. Well, if it helps uplift their souls, they are right. But the seeking soul itself is the only real sacrifice. Be seated, Lady Li, and let us come to know each other."

As the elders had instructed her, she knelt on the mat

near his feet. His look searched her. "You do that otherwise than any woman I have seen before," he murmured, "and you talk differently, too."

"I am but newly in these parts, Master."

"I mean that you do not talk like a lowlander who has picked up some of the highland form of speech."

"I thought I had learned more than one Chinese tongue well, as long as I have been in the Middle Kingdom," broke from her.

"I've been widely about, myself." He shifted to the idiom of Shansi or Honan, though it was not quite what she remembered from the wealthy, populous northeastern provinces and he used it rustily. "Will you be more at ease talking this?"

"I learned it first, Master."

"It's been long since I— But where are you from, then?"

She raised her face toward his. Her heart thuttered. With an effort like reining in a wild horse, she kept her voice level. "Master, I was born across the sea, in the country of Nippon."

His eyes widened. "You have come far in your search for salvation."

"Far and long, Master." She drew breath. Her mouth had gone dry. "I was born four hundred years ago."

"What?" He leaped to his feet.

She rose too. "It is true, it is true," she said desperately. "How could I dare lie to you? The enlightenment I seek, have sought, oh, that was to find someone like myself, who never grows old—"

She could hold back the tears no more. He laid his arms around her. She clung close and felt how he also trembled.

After a time they drew apart and, for another while, stared at one another. The wind boomed outside.

A strange calm had fallen on her. She blinked her lashes clear and told him, "You have only my word for this, of course. I learned quite early to be nobody that anybody was . . . much concerned about or would . . . especially remember."

"I believe you," he answered hoarsely. "Your presence, you, a foreigner and a woman, that speaks for you. And I think I am afraid to disbelieve you."

A laugh sobbed. "You will have time aplenty to make certain."

"Time," he mumbled. "Hundreds, thousands of years. And you a woman."

Old fears awoke. Her hands fluttered before her. She forced herself to stand where she was. "I am a nun. I took vows to Amida Butsu—the Buddha."

He nodded, against straining muscles. "How else could you travel freely?"

"I was not always safe," she wrung out of her lips. "I have been violated in wild lands of this realm. Nor have I always been true. I have sometimes taken shelter with a man who offered it, and stayed with him till he died."

"I'll be kind," he promised.

"I know. I asked . . . of certain women here . . . But what of those vows? I thought I had no choice before, but now—"

His laughter gusted louder than needful. "Ho! I release you from them."

"Can you?"

"I am the Master, am I not? The people aren't supposed to pray to me but I know they do, more than to their gods. Nothing bad has come of it. Instead, we've had peace, lifetime after lifetime."

"Did you . . . foresee that?"

He shrugged. "No. Myself, I am—maybe a thousand and a half years old. I don't remember just when I came here."

The past took possession of him. He looked beyond her and the wall, he spoke low and rapidly:

"The years blur together, they become one, the dead are as real as the living and the living as unreal as the dead. For a while, long ago, I was mad, in a waking dream. Some monks took me in, and slowly, I'm not sure how, slowly I grew able to think again. Ah, I see that something like that happened to you too. Well, for me it still is often hard to be sure what I truly remember, and I forget much.

"I had found, like you, the safest thing was to be a footloose religious person. I only meant to stay here a few years, after they'd made me welcome. But time went on and on, this was a snug den and foes feared to come, once word of me had drifted about, and what else, what better, was

there? I've tried to do my people no harm. I think, they think I do them good."

He shook himself, trod forward, caught both her hands. His were big, strong, but less hard than other men's. She had heard that he lived off their labor, at most diverting himself with his ancient trade of blacksmith. "But who are you, Li? What are you?"

In sudden weariness, she sighed. "I have borne many names, Okura, Asagao, Yukiko—names did not matter among us, they changed as our positions changed, and we might use a different nickname for every friend. I was an attendant at a court that became a shadow. When no more pretense of being mortal was possible, and I feared to proclaim what I was, I turned nun and begged my way from shrine to shrine, place to place."

"It was easier for me," he admitted, "but I too found I'd better keep moving, and stay clear of anybody powerful who might want me to linger. Until I found this haven. How did you come to leave . . . Nippon, you call that land?"

"I was forever hoping to find someone like me, an end to the loneliness, the—meaninglessness; for I had tried to find meaning in the Buddha, and no enlightenment ever came. Well, the news reached us that the Mongols—they who had conquered China and tried to invade us, but the Divine Wind wrecked their ships—they had been driven out. The Chinese were sailing far and wide, also to us. This land is . . . our motherland in spirit, the mother of civilization." She saw puzzlement, and recalled that he was of lowly birth and had lived withdrawn since before she came into the world. "We knew of many holy sites in China. I thought, as well, there if anywhere would be other . . . immortals. So I took passage as a pilgrim, the captain gained merit by carrying me, and on these shores I set off afoot . . . I did not then know how vast the country is."

"Have you never wished to go home?"

"What is home? Besides, the Chinese have stopped sailing. They have destroyed all their great ships. It is forbidden on pain of death to leave the Empire. You had not heard?"

"We're free of overlords here. Welcome, welcome." His tone deepened, strengthened. He let go her hands and once more laid arms about her waist, but now the clasp was strong and his breath turned musky. "You've found me,

we're together, you, my wife! I waited and waited, prayed, offered, cast spells, till at last I gave up hope. Then you came. Li!" His mouth sought hers.

She turned her cheek, protested faintly, no, this was too fast, unseemly. He paid no heed. It was not an assault, but it was an overwhelming. She surrendered as she might have surrendered to a storm or a dream. While he had her, she tried to bring her thoughts under control. Afterward he was drowsy and gentle for a while, then wildly merry.

3

WINTER STRUCK with blinding snow on wind that rampaged among the houses and stretched fingers through every crack around door or shutter. The calm that followed was so cold that silence seemed to ring, with stars uncountable above a white hardness that gave back their glitter. Folk went into the weather no more than they needed, to tend their livestock and get fuel. At home they crouched over tiny hearthfires or slept the hours away within heaped sheepskins.

Li felt sick. She always did in the mornings during the first part of a pregnancy. That she had become fruitful was no surprise, as often as Tu Shan lay with her. Nor did she regret it. He meant well, and bit by bit, without letting him know what happened, she schooled him in what pleased her, until sometimes she too flew off into joy and came back down to lie happily wearied in the warmth and odor of him. And this child they had gotten together might also be ageless.

Still, she wished she could exult over it as he did. On her best days she was free of forebodings, no more. If only she had something to do. At least in Heian-kyo there had been color, music, the round of ceremonies, the often vicious but oftener titillating intrigues. At least on the road there had been changing landscape, changing people, unsureness, small victories over trouble or danger or despair. Here she could, if she liked, weave the same cloths, cook the same meals, sweep the same floors, empty the same muck buckets—though the disciples expected to do the menial tasks—and swap the same and the same words with women whose minds ranged as far as next year's kitchen gardening.

Their men took interest in a little more than that, some of

them, though not much more. However, they felt ill at ease with her. They knew her for the chosen of the Master and accorded her respect, in a clumsy fashion. Yet they also knew her for a woman; and she was soon taken for granted, sacred but a part of everyday life, like Tu Shan; and women did not sit in the councils of men.

Li gathered that this was no great loss to her.

One day of that winter stood forth in memory, an island at the middle of an abyss that swallowed all the rest. The door swung open on dazzlingly sunlit, blue-shadowed drifts. A wave of chill poured through. Tu Shan's bulk blotted the light. He entered and closed the door. Gloom clapped down again. "Hoo!" he whinnied, stamping the snow off his boots. "Cold enough to freeze a fire solid and the anvil with it." She must have heard him say that a hundred times, and a few other favorite expressions.

Li looked up from the mat on which she knelt. Bright spots danced before her. They were due to reflection off the brass chest, which the disciples worshipfully kept polished. She had been staring at it for—an hour? two hours?—while sunken in the half-doze that was her retreat from these empty months.

A thought smote. The suddenness of it made her catch her breath. Next she wondered why it had not occurred to her before, then supposed that was because the newness of this life had driven everything else out of her mind until the life went stale, and she was saying: "Horseshoe," the pet name she had given him, "I have never looked in yonder box."

His mouth was open, he had been about to speak. He left it hanging thus for a moment before he replied slowly, "Why, uh, those are the books. And, uh, scrolls, yes, scrolls. The holy writings."

Eagerness thrilled through her. "May I see them?"

"They're not for, uh, ordinary eyes."

She rose and told him fiercely, "I too am immortal. Have you forgotten?"

"Oh, no, no." He waved his hands, a vague gesture. "But you're a woman. You can't read them."

Li's mind leaped back across centuries. Ladies of the court in Heian-kyo were literate in the vernacular but seldom in Chinese. That was the classical language, which only

men could properly comprehend. Nevertheless she had contrived to study the writing, and sometimes in China had found a chance, a span of rest in a tranquil place, to refresh that knowledge. Moreover, these texts were most likely Buddhist; that faith had intermingled here with Taoism and primitive animism. She would recognize passages.

"I can," she said.

He gaped. "You can?" He shook his head. "Well, the gods have singled you out. . . . Yes, look at them if you want. But handle them carefully. They're quite old."

Joyful, she went to the chest and opened it. At first she saw it only full of shadow. She fetched the lamp and held it above. Wan light flickered and fell.

The chest gaped across rot, mildew, and fungus.

She moaned. Barely did she keep from letting hot grease spill onto the corruption. With her free hand she groped, caught hold of something, lifted a gray tatter up to view.

Tu Shan bent over. "Well, well," he muttered. "Water must have gotten in. How sad."

She dropped the shred, replaced the lamp, rose to confront him. "When did you last look into that box?" she demanded most quietly.

His glance shifted elsewhere. "I don't know. No reason to."

"You never read the sacred texts? You have them perfectly by heart?"

"They were gifts from pilgrims. What are they to me?" He summoned bluster. "I don't need writings. I am the Master. That's enough."

"You cannot read or write," she said.

"They, well, they suppose I can, and— What harm? What harm, I ask you?" He turned on her. "Stop nagging me. Go. Go into the other rooms. Leave me be."

Pity overcame her. He was, after all, so vulnerable—a simple man, a common man, whom karma or the gods or the demons or blind accident had made ageless for no knowable reason. With peasant shrewdness he had survived. He had acquired the sonorous phrases that a saint should utter. And he had not abused his position here; he was a godfigure that required little and returned much, assurance, protection, oneness. But the unchanging cycle of season

after season after season, world without end, had dulled his wits and even, she saw, sapped his courage.

"I'm sorry," she said, laying a hand on his. "I meant no reproach. I'll tell nobody, of course. I'll clean this out and from now on take care of such things for you—for us."

"Thank you," he replied uncomfortably. "Still, well, I meant to tell you you'll have to stay in the back rooms till nightfall."

"A woman is coming to you," she said in a voice as leaden as the knowledge.

"They expect it." His own voice loudened. "So it's been since—since the beginning. What else was there for me? I can't suddenly withhold my blessing from their households. Can I?"

"And she's young and pretty."

"Well, when they aren't, I've been kind to them anyhow." He forced indignation. "Who are you to call me faithless? How many men have you been with in your time, and you a nun?"

"I said nothing against you." She turned around. "Very well, I go." She felt his relief like radiance at her back.

The four disciples huddled together in one room of their quarters, blurs of darkness by lamplight, and played a game with sticks tossed on the floor. They sprang to their feet when Li entered, bowed awkwardly, stood in abashed silence. They knew quite well why she was here, but could not think what to say.

How young they were, she thought. And how handsome Wan, at least, was. She imagined his body on hers, lithe, hot, delirious.

Perhaps later. There would be boundless later. She smiled at them. "The Master wants me to rehearse you in the Diamond Sutra," she told them.

4

It was raining when the village buried the first child of the Master and the Lady. They had hoped for sunshine but the wizard and the tiny corpse both told them they could not auspiciously wait longer than they had done. Spring that year had come late. Its bleakness and damp stretched on into the

summer. They slipped through to the lungs of the girl-child, who gasped for a few days before she lay still. Oh, very still, when she cried and sucked and snuggled no more.

With Tu Shan, Li watched the wizard lower the coffin into a hole where water sloshed. The disciples stood close, the rest of the people in a rough ring. Beyond them she saw mists, shadowy hints of hillside, grandeur dissolved in this formless gray that tapped on her face and dripped off her hat and weighted her hair. Wet wool stank. Her breasts ached with milk.

The wizard rose, took up the rattle tucked under his rope belt, and shook it as he pranced around the grave screaming. Thus he warded off evil spirits. The disciples and those few others who had prayer wheels spun them. Everybody swayed to and fro. The chant sounded as raw as the air, *"—honored ancestors, great souls, honored ancestors, great souls—"* over and over, rite of a heathendom that the Tao and the Buddha had barely touched.

Tu Shan raised his arms and intoned words more fitting, but blurred and mechanical. He had spoken them too often. Li hardly noticed. She likewise had known too many deaths. She could not at the moment count the number of infants she had borne and lost. Seven, eight, a dozen? It hurt more to watch children grow old. But farewell, daughter of mine. May you not be lonely and afraid, wherever you have gone.

What Li felt now was the final hard freezing of resolution within herself.

Things ended. Folk mumbled words and went back to their work. The wizard remained. His task was to fill the grave. At her back, through his ongoing quavery song, Li heard clods fall on the coffin.

The disciples sought their parents' homes for the nonce. Li and Tu Shan entered an empty house. He left the door ajar for light. Coals aglow on the hearth had somewhat warmed the room. He shucked his coat and tossed it on the bed. A sigh gusted from him. "Well," he said. "That's done."

After a span, into her silence: "The poor wee girl. But it happens. Better luck next time, eh? And maybe a son."

She tensed. "There will be no next time, here," she answered.

"What?" He lumbered around to stand before her. His arms dangled at his sides.

She met his stare full on. "I will not stay," she told him. "You should leave with me."

"Are you crazed?" Fear crossed the usually firm countenance. "Has a demon gotten into you?"

She shook her head. "Only an understanding, and it has been growing for months. This is simply no life for us."

"It's peaceful. It's happy."

"So you see it, because you've lain in it so long. I say it is stagnant and squalid." She spoke calmly, the least bit sadly. "At first, yes, after my wanderings, I believed I had come to a sanctuary. Tu Shan,"—she would not give him his endearment name until he yielded, if ever he did—"I have learned what you should have seen an age ago. Earth holds no sanctuaries for anyone, anywhere."

Amazement made his anger faint. "You want back to your palaces and monkey courtiers, eh?"

"No. That was another trap. I want . . . freedom . . . to be, to become whatever I am able to. Whatever *we* are able to."

"They need me here!"

She must first put down scorn. If she showed hers for these half-animals, she could well lose him. And, true, in his liking for them, his concern and compassion, he was better than she was. Second she must muster all the will at her command. If she surrendered and abided, she would likewise slowly become one with the hillfolk. That might aid her toward selflessness, toward ultimate release from the Wheel; but she would give up every imaginable attainment that this life held. What escape, except through random violence, did she have from it?

"They lived much the same before you," she said. "They will do so after you. And with or without you, it cannot be for always. The Han people press westward. I have seen them clearing forest and breaking earth. Someday they will take these lands."

He fell into bewilderment. "Where can we go? Would you be a beggar again?"

"If need be, but then only for a short while. Tu Shan, a whole world lies beyond this horizon."

"We kn-know nothing about it."

"I know something." Through the ice of her resolve shone a strengthening fire. "Foreign ships touch the shores of China. Barbarians thrust inward. I have heard about mighty stirrings to the south, on the far side of the mountains."

"You told me . . . it's forbidden to leave the Empire—"

"Ha, what does that mean to us? What watchmen stand on those paths we can find? I tell you, if we cannot seize the opportunities that beckon everywhere around, we do not deserve our lives."

"If we become famous, they . . . would notice we don't grow old—"

"We can cope with that. Change rushes through the world unbridled. The Empire can no more stay forever locked into itself than this village can. We'll find advantages to take. Perhaps just setting money out at interest for a long time. We'll see. My years have been harder than yours. I know how full of secret places chaos is. Yes, we may well go under, we may perish, but until then we will have been wholly alive!"

He stood dazed. She knew she would need months wherein to prevail, if indeed she could. Well, she had the patience of centuries to draw upon, when there was something for which to work.

Clouds thinned, light broke through, the rain in the doorway gleamed like flying arrows.

5

SPRINGTIME CAME back, and that year it was mild, overwhelmingly bright, full of fragrances and the cries of wildfowl returned. Gorged with snow melt, the stream sprang white amidst hillside leaves, brawled through the dell, plunged into the bamboo forest, bound for the great river and so at last the sea.

A man and a woman followed it on the road. They were clad for travel. Staves swung in their hands. On his back was a load of needful goods, on hers a swaddled baby boy who gurgled lustily and happily as he looked around him at wonders.

The people stood gathered together behind, where their homes came to an end, and wept.

XI

The Kitten and the Cardinal

ARMAND JEAN du Plessis de Richelieu, cardinal of the Church, first minister to His Most Christian Majesty Louis XIII, who had created him duke, gave his visitor a long regard. The man was altogether out of place in this chamber of blue-and-gilt elegance. Though decently clad for a commoner, he seemed unmistakably the seafarer he proclaimed himself. Of medium height, he had the suppleness of youth, and the dark hawk face was unlined; but something about him—perhaps the alert steadiness of the look he gave back—bespoke a knowledge of the world such as it takes many years in many corners to gain.

Windows stood open to summer fragrances blowing from the fields and woodlands of Poitou. The river Mable clucked past an ancestral castle lately rebuilt as a modern palace. Sunlight, reflected off the water, danced in shards among the cherubs and ancient heroes that adorned the ceiling. At a little distance from the cardinal's thronelike chair, a kitten played with its shadow across the parquetry.

Richelieu's thin fingers stroked the parchment on his lap. Its age-spotted dun made his robe appear blood-bright. For this meeting he had put on full canonicals, as though to shield against demons. But when he spoke, his voice held its wonted wintry calm.

"If this be not falsified, today shall perhaps see the strangest audience I have ever granted."

Jacques Lacy bowed with more grace than would have been awaited. "I thank your eminence for it, and assure him all is true." His speech was not quite of the region nor of any in France. Did it still bear a lilt of Ireland, or of some land farther yet? Certainly it showed that, if not formally

educated, he had read many books. Where did a skipper plying between the Old World and the New find time?

"You may thank the bishop who prevailed upon me," said Richelieu dryly.

"After the priest of St. Félix had prevailed upon another, Your Eminence."

"You are a bold one indeed, Captain Lacy. Have a care. This matter is dangerous enough already."

"I humbly beg Your Eminence's pardon." The tone was by no means insolent, but neither was it contrite.

"Well, let us get on with your business." Even away from Paris, hours were precious; and the future might not hold a large store of them. Nevertheless Richelieu considered for a minute, stroking the beard that brought the gauntness of his features to a point, before ordering: "Describe exactly what you said to the priest and caused him to do."

Surprise slightly shook Lacy's self-command. "Your Eminence knows."

"I will compare the accounts." Richelieu sighed. "And you may spare the honorifics hereafter. We are alone."

"I thank Your— Well." The mariner drew breath. "I sought him out at his church in St. Nazaire after I heard that . . . monsieur would grace these parts, no enormous distance to travel from there, with his presence for a while. I told him of the casket. Rather, I reminded him, for he knew about it in a half-forgotten way. Naturally, that caught his attention, for nobody else remembered. It had simply gathered dust in the crypt these past four hundred years."

The kitten pounced at Lacy's foot. A smile in its direction flickered across the cardinal's lips. His eyes, huge and feverishly luminous, turned back to the man. "Did you relate how it came to be there?" he pursued.

"Certainly, monsieur. That was evidence for my good faith, since the story had not become part of folklore."

"Do so again."

"Ah . . . in those days a Breton trader named Pier, of Ploumanac'h, settled in St. Nazaire. It was hardly more than a village—not that it's major these days, as monsieur doubtless knows—but on that account a house cost little, and the location was handy for the small coastwise vessel he acquired. Men could more easily change their homes and trades then than now. Pier prospered modestly, married,

raised children. At last, widowed, he declared he'd enlist in the crusade—the final one, as it turned out—that King Louis the Saint was launching. By that time he was old, but remarkably well-preserved. Many people said he still looked downright youthful. He was never seen afterward, and folk supposed he had died.

"Before he left, he made a substantial donation to the parish church. That was common when someone was about to go on a long journey, let alone off to war. However, to this gift he attached a condition. The church was to keep a box for him. He showed the priest that it contained nothing more than a rolled-up parchment, a document of some importance and confidentiality; whereupon he sealed it. One day he or an heir would return to claim it, and the parchment itself would validate that claim. Well, a request of this kind was not unheard of, and the priest duly entered it in the annals. Lifetimes went by. When I appeared, I expected I'd have to find the record for today's priest; but he's an antiquarian and had browsed through the books."

Richelieu lifted the parchment and read it for perhaps the seventh time, repeatedly glancing at Lacy. "Yes," he murmured, "this declares that the rightful heir will look just like Pier de Ploumanac'h, whatever name he bears, and describes him in full. Excellently crafted, that description." The cardinal fancied himself a man of letters, and had written and produced several dramas. "Furthermore, there is this verse in supposed nonsense syllables that the claimant will be able to recite without looking at the text."

"Shall I do so for monsieur?"

"No need—thus far. You did for the priest, and later for his bishop. The proof was sufficient that he in turn wrote to the bishop of this diocese, persuading him to persuade me to see you. For the document concludes by declaring that the . . . heir . . . will carry tidings of the utmost importance. Now why did you refuse any hint of their nature to either prelate?"

"They are only for the greatest man in the land."

"That is His Majesty."

The visitor shrugged. "What chance would I have of admission to the king? Rather, I'd be arrested on suspicion of—almost anything, and my knowledge tortured out of me. Your eminence is known to be more, m-m, flexible. Of an

inquiring mind. You patronize learned and literary men, you've founded a national academy, you've rebuilt and generously endowed the Sorbonne, and as for political achievements—" His words trailed off while he waved his hands. Clearly he thought of the Huguenots curbed, yet kept conciliated; of the powers of the nobles patiently chipped down, until now their feudal castles were for the most part demolished; of the cardinal's rivals at court outwitted, defeated, some exiled or executed; of the long war against the Imperialists, in which France—with Protestant Sweden, the ally that Richelieu obtained—was finally getting the upper hand. Who really ruled this country?

Richelieu raised his brows. "You are very well informed for a humble sea captain."

"I have had to be, monsieur," replied Lacy quietly.

Richelieu nodded. "You may be seated."

Lacy bowed once more and fetched a lesser chair, which he placed before the large one at a respectful distance, and lowered himself. He sat back, seemingly at ease, but a discerning eye recognized readiness to explode into instant action. Not that there was any danger. Guards stood just outside the door.

"What is this news you bear?" Richelieu asked.

Lacy frowned. "I do not expect Your Eminence to believe upon first hearing it. I gamble my life on the supposition that you will bear with me, and will dispatch trusty men to bring you the further evidence I can provide."

The kitten frolicked about his ankles. "Charlot likes you," the cardinal remarked, a tinge of warmth in his voice.

Lacy smiled. "They say monsieur is fond of cats."

"While they are young. Go on. Let me see what you know about them. It will tell me something about you."

Lacy leaned forward and tickled the kitten around the ears. It extended tiny claws and swarmed up his stockings. He helped it to his lap, chucked it under the chin and stroked the soft fur. "I've had cats myself," he said. "Afloat and ashore. They were sacred to the ancient Egyptians. They drew the chariot of the Norse goddess of love. They're often called familiars of witches, but that's nonsense. Cats are what they are, and never try like dogs to be anything else. I suppose that's why we humans find them mysterious, and some of us fear or hate them."

"While some others like them better than their fellow men, God forgive." The cardinal crossed himself in perfunctory fashion. "You are a remarkable man, Captain Lacy."

"In my way, monsieur, which is quite different from yours."

Richelieu's gaze intensified. "I obtained a report on you, of course, when I heard of your wish," he said slowly. "But tell me about your past life in your own words."

"That you may judge them—and me, monsieur?" The mariner's look went afar, while his right hand continued as the kitten's playmate. "Well, then, I'll tell it in a curious way. You'll soon understand the reason for that, which is that I do not want to lie to you.

"Seumas Lacy hails from northern Ireland. He can't readily say when he was born, for the baptismal record is back there if it's not been destroyed; but on the face of it, he must be around fifty years old. In the year 1611 the English king cleared the Irish from the best parts of Ulster and settled it with Scottish Protestants. Lacy was among those who left the country. He took a bit of money along, for he came of a mildly well-to-do seafaring family. In Nantes he found refuge with old-established Irish trading folk, who helped him regularize his status. He took the French form of his Christian name, became a French subject, and married a French woman. Being a sailor, he made long voyages, as far as Africa, the West Indies, and New France. Eventually he rose to shipmaster. He has four children alive, their ages from thirteen to five, but his wife died two years ago and he has not remarried."

"And when he heard that I would be in Poitou for several weeks, he went downstream to St. Nazaire and opened the casket that his . . . ancestor had left in the church," Richelieu said low.

Lacy looked straight at him. "Thus it is, Your Eminence."

"Presumably you always knew about it."

"Obviously I did."

"Although you are Irish? And no member of your family claimed the thing for four centuries. You yourself lived almost thirty years in nearby Nantes before you did. Why?"

"I had to be sure of the situation. At that, the decision was hard."

"The report states that you have an associate, a red-headed man with a missing hand who goes by the name of MacMahon. Lately he has disappeared. Why?"

"No disrespect intended, Your Eminence, but I sent him off because I couldn't foresee what would come of this, and it was wrong to risk his life also." Lacy smiled. The kitten tumbled about his wrist. "Besides, he's an uncouth sort. What if he gave offense?" He paused. "I took care not to know just where he's gone. He'll find out whether I've returned safely home."

"You show a distrustfulness that is . . . scarcely friendly."

"On the contrary, monsieur, I'm putting a faith in you that I've put in none but my comrade for a very long time. I stake everything on the belief that you will not immediately assume I'm a madman, an enemy agent, or a sorcerer."

Richelieu gripped the arms of his chair. Despite the robe, it could be seen how his wasted frame tautened. His eyes never wavered. "What, then, are you?" he asked tonelessly.

"I am Jacques Lacy from Ireland, your eminence," the visitor replied with the same levelness. "The only real falsehood about that is that I was born there, for I was not. I did spend more than a century in it. Outside the English-held parts people have a large enough measure of freedom that it's rather easy to change lives. But I fear they are all doomed to conquest, and the plantation of Ulster gave me an unquestionable reason for departing.

"I came back to where I had once been Pier de Ploumanac'h—who was not a Breton born. Before and after him I've used other names, lived in other places, pursued other trades. It's been my way of surviving through the millennia."

Breath hissed between teeth. "This is not a total surprise to me. Since I first heard from the bishop, I have been thinking. . . . Are you the Wandering Jew?"

The head shook; the kitten sensed tension and crouched. "I know about rascals who've pretended they were him. No, monsieur, I was alive when Our Lord was on earth, but never saw him, nor knew about him till much later. Once in a while I have passed myself off as a Jew, because that was

safest or simplest, but it was pretense, same as when I've been a Mussulman." The mouth formed a grim grin. "For those roles, I had to get circumcised. The skin slowly grew back. On my kind, unless a wound is as great as the loss of a hand, it heals without scars."

"I must think anew." Richelieu closed his eyes. Presently his lips moved. They shaped the Paternoster and the Ave, while his fingers drew the Cross, over and over.

Yet when he was done and looked back upon the world, down at the parchment, he spoke almost matter-of-factly. "I saw at once that the verse here is not actually nonsense. It bears a certain resemblance to Hebraic, transcribed in Roman letters, but it is different. What?"

"Ancient Phoenician, Your Eminence. I was born in Tyre when Hiram was its king. I'm not sure whether David or Solomon was reigning in Jerusalem just then."

Again Richelieu closed his eyes. "Two and a half millennia ago," he whispered. He opened them wide. "Recite the verse. I want to hear that language."

Lacy obeyed. The rapid, guttural words rang through sounds of wind and water, through the silence that filled the chamber. The kitten sprang off his lap and pattered to a corner.

Stillness prevailed for half a minute before Richelieu asked, "What does it mean?"

"A fragment of a song, the sort men sang in taverns or when camped ashore during a voyage. *'Black as the sky of night is my woman's hair, bright as the stars are her eyes, round and white as the moon her breasts, and she moves like Ashtoreth's sea. Would that my sight and my hands and myself lay upon all!'* I'm sorry it's so profane, monsieur. It was what I could remember, and at that, I had to reconstruct it."

Richelieu quirked a smile. "Yes, I daresay one forgets much in thousands of years. And in . . . Pier's day, clerics, too, were less refined than they are now." Shrewdly: "Though did you expect that something like this would go a little way toward authenticating you, since it is the kind of thing that would stick in a man's mind?"

"I am not lying to Your Eminence. In no particular."

"In that case, you have been a liar throughout the ages."

Lacy spread his palms. "What would monsieur have had

me do? Imagine, if you please, even in this most enlightened of eras and countries, imagine I proclaimed myself openly. At best I'd be taken for a mountebank, and be lucky to escape with a scourging. I could easily go to the galleys, or hang. At worst I'd be condemned as a sorcerer, in league with Satan, and burned. Evil would befall me without my saying a word if I just stayed in one place, living on and on while they buried my sons and grandsons and I never showed signs of age. Oh, I've met folk—many live at this moment in the New World—for whom I could be a holy man or a god; but they've been savages, and I prefer civilization. Besides, civilization sooner or later overruns the savages. No, best I arrive at a new home as a plausible outsider, settle down a few decades, and at last move onward in such wise that people take for granted I've died."

"What brought this fate upon you?" Richelieu signed himself anew.

"God alone knows, Your Eminence. I'm no saint, but I don't believe I was ever an especially terrible sinner. And, yes, I am baptized."

"When was that?"

"About twelve hundred years ago."

"Who converted you?"

"I'd been a Christian catechumen a long time, but customs changed and— May I ask leave to defer telling how it happened?"

"Why?" demanded Richelieu.

"Because I must convince Your Eminence that I'm telling the truth, and in this case the truth looks too much like invention—" Before those eyes, Lacy broke off, threw up his hands, laughed, and said, "Very well, if you insist. It was in Britain after the Romans were gone, at the court of a warlord. They called him Riothamus, their High King, but mainly he had some cataphracts. With them he staved off the English invaders. His name was Artorius."

Richelieu sat motionless.

"Oh, I was no knight of his, merely a trader who came by on my rounds," Lacy stated. "Nor did I meet any Lancelot or Gawain or Galahad, nor see any glittering Camelot. Little of Rome lingered there. In fact, it's only my guess that this was the seed corn of the Arthur legend. But monsieur

will understand why I was reluctant to mention it at all. I was tempted to concoct a prosaic falsehood."

Richelieu nodded. "I do understand. If you continue a liar, you are as skillful a one as I have found in a wide experience." He forbore to inquire whether the Phoenician had embraced Christ out of expediency, the same as when he did homage to numerous other gods.

Lacy's tone became wry. "I shan't insult you by denying that I've given a great deal of beforehand thought to this interview."

Richelieu plucked the parchment from his lap and cast it to the floor. It struck with a small rattling noise that drew the notice of the kitten. So much of a bodily gesture did the cardinal permit himself. He leaned forward, fingertips pressed together. Sunlight glistened off a great ring of gold and emerald. "What do you want from me?" he snapped.

"Your protection, monsieur," Lacy replied, "for myself and any like me." Color came and went in his lean cheeks, above the closely trimmed beard which had not a single silver hair.

"Who are they?"

"MacMahon is one, as your eminence must have guessed," Lacy told him. "We met in France when it was still Gaul. I've encountered or heard of three more whom I wondered about, but death by mischance took them before I could be certain. And another I did feel sure of, but that person—disappeared. Our kind must be very rare, and shy of revealing themselves."

"Vanishingly rare, as the learned doctor Descartes might put it," said Richelieu with a flash of bleak humor.

"Some, over the centuries, may have tried to do what I am trying this day, and come to grief. No record of them would likely remain, if any was ever made."

The kitten advanced cautiously toward the parchment. Richelieu sat back. Lacy had stayed well-nigh immobile, hands folded on the sober-hued knee breeches. "What more evidence have you to offer?" the cardinal asked.

Lacy gazed away at nothing visible. "I thought about this for lifetimes before I took the first measures." His voice was methodical. "One gets into the habit of taking forethought and biding one's time. Perhaps too much so. Perhaps opportunities slip by and it's again too late. But one has learned,

sometimes at a high price, monsieur, one has learned that this world is dangerous and nothing in it abides. Kings and nations, popes and gods—no irreverence meant—all go down in the dust or up in the flames, all too soon. I have my provisions, piecemeal made over the centuries, hoards buried here and there, tricks for changing identities, a tool chest of assorted skills, and . . . my reliquaries. They are not all in churches, nor are they all of them caskets containing parchments. But throughout Europe, northern Africa, hither Asia lie the tokens I planted whenever I could. My idea was that if and when a hope came along, I'd go to the nearest of those caches and retrieve what it held. That should give me my opening wedge.

"Now, if Your Eminence likes, I can describe quite a few that will be accessible to his agents. I can say exactly what the nature of each is, and where it reposes. In several cases, at least, it will definitely have been there for a long while. In every case, they can verify that Captain Jacques Lacy could not possibly have made the arrangements at any time in the half century that men have known him."

Richelieu stroked his beard. "And meanwhile you expect to wait in custody, hostage to this material," he murmured. "Yes. I have little doubt that it exists, for you show no signs of madness. Therefore you cannot be an impostor either, of any sort known to criminal justice. Unless, indeed, you really are a sorcerer, or an actual demon."

A film of sweat shone on Lacy's brow, though he responded steadily: "Holy water or exorcism won't hurt me. You could have me put to the question. You'd find me healing quite fast from anything that didn't kill or totally mutilate. I came here because everything I could find out made me think you are too wise—I do not say 'merciful,' monsieur, I say 'wise, enlightened, intelligent'—to resort to that."

"Others will urge me to do so."

"Your Eminence has the power to refuse them. That's another reason why I sought you. I've waited centuries for such a man at such a crux in history."

The kitten arrived at the parchment, reached out, patted it. Curled back into a loose roll, it rustled and moved. Delighted, the kitten bounced to and fro.

Richelieu's look smoldered. "Have you never before had a protector?"

Lacy sighed. "Once, monsieur. About three hundred years after my birth, in Egypt."

"Tell me."

"Like a number of Phoenicians—I'd resumed that nationality—I sailed in the service of Pharaoh Psammetk. You may have read of him under the name Psammetichus. He chanced to be strong and wise, like you, a man who saved his country from disaster and made it once more secure. Oh, I'd planned nothing, except to depart in my usual way when the time came. But it also chanced this king lived long, reigning for more than fifty years. And I—well, it was a good service I was in; and when my first Egyptian wife died I married another and we were . . . uncommonly happy. So I lingered, till the king saw past the mannerisms by which I feigned encroaching age. He persuaded me to confide in him, and took me under his wing. To him I was sacred, chosen by the gods for some purpose unknown but surely high. He set inquiries afoot throughout his realm and as far abroad as possible. Nothing came of them. As I said, my kind must be very rare."

"What finally happened?"

"Psammetk died. His son Necho succeeded him, and had no love for me. Nor hatred, I suppose; but most of the priests and courtiers did, seeing me as a threat to their positions. It grew plain that I wouldn't last in the royal compound. If nothing else, an assassin would get me. But the new king denied me leave to go. I think he feared what I might be able to do.

"Well, talk rose about dispatching a Phoenician crew to try sailing around Africa. I used what little influence was left me to help make that come about, and be named to it. An immortal man might prove valuable in unknown countries." Lacy shrugged. "At the first opportunity, I jumped ship and made my way to Europe. I never found out whether the expedition succeeded. Herodotus said it did, but he was often careless about his information."

"And I assume any record of you in Egypt has decayed, if your enemies didn't expunge it," Richelieu said. "Not that we can read those glyphs."

"Please understand, monsieur," Lacy urged, "I've seldom

been in the presence of greatness. Psammetk, Artorius, two or three others, but usually insignificantly; and now Your Eminence. I've glimpsed more, but only when I was in a crowd. It's almost always been wisest to stay obscure. Besides, I'm just an old sailor, with nothing special to offer." Eagerly: "Except my memories. Think what I can mean to scholars. And if, under your protection, I draw other immortals to us—think, my lord, what that will mean to . . . France."

Silence fell again, except for the wind, the river, a ticking clock, and the kitten that made a toy of the parchment. Richelieu brooded. Lacy waited.

At last the cardinal said: "What do you truly want of me?"

"I told you, monsieur! Your protection. A place in your service. The proclamation of what I am, and the promise that anyone like me can come to the same safe harbor."

"Every rogue in Europe will swarm here."

"I'll know what questions to ask, if your learned men don't."

"M-m, yes, I daresay you will."

"After you've made a few examples, that nuisance should end." Lacy hesitated. "Not that I can foretell what the immortals will each prove to be like. I've admitted, my MacMahon is a crude sort. The other whom I was sure of is, or has been, a prostitute, if she still lives. One survives as best one can."

"But some may well be decent, or repent. Some may in truth be holy—hermits, perhaps?" Richelieu's momentarily dreamy tone sharpened. "You have not sought for any new patron after that Egyptian king, more than two thousand years ago?"

"I told Your Eminence, one grows wary."

"Why have you now at last let down your guard?"

"In part because of you," Lacy answered at once. "Your Eminence hears much flattery. I needn't go into detail about what's the plain truth. I've already spoken it.

"But you by yourself wouldn't have been enough. It's also that I dare hope the times are right."

The parchment jammed against a leg of the chair of state and resisted further attempts. The kitten mewed. Richelieu looked down and half reached. "Does my lord wish—?"

Lacy sprang to pick up the animal and proffer it. Richelieu took the small fuzzy form in both hands and placed it on his lap where the parchment had rested. Lacy bowed and resumed his seat.

"Continue," the cardinal said while he caressed his pet.

"I have watched the course of things as well as a man can who's in the middle of them," Lacy said. "I've read books and listened to philosophers, and to common folk with native wit. I've thought. Immortality is lonely, monsieur. One has much time for thinking.

"It seems to me that in the past two or three centuries, a change has been coming upon the world. Not just the rise or fall of another empire; a change as great as the change from boy to man, or even worm to butterfly. Mortals feel it too. They speak of a Renaissance that began perhaps fourteen hundred years after Our Lord. But I see it more clearly. Pharaoh Psammetk—how far could his couriers go? How many could they find who'd understand my question that they bore, and not cower from it, ignorant and frightened? And he was as powerful a king as any in his age. The Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Persians, all the rest, they were little better as regards either knowledge or range. Nor did I ever again have access to a ruler I trusted; nor had I then thought to prepare myself for such a meeting. That came later.

"Today men have sailed around the globe; and they know it *is* a globe. The discoveries of such as Copernicus and Galileo—" He saw the slight frown. "Well, be that as it may, men learn marvelous things. Europe goes forth into a whole new hemisphere. At home, for the first time since Rome fell, we begin to have good roads; one can travel swiftly, for the most part safely, over hundreds of leagues—thousands, once this war is over. Above all, maybe, we have the printing press, and more people every year who can read, who can be reached. At last we can bring the immortals together!"

Richelieu's fingers amused the kitten, which was becoming drowsy, while his brows again drew downward. "That will take a considerable time," he said.

"Oh, yes, as mortals reckon— Forgive me, Your Eminence."

"No matter." Richelieu coughed. "With none but Charlot

to hear, we can speak plainly. Do you indeed believe mankind—here in France, let us say—has attained the security that you found to be such a delusion through all prior history?"

Taken aback, Lacy stammered, "N-no, monsieur, except that—I think France will be strong and stable for generations to come. Thanks largely to Your Eminence."

Richelieu coughed afresh, his left hand to his mouth, his right reassuring the kitten. "I am not a well man, Captain," he said, hoarsened. "I never have been. God may call me at any moment."

Lacy's visage took on a somehow remote gentleness. "I know that," he said softly. "May He keep you with us for many years yet. But—"

"Nor is the king in good health," Richelieu interrupted. "Finally, finally he and the queen are blessed with a child, a son; but the prince is not quite two years old. About when he was born, I lost Father Joseph, my closest councillor and ablest helper."

"I know that also. But you have this Italian-born Mazarin, who's much like you."

"And whom I am preparing to be my successor." Richelieu's smile writhed. "Yes, you have studied us carefully."

"I must. I've learned how, during my span on earth. And you too think far ahead." Lacy's words quickened. "I beg you, think. You'll need a while to take this in, as well as to verify my story. I'm amazed how calmly you've heard me out. But—an immortal, in due course a gathering of immortals, at the service of the king—today's king, and afterward his son, who should reign long and vigorously. Can you imagine what that will mean to his glory, and so to the glory and power of France?"

"No, I cannot," Richelieu snapped. "Nor can you. And I have likewise learned wariness."

"But I tell you, Your Eminence, I can give you evidence—"

"Silence," Richelieu commanded.

He rested left elbow on chair arm, chin on that fist, and stared into space, as if beyond the walls, the province, the kingdom. His right hand gently stroked the kitten. It fell

asleep, and he took his fingers away. The wind and the river rustled.

At last—the clock, on which Phaëton careered desperately in Apollo's runaway sun chariot, had snipped off almost a quarter of an hour—he stirred and looked back at the other man. Lacy had gone Orientally impassive. Now his countenance came alive. The breath shivered in and out of him.

"I need not trouble myself with your tokens," Richelieu said heavily. "I assume you are what you assert. It makes no difference."

"I beg Your Eminence's pardon?" Lacy whispered.

"Tell me," Richelieu went on, and he came to sound nearly amiable, "do you, in the teeth of what you have seen and suffered, do you really believe we have won to a state of things that will endure?"

"N-no," Lacy admitted. "No, I think instead everything is changing, everything, and this will go on and on, and nobody can guess what the end will be. But—because of it—we and the generations to come, our lives will be unlike any that ever were lived before. The old bets are off." He paused. "I've grown weary of being homeless. You cannot dream of how weary. I'll snatch at any chance of escape."

Richelieu ignored the informal language. Perhaps he did not notice it. He nodded, and said as he might have crooned to one of his pets, "Poor soul. How brave you are, to have ventured this. Or else, as you say, how weary. But you have just your single life to lose. I have millions."

Lacy's head lifted stiffly. "My lord?"

"I am responsible for this realm," Richelieu said. "The Holy Father is old and troubled and never had any gift of statecraft. Thus I am also responsible to a certain extent for the Catholic faith, which is to say Christendom. A good many people think I've given myself over to the Devil, and I confess to scorning most scruples. But in the end, I am responsible.

"You see this as an age of upheaval, but also of hope. You may be right, perhaps, but if so, you look on it with an immortal eye. I can only, I may only, see the upheaval. War devastating the German lands. The Empire—our enemy, yes, nevertheless the Holy Roman Empire that Charlemagne founded—bleeding to death. Protestant sect

after sect springing up, each with its own doctrine, its own fanaticism. The English growing back to power, the Dutch growing newly to it, voracious and ruthless. Stirrings in Russia, India, China. God knows what in the Americas. Cannon and muskets bringing down the ancient strongholds, the ancient strengths—but what will replace them? To you, the discoveries of the natural philosophers, the books and pamphlets that pour from the printing presses, those are wonders that will bring a new era. I agree; but I, in my position, must ask myself what that era will be like. I must try to cope with it, keep it under control, knowing the entire while that I shall die unsuccessful and those who come after me will fail."

His question lashed: "How then dare you suppose I would ever allow, yes, encourage and trumpet the knowledge that persons exist whom old age passes by? Should I—the doctor Descartes might say—throw yet another, wholly unknown and unmanageable factor into an equation already insoluble? 'Unmanageable.' Indeed that is the right word. The sole certainty I have is that this spark would ignite a thousand new religious lunacies and make peace in Europe impossible for another generation or worse.

"No, Captain Whatever-you-are," he ended, glacial again in the way the world had come to fear, "I want no part of you or your immortals. France does not."

Lacy sat equally quiet. He had had his reverses often before. "May I try to persuade Your Eminence otherwise, over the next few days or years?" he asked.

"You may not. I have too much else to occupy my mind, and too damnably little time left for it."

Richelieu's manner mildened. "Be at ease," he said with half a smile. "You shall depart freely. Caution enjoins me to have you arrested and garroted within this hour. Either you are a charlatan and deserve it or a mortal danger and require it. However, I deem you a sensible man who will withdraw to his obscurity. And I am grateful to you for a fascinating glimpse of—what is best left alone. Could I have my wish, you would stay a while and we would talk at length. But that would be risky to me and unkind to you. So let us store this afternoon, not among our memories, but among our fantasies."

Lacy sat silent for a bit, until he drew breath and an-

swered, "Your Eminence is generous. How can you tell I won't betray your trust and seek elsewhere?"

Richelieu chuckled. "Where else? You have called me unique. The queen of Sweden has a penchant for curious characters, true. She is still a minor, though, and when she does take power, well, everything I know about her makes me warn you most sincerely to stay away. You are already aware of the hazards in any other country that matters."

He bridged his fingers. "In all events," he continued, didactic, "your scheme was poor from the beginning, and my advice is that you abandon it forever. You have seen much history; but how much of it have you *been*? I suspect that I, in my brief decades, have learned lessons in which your nose was never rubbed.

"Go home. Then, I strongly suggest, make provision for your children and disappear with your friend. Take up a new life, perhaps in the New World. Remove yourself, and me, from temptation, remembering what my temptation is. For you dream a fool's dream."

"Why?" Lacy croaked.

"Have you not guessed? Really, I am disappointed in you. Hope has triumphed over experience. Hark back. Remember how kings have kept wild animals in cages—and freaks at court. Oh, if I accepted you I might be honest in my intentions, and Mazarin might be after me; but what of young Louis XIV when he comes to his majority? What of *any* king, any government? The exceptions are few and fleeting. Even if you immortals were a race of philosophers who also understood how to rule me—do you suppose those who do rule would or could share power with you? And you have admitted you are only extraordinary in your lifespans. What can you become but animals in the royal menagerie, endlessly watched by the secret police and disposed of if ever you become inconveniently articulate? No, keep your freedom, whatever it costs you.

"You begged me to think about your proposal. I tell you to go and think about my counsel."

The clock ticked, the wind blew, the river flowed.

From down in his throat, Lacy asked, "Is this Your Eminence's last word?"

"It is," Richelieu told him.

Lacy rose. "Best I leave."

Richelieu's lips contorted. "I do wish I had more time to give you," he said, "and myself."

Lacy approached. Richelieu extended his right hand. Lacy bowed and kissed it. Straightening, he said, "Your Eminence is as great a man as I have ever met."

"Then God have mercy on humankind," Richelieu replied.

"I shall never forget you."

"I will bear that in mind for as long as is granted me. Farewell, wanderer."

Lacy went to the door and knocked. A guard opened it. Richelieu signalled him to let the man by and close it again. Thereupon he sat with his thoughts. The sunlight lengthened. The kitten woke, scrambled down his robe, and frisked off in its own life.

XII

The Last Medicine

OVER THE plain from the north the young men came a-gallop. The haste and rhythm of it were like the ripples that went through the grass beneath the wind. Sunflowers here and there swayed the same, lofty, petals as hot yellow as the light pouring across the world. Land and sky reached both unbounded, green seemed to meet blue but that was only at the edge of sight, distance went on and on farther than dreams could fly. A hawk rode the airflows, dipping and soaring, his wings twin flames. A flight of marshfowl lifted, so many that they darkened their quarter of heaven.

Children set to keep crows out of the fields were first to see the young men. The oldest boy among them ran back to the village, filled with importance; for Deathless had ordered that he be told of the return. Yet when the boy had passed inside the stockade and was among the houses, his courage faltered. Who was he to speak to the mightiest of all shamans? Dared he risk interrupting a spell or a vision? Women at their work saw him stand forlorn. One hailed him, "Ohé, Little Hare, what is in your heart?" But they were only women, the old men he glimpsed were only old men, and surely this was a thing of terrible power if Deathless cared so much about it.

The boy gulped and made for a certain house. Its dun sod loomed over him. When he came around its length to the front, the doorway gaped on a nightful cave where a single banked fire glimmered red. The families that shared it were elsewhere, doing their tasks or, if they had none, taking their ease down by the river. One did remain, the person for whom Little Hare had hoped, a man dressed in woman's

clothes, grinding corn. He looked up and asked in his mild way, "What do you wish, lad?"

Little Hare gulped. "The hunters come back," he said. "Will you go tell the shaman, Three Geese?"

The noise of stone against stone ceased. The berdache rose. "I will," he replied. Such as he had some power against the unseen, perhaps because the spirits made up to them for their lack of manliness. Besides, he was a son of Deathless. He dusted meal off his buckskin, uncoiled his braids, and departed at a dignified pace. Little Hare gusted relief before he started back to his duty. Eagerness tingled in him. What a brave sight the riders would be when they went by!

The shaman's house stood next to the medicine lodge at the middle of the village. It was smaller than the rest because it was only for him and his family. He was there just then with his wives. Copperbright, mother of Three Geese, sat on the ground outside, watching over the two small daughters of Quail Wing while they played in the sun. Bent, half-blind, she was glad she could still help this much at her great age. In the doorway, Rain At Evening, who had been born the same winter as the berdache, helped a daughter of her own, Dawn Mist, ornament a dress with dyed quills for the maiden's forthcoming marriage. She greeted the newcomer and, at his word, went inside to call her husband. Deathless came forth after a short while, still fastening his breechclout. Young Quail Wing peeped out from within, looking rumpled and happy.

"Ohé, father," said Three Geese with due respect but not the awe that was in the likes of Little Hare. After all, this man had dandled him when he was a baby, taught him to know the stars and how to set snares and everything else needful or delightful—and, when it grew clear that the youth was not going to become fully a man, never lessened his love but accepted the fact with the calm of one who had watched hundreds of lives blow past on the wind. "They have seen Running Wolf's party on the way back to us."

Deathless stood quiet for a bit. When he frowned, a single wrinkle spread on his face. Sweat made his skin gleam over the springy muscles like dew upon rock; his hair was

like the rock itself, polished obsidian. "Are they sure that is who it is?" he asked.

"Why, who else?" replied Three Geese, astonished.

"Enemies—"

"Raiders would not come so openly, in broad daylight. Father, you have heard about the Pariki and their ways."

"Oh, true, I have," the shaman muttered, as if he had forgotten and needed reminding. "Well, I must make haste now, for I want to speak to the hunters alone."

He went back into his house. Berdache and women exchanged looks where foreboding stirred. Deathless had spoken against the buffalo hunt, but Running Wolf had gotten his band together and left too swiftly for any real talk about it. Since then Deathless had brooded, and sometimes taken elders aside, who afterward kept silence themselves. What did they fear?

Soon Deathless reappeared. He had donned a shirt with strong signs burnt into the leather. White swirls of paint marked his countenance; a cap made from the pelt of a white mink encircled his brows. In his left hand he bore a gourd rattle, in his right a wand topped with a raven's skull. The rest stood aside, even the children gone silent. This was no longer the kindly, rather quiet husband and father they knew; this was he in whom a spirit dwelt, he who never grew old, he who during the ages had guided his folk and made them unlike any other.

The hush followed him as he walked among the dwellings. Not every eye watched with the ancient reverence. Especially in the heads of boys, several smoldered.

Through the open gate of the stockade he passed, and through the patches of corn, beans, and squash outside. The village stood on a bluff overlooking a broad, shallow river and the cottonwoods along the banks. Northward the ground sloped into gently rolling hugeness. Hereabouts short-grass prairie gave way to tall-grass plain. Shadows went mysterious over green waves. The hunters were now quite near. Earth drummed to hoofbeats.

When he recognized the man afoot, Running Wolf signalled halt and reined in. His mustang whinnied and curvetted before standing quiet. Leggings held close against ribs, the rider sat the beast as if he had grown from it or it from him. His dozen followers were nearly as skillful. Under the

sun, men and horses alike blazed with life. In some hands were lances, on some shoulders hung bows and quivers. A knife of the finest flint rested at each waist. Headbands bore patterns of lightning bolt, thunderbird, hornet. From Running Wolf's, feathers of eagle and jay thrust upward—did he think someday he would fly?

"Ohé, great one," he said reluctantly. "You honor us."

"How went the chase?" asked Deathless.

Running Wolf gestured backward at the pack animals. They bore hides, heads, haunches, humps, entrails, umbles, lavishness that strained against rawhide lashings. Already, as they rested, the grease and clotted blood were drawing flies. Exultance surged in his voice: "Never was such sport, never such slaughter! We left more than this behind for the coyotes. Today the people feast, no, they gorge."

"The spirits will punish wastefulness," Deathless warned.

Running Wolf squinted at him while retorting, "What, is Coyote not pleased that we feed his kind so well too? And the buffalo are as many as the blades of grass."

"A fire can blacken the land—"

"And with the first rain it springs green anew."

Breath hissed between teeth when the leader thus dared interrupt the shaman; but none of the band were really shocked. Two grinned.

Deathless ignored the breach, save that his tone grew harder still: "When the buffalo come by, our men go forth to take of them. First they offer the proper dances and sacrifices. Afterward I explain our need to the ghosts of the quarry, that they be appeased. So it has always been, and we have prospered in peace. Ill must come from leaving the ancient, proven path. I will tell you what atonement you can make, and lead you in it."

"And shall we then return to waiting until a herd drifts within a day's walk of here? Shall we try to cut a few out and kill them without any man getting gored or trampled? Or if we are lucky, may we stampede the whole herd over a drop, and see most meat rot before we can eat it? If our fathers brought home little, it was because they *could* do no more, nor could the dogs draw much on their wretched travois." Running Wolf's words came in spate, never hesitating. Clearly he had awaited this encounter sometime upon his return, and planned what he would say.

"And if the new ways are unlucky," exclaimed Red Hawk, "why do the tribes that follow them flourish so mightily? Shall they take everything, and we pick the carrion bones?"

Running Wolf frowned at his follower and beckoned for silence. Deathless sighed. His response was almost gentle: "I foreknew you would speak like this. Therefore I sought you out where nobody else can hear. It is hard for a man to admit he has been wrong. Together we shall find how you can set things right and still keep your pride. Come with me to the medicine lodge, and we will seek a vision."

Running Wolf straightened, sheer against the sky. "Vision?" he cried. "I have had mine, old man, under the high stars after a day when we raced with the wind. I saw riches overflowing, deeds men will remember longer than you yourself have lived and will live, glory, wonder. New gods are in the land, fiery from the hands of the Creator, and—they ride on horses whose hoofs drum thunder and strike forth lightning. It is for you to make peace with them!"

Deathless lifted his wand and shook his rattle. Unease crossed faces. The mounts felt it and snorted, shied, stamped.

"I meant no offense, great one," Running Wolf said quickly. "You wish us to talk free of fear and boasting alike, no? Well, if I got too loud, I'm sorry." He tossed his head. "Nevertheless, the dream did come to me. I have told my comrades, and they believe."

The magical things sank earthward in the shaman's grasp. He stood for a little while unmoving, dark amidst the sunlight and grass, before he said low, "We must talk further and try to learn the meaning of what has happened."

"Indeed we must." Relief made Running Wolf's tone kindly. "Tomorrow. Come, great one, let me lend you this, my prize stallion, and I will walk while you ride into the village, and you will bless us there as you have always blessed the returning hunters."

"No." Deathless went from them.

They sat mute, troubled, until Running Wolf laughed. He sounded like his namesake in wooded eastern country. "The joy among our people will be blessing enough," he said. "And ah, for us the women, hotter than their fires!"

Most of them had to force an echo of his mirth. However,

the act heartened them. He at the forefront, they struck heels to flanks and pounded whooping ahead. When they passed the shaman, they never glanced his way.

Upon his own entry, he found tumult. Folk seethed about the party, shouted, capered, exulted. Dogs clamored. The abundance was more than meat. It was fat, bone, horn, gut, sinew, all they needed to make nearly all they wanted. And this was the barest beginning. The hides would become coverings for tipis—those that were not traded eastward for poles—and then whole families could range as far and as long as they wished, hunt, butcher, tan, preserve on the spot, before going on to the next kill and the next. . . .

"Not overnight," Running Wolf cautioned. Though he spoke weightily, his voice carried through the racket. "We have few horses yet. And first we must care for these that have served us." Victory rang: "But we shall soon have more. Every man of us shall have his herd."

Somebody howled, somebody else did likewise, and then the tribe was howling—his sign, his name, his leadership to be.

Deathless went around them. Few noticed him. Those looked away, abashed, before throwing themselves the more wildly back into jubilance.

The wives and youngest children of Deathless stood fast outside his house. There they could not see the crowd, but the cheers broke across them. Quail Wing's gaze kept drifting yonder, wistfully. She was hardly more than a girl. He halted, confronted them. Lips parted but nobody had words.

"You were good to wait here," he said at length. "Now you may as well go join the rest, help cook the food, share in the feast."

"And you?" asked Rain At Evening low.

"I have not forbidden it," he said bitterly. "How could I?"

"You counselled against the horses, you counselled against the hunt," quavered Copperbright. "What madness is in them, that they no longer heed you?"

"They will learn better," Rain At Evening avowed.

"I am thankful I shall soon be snug in death." Copperbright reached a gnarled hand toward Deathless. "But you, poor darling, you must live through that lesson."

Quail Wing regarded her children and shuddered a little.

"Go," said the man. "Have pleasure. Also, it will be wise. We must not let the folk feel divided. That could well destroy them. I always strove to keep my people together."

Rain At Evening considered him. "However, you will stay away?" she asked.

"I will try to think what can be done," he answered, and went into the medicine lodge. They lingered a bit, troubled, before leaving. His unsureness, the defiance of him, struck at the heart of everything by which they had lived.

With its entrance toward sunrise, the lodge had at this time of day gone gloomy. Light from doorway and smokehole lost itself in shadows brimming the circle of floor and walls. Things magical were blurs, gleams, hunched lumps. Deathless laid buffalo chips in the firepit at the center. He worked with drill and tinder until flames licked small. After he had banked the fire, he put tobacco that traders bore from afar into his calumet, kindled it, breathed deep, let the sacred dizziness whirl him off toward meditation.

Insight escaped him. He was wanly glad when a form darkened the doorway. By then the sun was on the horizon he could not see. Light tinged with yellow the smoke that drifted thick and savory off cookfires. The din of celebration was at once loud and remote, only half real.

"Father?" came a shy whisper.

"Enter," said Deathless. "Be welcome."

Three Geese stooped, passed through, settled on the opposite side of the pit. His face was barely visible, webbed and gullied with encroaching age, full of the concern that a berdache need not be ashamed to show. "I hoped you would give me refuge here, father," he said.

"From what?" asked Deathless. "Has anyone abused you?"

"No, no. Everybody is gleeful." Three Geese winced. "That is what hurts. Even the old men seem to have cast their doubts from them."

"Save for you."

"And perhaps a few others. How should I know? More of the women are with us in their hearts, but the men sweep them along. And it *is* a mighty gain that Running Wolf and his followers have made."

"He promises unboundedly much in the future."

Three Geese grunted an affirmative.

"Why do you not share these hopes?" Deathless asked.

"You are my father, who was always kind to me," said the berdache. "I fear there will be scant kindness in the morrow that Running Wolf brings."

"From what we know about the tribes who have gone the way of the horse, that is so."

"I have heard men say—when I happened to be in earshot of man-talk—that some are forced to it."

"True. They are thrust from their ancient homes, the eastern woodlands, out onto the prairie, by invaders from farther east. They say those invaders bear horrible weapons that shoot lightning. They get them from pale-skinned foreigners such as we hear rumors of. But others, like the Pariki, have freely taken to the horse, and spill out of the west, out of the mountains yonder.

"They did not have to. We do not have to. I have spoken with travelers, traders, whoever bears news from outside. North of us the Arikara, Hidatsa, and Mandan still live in olden wise. They remain strong, well-off, content. I would have us do the same."

"I have talked with two or three of those young men who brought horses despite your counsel, father," said Three Geese. "One of them went forth with Running Wolf, first to practice, later on this buffalo hunt. They say—he says—they intend no disrespect, no overthrow of anything. They only want for us whatever is good in the new ways."

"I know. I also know you cannot pick and choose. Change is a medicine bundle. You must refuse it altogether, or take the whole thing."

Sorrow thinned the voice of Three Geese: "Father, I do not question your wisdom, but I have heard some who do. They wonder if you can understand change, you who live outside of time."

Deathless smiled sadly through the dusk. "Strange, my son, strange that only now, when you near the end of your days, do we truly confide in each other." He drew breath. "Well, I seldom speak of my youth. It was so long ago that it seems a half-forgotten dream. But as a boy I listened to my grandfather tell about the drought of many years that at last made our people trek eastward from the uplands, to find a better home here. We were still learning how to be

plainsfolk when I became a man. I had no idea then of what I was. No, I expected to grow old and lie down to rest in the earth like everyone else. When, slowly, we came to see that this was not happening—what more soulshaking change than that can you imagine? Since it was clear the gods had singled me out, I must seek the shaman, have him teach me, change from man to disciple, finally from housefather to shaman myself. And the years flew by faster and faster. I saw girls born whom I wed when they were grown and buried when they had died, along with the children, the children. I saw more tribes pour onto the plains, and war begin among them. Do you know it was only in your mother's girlhood that we decided we must build a stockade? True, a certain awe of me has helped keep enemies off, but—Running Wolf has had a vision of new gods."

He laughed wearily. "Yes, my son, I have known change. I have felt time rush by like a river in flood, bearing the wreckage of hopes downstream out of sight. Now do you understand why I have tried to bulwark my people against it?"

"They must heed you," Three Geese groaned. "Make a medicine that will open their eyes and unstop their ears."

"Who can make a medicine against time?"

"If anyone can, father, that one is you." The berdache hugged himself and shivered, though the air was still mild. "This is a good life we have, a gentle life. Save it for us!"

"I will try," said Deathless. "Leave me alone with the spirits." He held out his arms. "But first come and let me embrace you, my son."

The old cold body trembled against the firm warm flesh, then Three Geese said farewell and departed.

Deathless sat unmoving as embers faded and night welled up out of the earth. Noise continued, drum-throb, chants, feet stamping around an extravagant fire. It grew louder when the doorway brightened again. A full moon had risen. That gray went black as the moon climbed higher, though the ground outside remained hoar. At last the merrymaking dwindled until silence laid its robe over the whole village.

No vision had come. Perhaps a dream would. He had heard that men of nomad tribes often tortured themselves in hope that that would call the spirits to them. He would

abide with the ancient unforced harmonies. On a few heaped skins, one atop him, he slept.

Stars fared across heaven. Dew glittered in deepening chill. The very coyotes had quieted. Only the river murmured, along the banks, under the cottonwoods, around the sandbars, on and on in retreat from the sinking moon.

Slowly, eastern stars dimmed as their part of the sky turned pale.

The hoofs that neared scarcely broke the stillness. Riders dismounted, left their animals in care of chosen companions, approached on foot.

They meant to steal the horses hobbled outside the stockade. A boy on watch saw them and sped for the gate. He screamed his warning till a warrior overtook him. A lancethrust cast him to hands and knees. Little Hare gobbled around the blood that welled into his mouth. He threshed about till he fell in a heap that looked very small. War cries ripped the dawn.

"Out!" roared Running Wolf before his house. "It's an attack! Save the horses!"

He was the first to dash forth into the open, but men swarmed after him, mostly naked, clutching whatever weapons they had snatched. The strangers sprang at them. Alien words yowled. Arrows whirred. Men screamed when struck, less in pain than in fury. Running Wolf bore a tomahawk. He sought the thick of the foe and hewed, snarled, a tornado.

Bewildered, the villagers nevertheless outnumbered the raiders. The Pariki leader yelled commands. His men rallied to him, where he shook his lance on high. In a body, they beat the defenders aside and poured through the opened gate.

Dawnlight strengthened. Like prairie dogs, women, children, old folk fled back into houses. The Pariki laughed and pursued them.

Running Wolf lost time getting his dismayed fighters together. Meanwhile the Pariki made their quick captures—a woman or child seized, hauled outside, or fine pelts grabbed, a buffalo robe, a shirt with colorful quillwork—and regathered in the lane that went straight to the gateway.

One warrior found a beautiful young woman with an

aging one and a crone in the smallest of the houses, next to a round lodge. She wailed and clawed at his eyes. He pinned her wrists at her back and forced her along, regardless of struggles or of the others who sought to hinder him. A man bounded from the lodge. He was unarmed apart from a wand and a rattle. When he shook them, the warrior hooted and swung tomahawk at him. The man must dodge back. The raider and his prey joined the rest of the war band.

Running Wolf's men milled in the entrance. At their backs, those Pariki who had kept the horses arrived at a gallop, with the free beasts on strings. The villagers scattered. The forayers seized manes, got on with a single leap, dragged booty or captives up after them. The men who had already been riding helped injured comrades mount and collected three or four dead.

Running Wolf bayed, egged his people on. Their arrows were spent, but enough of them finally came at his heels that the foe made no further try for their herd. Instead the Pariki rode west, bearing their prizes. Dazed with horror, the villagers did not give chase.

The sun rose. Blood glowed brilliant.

Deathless sought the battle place. Folk were getting busy there. Some mutilated two corpses the enemy had not recovered, so that the ghosts must forever drift in the dark; these persons wished aloud for live prisoners to torture to death. Others tended their own slain. Three Geese was among those who worked on the wounded. His hands eased anguish; his low voice helped men bite back any cries. Deathless joined him. The healing arts were part of a shaman's lore.

"Father," said the berdache, "I think we need you more to make medicine against fresh misfortune."

"I know not if any power to do that is left in me," Deathless replied.

Three Geese pushed a shaft deeper into a shoulder, until the barbed head came out the rear and he could pull the entire thing free. Blood welled, flies buzzed. He packed the hole with grass. "I am ashamed that I was not in the fight," he mumbled.

"You are long past your youth, and fighting was never for you," Deathless said. "But I— Well, this took me by sur-

prise; and I have forgotten whatever I once knew about combat."

Running Wolf stalked around, tallying the harm that had been done. He overheard. "None of us knew anything," he snapped. "We shall do better next time."

Three Geese bit his lip. Deathless went impassive.

Afterward he did undertake his duties as the shaman. With his disciple, who yesterday had never come near him, he led rites for the lost, cast spells for the clean mending of wounds, made offerings to the spirits. An elder mustered courage to ask why he did not seek omens. "The future has become too strange," he answered, and left the man standing appalled. By eventide he could take a short span to console Quail Wing's children for the taking of their mother, before he again went alone into the medicine lodge.

Next morning the people buried the dead. Later they would dance in their honor. First, though, the hale men gathered at a place which had known happier meetings. Running Wolf had demanded it—no council of elders calmly finding their way toward agreement, but every man who could walk—and none cared to gainsay him.

They assembled before a knoll near the bluff edge. Standing on it, a man could look south to the broad brown river and its trees, the only trees anywhere in sight; east to the stockade, the fields clustered about it, gravemounds both raw and time-worn; elsewhere across grass that billowed and shimmered, green and white, under a shrill wind. Clouds flew past, trailing shadows through a sunlight gone harsh. Thunderheads loomed blue-black in the west. From here the works of man seemed no more than anthills, devoid of life. Nothing but the horses moved yonder. They chafed at their hobbles, eager to be off and away.

Running Wolf mounted the knoll and raised an arm. "Hear me, my brothers," he called. Wrapped in a buffalo robe, he seemed even taller than he was. He had gashed his cheeks for mourning and painted black bars across his face for vengefulness. The wind fluttered the plumes in his headband.

"We know what we have suffered," he told the eyes and the souls that sought him. "Now we must think why it happened and how we shall keep it from ever happening again.

"I say to you, the answers are simple. We have few

horses. We have hardly any men who are good hunters upon them, and we have no skilled warriors at all. We are poor and alone, huddled within our miserable walls, living off our meager crops. Meanwhile other tribes ride forth to garner the wealth of the plains. Meat-fed, they grow strong. They can feed many mouths, therefore they breed many sons, who in turn become horseman hunters. They have the time and the mettle to learn war. Their tribes may be strewn widely, but proud brotherhoods and sisterhoods, oath-societies, bind them together. Is it then any wonder that they make booty of us?"

His glance fell hard on Deathless, who stood in the front row under the hillock. The shaman's gaze responded, unwavering but blank. "For years they stayed their hand," Running Wolf said. "They knew we had one among us who was full of spirit power. Nonetheless, at last a band of young men resolved to make a raid. I think some among them had had visions. Visions come readily to him who rides day after day across empty space and camps night after night beneath star-crowded skies. They may have urged each other on. I daresay they simply wanted our horses. The fight became as bloody as it did because we ourselves had no idea of how to wage it. This too we must learn.

"But what the Pariki have found, and soon every plains ranger will know, is that we have lost whatever defense was ours. What new medicine have we?"

He folded his arms. "I ask you, Deathless, great one, what new medicine you can make," he said. Slowly, he stepped aside.

Indrawn breath whispered among the men, beneath the damp chill that streaked from the stormclouds. They stared at the shaman. He stood still an instant. Thereafter he climbed the knoll and confronted Running Wolf. He had not adorned himself in any way, merely donned buckskins. Against the other man, he seemed drab, the life in him faded.

Yet he spoke steadily: "Let me ask you first, you who take leadership from your elders, let me ask you and let you tell us what you would have the people do."

"I did tell you!" Running Wolf declared. "We must get more horses. We can breed them, buy them, catch them wild, and, yes, steal them ourselves. We must go win our

share of the riches on the plains. We must become skilled in the arts of war. We must find allies, enroll in societies, take our rightful place among folk who speak Lakotan tongues. And all this we must begin upon at once, else it will be too late."

"Thus is your beginning," said Deathless quietly. "The end is that you will forsake your home and the graves of your ancestors. You will have no dwellings save your tipis, but be wanderers upon the earth, like the buffalo, the coyote, and the wind."

"That may be," replied Running Wolf with the same levelness. "What is bad about it?"

A gasp went from most listeners; but several young men nodded, like horses tossing their heads.

"Show respect," quavered an aged grandson of the shaman. "He is still the Deathless one."

"He is that," acknowledged Running Wolf. "I have spoken what was in my heart. If it be mistaken, tell us. Then tell us what we should do, what we should become, instead."

He alone heard the answer. The rest divined it, and some wrestled with terror while others grew thoughtful and yet others shivered as if in sight of prey.

"I cannot."

Deathless turned from Running Wolf, toward the gathering. His voice loudened, though each word fell stone-heavy. "I have no further business here. I have no more medicine. Before any of you were born, rumors came to me of these new creatures, horses, and of strange men who had crossed great waters with lightnings at their command. In time the horses reached our country, and that which I feared began to happen. Today it is done. What will come of it, nobody can foretell. All that I knew has crumbled between my fingers.

"Whether you must change or not—and it may well be that you must, for you lack the numbers to keep a settlement defended—you *will* change, my people. You want it, enough of you to draw the rest along. I no longer can. Time has overtaken me."

He raised his hand. "Therefore, with my blessing, let me go."

It was Running Wolf who cried, "Go? Surely not! You have always been ours."

Deathless smiled the least bit. "If I have learned anything in my lifetimes of years," he said, "it is that there is no 'always.'"

"But where would you go? How?"

"My disciple can carry out what is needful, until he wins stronger medicine from warrior tribes. My grown sons will see to the welfare of my two old wives and my small children. As for myself—I think I will fare alone in search of renewal, or else of death and an end of striving."

Into their silence, he finished: "I served you as well as I was able. Now let me depart."

He walked down the knoll and away from them. Never did he look back.

XIII

Follow the Drinking Gourd

A THUNDERSTORM flamed and boomed during the night. By morning the sky was clear, everything asparkle, but the fields were too wet for work. That didn't matter. Crops were coming along fine, alfalfa so deep a green you could nearly hear the color and corn sure to be knee-high by the Fourth of July. Matthew Edmonds decided that after chores and breakfast he'd fix up his plow. The colter needed sharpening and there was a crack in the whippletree. If he reinforced it, he could get yet another season's use out of it before prudence called for replacement. Then Jane had a long list of tinkerings around the house for him.

When he closed the kitchen door, he stopped and drew a breath on the top step. The air was cool and damp, rich with smells of soil, animals, growth. On his right the sun had just cleared the woods behind the barn; the rooster weathervane there threw the light back aloft into a blue that had no end. The yard was muddy, but puddles shone like mirrors. He let his eyes run left, across silo, pigsty, chickenhouse, over his acres that rolled away beyond them bearing the earth's abundance. Could he, could any man ever make any real return for the blessings of the Lord?

Something flickered at the edge of sight. He turned his head fully left. You could see the county road from here, about a hundred yards off along the west edge of the property. On the other side lay Jesse Lyndon's land, but his house was to the north, hidden from this by its own patch of woods. The Edmonds' drive was also screened from sight, lined with apple trees whose fruit was starting to swell among pale-bright leaves. Out from between them ran a woman.

Chief, the half-collie, was helping ten-year-old Jacob take the cows to pasture. That was just as well. The woman acted scared when Frankie bounded forth barking at her, and he was only a fox terrier. At least, she shied from him and made fending motions. She kept on running, though. No, she staggered, worn out, close to dropping. All she had on was a thin dress that had once been yellow, halfway down her shins. A shift, would the ladies call it? Ragged, filthy, and drenched, it clung to a skin from under which the flesh had melted away. That skin was the shade of weak coffee.

Edmonds sprang down the steps and broke into a run himself. "You, Frankie, quiet!" he hollered. "Shut up!" The little dog skipped aside, wagged his tail, and lolled his tongue.

Man and woman met near the corncrib, stopped, stared at each other. She looked young, maybe twenty, in spite of what hardship had done to her. Feed her up and she'd be slender and tall instead of skinny. Her face was different from the usual, narrow, nose curved and not very wide, lips hardly fuller than on some whites, big eyes with beautiful long lashes. Hair, cut short, wasn't really kinky; it would bush out if ever she let it grow. Edmonds thought with a pang how a slaveowner must have forced her mother or her grandmother.

The wind went raw in her throat. She tried to straighten, but a shiver took hold of her. "Peace," Edmonds said. "Thee is with friends."

She stared. He was a big sandy man, wearing clothes darker than most and a hat that was flat of crown, broad of brim. After a moment she gasped, "Yo' Massa Edmonds?"

He nodded. "Yes." His voice stayed easy. "And thee, I think, is a fugitive."

She half lifted her hands. "Please, suh, please, dey's aftuh me, right behin' me!"

"Then come." He took her arm and led her across the yard to the kitchen door.

The room beyond was large and sunny, clean-scrubbed but still full of sweet odors. Jane Edmonds was spooning oatmeal into Nellie, not quite one, while four-year-old William stood on a stool and manfully pumped water into a kettle fresh off the stove. Its earlier load steamed in a dish-

pan. Everybody stopped when Father and the Negress appeared.

"This girl needs shelter, and quickly," Edmonds told his wife.

Herself fine-boned, hair peeping red from beneath a scarf, she dropped the spoon and clutched fist between fingers. "Oh, dear, we haven't any real hiding place ready." Decision: "Well, the attic must serve. Nothing in the basement to hide behind. Maybe the old trunk, if they search our house—"

The Negress leaned against the counter. She didn't pant or shake now, but wildness still dwelt in her eyes. "Go with Jane," Edmonds told her. "Do what she says. We'll take care of thee."

A brown hand snaked out. The big butcher knife almost flew from the rack into its grasp. "Dey ain' gon' take me 'live!" she yelled.

"Put that down," Jane said, shocked.

"Child, child, thee must not be violent," Edmonds added. "Trust in the Lord."

The girl crouched back, blade bright in front of her. "Ah don' wanna hurt nobody," she answered, raspy-voiced, "but dey fin' me, Ah kill mahse'f 'fo' dey take me back, an' fust Ah kill one o' dem if'm de Lawd he'p me."

Tears stood forth in Jane's eyes. "What have they done, to drive thee to this?"

Edmonds cocked his head. "Frankie's barking again. Don't wait, let her keep the knife, just get her out of sight. I'll go talk to them."

Since his boots were muddy, he went straight out and around the corner of the house to the front porch on the west side. The drive branched off where the apple trees ended, an arm leading south. Edmonds hushed the dog and placed himself on the step before the screen door, arms folded. When the two men saw him, they cantered that way and drew rein.

Their horses were splashed but fairly fresh. At each saddle was sheathed a shotgun, at each belt hung a revolver. One rider was burly and blond, one gaunt and dark. "Good day, friends," Edmonds greeted them. "What can I do for ye?"

"We're after a runaway nigger woman," said the blond man. "You seen her?"

"How does thee suppose I should know?" Edmonds replied. "Ohio is a free state. Any person of color passing by should be as free as thee or me."

The dark man spat. "How many like that you got around here? They're all runaways, and you damn well know it, Quaker."

"I do not, friend," said Edmonds with a smile. "Why, I could name thee George at the feed store, Caesar in the blacksmith shop, Mandy who keeps house for the Abshires—"

"Stop stallin' us," snapped the blond man. "Listen, this mornin' early we seen her ourselves, way off. She ducked into some woods and shook us, but this here's jest about the only way she could come, and we've found barefoot tracks in the road."

"And up your drive!" crowed his companion.

Edmonds shrugged. "It's getting to be summer. Children leave off their shoes whenever we let them."

The blond man narrowed his eyes. "All right, suh," he murmured. "If you're so innocent, you won't mind us lookin' through your place, will you?"

"She could'a snuck in without you knowin'," suggested the other. He forced a smile. "You wouldn't like that, you with a wife and kids, I'll bet. We'll jest make sure for you."

"Yeh, you wouldn't break the law," said the first. "You'll co-op-erate, sure. C'mon, Allen."

He moved to dismount. Edmonds raised a thick, hard hand. "Wait, friend," he called softly. "I am sorry, but I cannot invite either of ye in."

"Huh?" grunted the blond man.

Allen snickered. "He's skeered o' what his wife'll do if we track up her floor, Gabe. Don't you worry, suh, we'll wipe our feet real good."

Edmonds shook his head. "It grieves me, friends, but neither of ye is welcome. Please go."

"Then you are harborin' the nigger!" Gabe exploded.

"I did not say that, friend. I simply do not wish to talk further with ye. Please get off my land."

"Listen, you. Helpin' a runaway, that's a federal crime.

Could cost you a thousand dollars or six months in jail. Law says you got to help *us*."

"An iniquitous ordinance, as wrong as President Pierce's designs on Cuba, plain contrary to God's commandments."

Allen drew his pistol. "I'll give you a commandment," he snarled. "Stand aside."

Edmonds didn't stir. "The Constitution grants my family and me the right to be secure in our home," he told them with the same calm.

"By God—" The weapon lifted. "You wanna get shot?"

"That would be a pity. Thee would hang, thee knows."

Gabe gestured. "Put that away, Allen." He straightened in the saddle. "Aw right, Mr. Niggerlover. 'Tain't far to town. I'm goin' right in there and git me a warrant and a deppity sheriff. Allen, you watch and see nobody sneaks out o' here while I'm gone." He squinted back at Edmonds. "Or you wanna be reasonable? Your last chance, boy."

"Unless the Lord show me otherwise," Edmonds said, "I believe I am the reasonable man here and ye, friends, are terribly mistaken."

"Aw right! About time we started makin' some examples. Watch close, Allen." Gabe wheeled his horse and struck spurs to flanks. In a shower of mud, he galloped away. Frankie's barking sounded thin against the hoofbeats.

"Now, friend, kindly remove thyself," Edmonds said to Allen.

The slavecatcher grinned. "Oh, I think I'll jest ride around, this fine mornin'. Won't hurt nothin', won't poke in nowheres."

"Thee will nevertheless be trespassing."

"I don't think the jedge'll call it that, you a lawbreaker and all."

"Friend, we in this family have always done our humble best to observe the law."

"Yeah, yeah." Allen unlimbered his shotgun and laid it across his saddlebow. He clucked to the horse and jogged off, around the yard, on patrol.

Edmonds went back inside. Jane was on hands and knees, cleaning tracks off her floors. She rose and stood quietly while her husband told her what had happened. "What shall we do?" she asked.

"I must think," he answered. "Surely the Lord will provide." His gaze sought William. "My son, thee is happy, because thee is too young to know about evil. However, thee can help us. Pray keep silent, unless thee needs something for thyself, and then speak only to thy mother. Say no word to anybody else till I tell thee. Can thee do that?"

"Yes, father," piped the boy, delighted by the responsibility.

Edmonds chuckled. "At thy age, it won't be so easy. Later I'll tell thee a story about another boy named William. He became famous for keeping still. To this day they call him William the Silent. But thee'd better hold thyself aside. Thee may go play with thy toys."

The lad pattered off. Jane wrung her hands. "Matthew, must we endanger the children?"

Edmonds took both her hands in his. "A deal more dangerous it'd be to let wickedness go unresisted. . . . Well, thee see to Nellie. I'd better catch Jacob on his way back. And we all have our work to do."

His older son, tanned and towheaded, came into sight from behind the barn as the man stepped out again. Edmonds walked unhurriedly to meet him. Allen saw from a distance and rode toward them. The big dog, Chief, sensed trouble and growled.

Edmonds quieted him. "Jacob," he said, "go clean up."

"Of course, father," replied the boy, surprised.

"But don't head for school. Wait in the house. I think I'll have an errand for thee."

The blue eyes widened, went to the approaching stranger, back to the parent, kindled with understanding. "Yes, sir!" Jacob scampered from them.

Allen halted. "What you been talkin' about?" he demanded.

"Can't a man speak to his son any more in these United States?" The smallest bit of harshness touched Edmonds' tone. "I almost wish my religion would let me kick thee off my grounds. Meanwhile, at least leave us alone in our business. *It* doesn't hurt anybody."

In spite of his weapons, Allen looked uneasy. Edmonds stood bear-powerful. "I got my livin' to make, same as you," the slavecatcher mumbled.

"Plenty of honest jobs around. Where is thee from?"

"Kentucky. Where else? Gabe Yancy and me, we been trackin' that coon for days."

"Then the poor creature must be half dead from hunger and weariness. The Ohio's a wide river. Thee does not think she could swim across, does thee?"

"I dunno how, but them niggers got their ways. Somebody'd seen her yestiddy on t' other bank, like she meant to cross. So we ferried over this mornin', and sure 'nough, found somebody else who'd spotted what had to be her. And then we seen her ourselves, till she went into the woods. If only we'd'a had a dawg or two—"

"Brave men, chasing unarmed women like animals."

The rider leaned forward. "Listen," he said, "she ain't jest any old runaway off a plantation. They's somethin' queer about her, somethin' real wrong. That's how come Mr. Montgomery was fixin' to sell her south. He wants her back for more'n the money she's worth." He wet his lips. "And don't you forget, if she gits away, you got a thousand dollars owin' to him, 'sides the fine and jail."

"That's if they can prove I had anything to do with her escape."

Anger flashed: "You won't lie your way out o' this."

"Lying is against the principles of the Society of Friends. Now kindly let me get on with my work."

"So you don't lie to nobody, huh? You ready to swear you ain't hidin' any nigger?"

"Swearing is against our religion too. We don't lie, that's all. It doesn't mean we have to make conversation." Edmonds turned his back and walked off. Allen didn't pursue him, but after a minute took up his rounds again.

In the dimness of the wagon shed, Edmonds began to repair his plow. His mind wasn't really on it. At last he nodded to himself and returned to the house. Allen's look followed his every step.

Inside, he asked Jane, "How's our guest?"

"I took some food up to her," she said. "Starved, she is. This is the first station she's found."

"She struck off entirely on her own?"

"Well, naturally she'd heard about the Underground Railroad, but only that it exists. She lived on roots, grubs, a few times a meal in a slave cabin. Swam the river last night during the storm, with a piece of driftwood to keep her afloat."

"If ever anybody earned freedom, she has. How did she find us?"

"Came on a Negro man and asked. From what she told me, I think it must have been Tommy Bradford."

Edmonds frowned. "I'd better speak to Tommy. He's a steady fellow, but we'll have to be more careful in future. . . . Well, we're pretty new in this traffic. Our first passenger."

"Too soon," she said fearfully. "We should have waited till thee had the hidey-hole dug and furnished."

"This duty can't wait, dear."

"No, but— What shall we do? Those dreadful anti-Abolitionists in the neighborhood—they would be glad to see us ruined—"

"Speak no evil of people. Jesse Lyndon is misguided, but he's not a bad man at heart. He'll come to the light eventually. Meanwhile, I have a notion." Edmonds raised his voice. "Jacob!"

The boy entered the plainly, comfortably furnished parlor. "Yes, father?" Excitement danced in his tone, his whole being.

Looming over him, Edmonds laid a hand on his shoulder. "Listen carefully, son. I have an errand for thee. We have a guest today. For reasons that thee doesn't need to know, she's staying in the attic. Her dress isn't fit to be seen in. It was all she had, but we will provide her decent clothes. I want thee to take the foul old garment elsewhere and get rid of it. Can thee do that?"

"Uh, y-yes, sure, but—"

"I told thee to listen close. Thee may go barefoot, which I know thee enjoys, and carry a basket. Pick up some deadwood for kindling on thy way home, eh? Keep the dress down in the basket. We don't want anybody offended. There is no hurry. Go across the road to the Lyndons' woods. Do not gather sticks there, of course; that would be stealing. Saunter about, take pleasure in God's beautiful creation. When thee is by thyself, put on a black kerchief thy mother will give thee to cover thy hair from the sun. It's pretty muddy. Thee would do well to roll up thy sleeves and trousers, and pull the dress over them. A smock to keep thine own clothes clean, understand? Just the same, I suppose thee'll get thy head and arms and legs mired up.

Downright black, even. Well, I remember how I liked that when I was a kid." Edmonds laughed. "Till I came back and my mother saw me! But this is a holiday for thee, so that such carelessness will be allowable." He paused. "If perchance thee pass near the Lyndon house, so they spy thee, don't linger. Don't give them a good look, but run past quickly. They'd be scandalized to know young Jacob Edmonds was dressed and mucked like that. Dash back into the woods and bury the dress somewhere. Then circle back to our land and collect that kindling. Thee may take several hours all told." He squeezed the shoulder and smiled. "How's that sound, hm?"

His son had strained breathless at his words. Eagerness blazed: "Yes, sir! Wonderful! I can do it!"

Jane touched her man's arm. "Matthew, dear, he's only a child," she protested.

Jacob reddened. Edmonds raised a palm. "There should be no danger to him if he's as smart as I think he is. And thee," he said sternly to the face below his, "remember Jesus doesn't like bragging. Tomorrow I'll give thee a note to the schoolmaster, that I needed thy help here today. That's all that either of us has to tell anybody, ever. Got me?"

Jacob stood very straight. "Yes, sir, I do."

"Good. I'd better get back to work. Have fun." Edmonds stroked his wife's cheek, softly and briefly, before he went out.

As he crossed the yard, Allen rode over and exclaimed, "What you been doin'?"

"Minding my own business," Edmonds said. "We have a farm to run, if thee has not heard." He went on into the shed and took up his task again.

It was near midday and he was growing hungry—Jacob doubtless wolfing the sandwiches Jane would have made—when the dogs barked and Allen whooped. Edmonds strolled into the warm sunlight. Alongside Gabe rode a man with curly brown hair and troubled youthful face. The three of them brought their horses to meet the farmer.

"Good day, friend Peter," said Edmonds cheerily.

"Hi." Deputy Sheriff Frayne bit the greeting off. He struggled a few seconds before he could go on. "Matt, I'm

sorry, but this man's gone to Judge Abshire and got a search warrant for your place."

"That was not very neighborly of the judge, I must say."

"He's got to uphold the law, Matt. I do too."

Edmonds nodded. "Everybody should, when it is at all possible."

"Well, uh, they claim you're hiding a fugitive slave. That's a federal offense, Matt. I don't like it, but it's the law of the land."

"There is another Law, Peter. Jesus Christ spoke it in Nazareth. *'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath set me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.'*"

"No more o' your preachin', Quaker!" Gabe shouted. He was tired, sweaty, on edge after so much faring to and fro. "Deppity, do your duty."

"Search as thee will, thee will never find a slave on this land," Edmonds declared.

Frayne stared. "You swear to that?"

"Thee knows I can't give an oath, Peter." Edmonds stood silent for a spell. Then, in a rush: "But it'd bother my wife and frighten our little ones, having ye ransack the house. So I'll confess. I did see a Negro woman today."

"You *did*?" Allen yelled. "And didn't tell us right off? Why, you son of a bitch—"

"That'll do, fellow!" Frayne rapped. "Any more and I'll run you in for abuse, threat, and menace." He turned to Edmonds. "Can you describe what you saw?"

"She was wearing a ragged yellow dress, badly stained, and it was clear she was traveling north. Before ye spend valuable time here, why not ask the people in that direction?"

Frayne scowled. "Um, yeah," he said reluctantly, "the Lyndons are about a mile off, and they . . . don't like Abolitionists."

"They might have seen something too," Edmonds reminded him. "They wouldn't keep it from thee."

"The tracks we followed—" Allen began.

Edmonds chopped air with his hand. "Bah! Barefoot tracks are everywhere. Look, if ye find nothing, hear noth-

ing, yonder, ye can come back and search us. But I warn ye, it'll take hours, as many possible hiding places as a big farm has got, and meanwhile a fugitive who was not here would get clean away."

Frayne stared hard at him. Gabe opened his mouth. "He's right," the deputy said. "Let's go."

"I dunno—" Gabe muttered.

"You want my help or not? I been hauled from my business in town for this. I'm not about to lose another half a day watching you bumble around if it's needless."

"You go ask," Gabe told Allen. "My turn to guard this place."

"I'll come along," Frayne said, and rode off with the warrant in his pocket.

Jane appeared on the kitchen steps. "Dinner!" she hailed.

"I regret we cannot invite thee to share our table," Edmonds said to Gabe. "A matter of principle. However, we'll send food out."

The slavecatcher shook his head, furiously, and swatted at a fly. "To hell with you," he grated, and trotted to a vantage point.

Edmonds took his time washing up. He had barely finished saying grace when the dogs barked once more. Glancing out a window, he and Jane saw the deputy ride back into the yard and over to Gabe. After they had talked a minute, Gabe spurred his horse and disappeared between the apple trees. Soon he came back to sight on the road, northbound in a hurry.

Edmonds went onto the steps. "Will thee come eat with us, friend Peter?" he called.

The deputy rode to him. "Thanks, but, uh, I'd better get on back," he replied. "Another time, or you folks come in to Molly and me, hey? Maybe next week?"

"I thank thee. We'll be in touch. Did the Lyndons have news?"

"Yeah, Jesse told as how he glimpsed what's got to be her. We've seen the last of those two boys for a while, I guess." Frayne hesitated. "I never thought you'd give out information like that."

"I really didn't want my house invaded."

"N-no, but still—" Frayne rubbed his chin. "You said nobody'd ever find a slave on your land."

"I did."

"Then I s'pose you haven't joined the Railroad after all. There was some rumors."

"It's better not to listen to gossip."

"Yeah. And better not wonder too much." Frayne laughed. "I'm off. Give your missus my best." He turned serious. "If you did ever tell a lie—if you ever do—I'm sure it's in a rightful cause, Matt. I'm sure God will forgive you."

"Thee is kind, but thus far falsehoods haven't been necessary. Not but what I don't have plenty of other sins to answer for. Good day, friend, and give thy Molly our love."

The deputy tipped his hat and departed. When he was out of earshot, Edmonds stated, "There *are* no slaves. It's against Christ's teaching that human beings should be property."

He went back in. Jane and William cast him expectant looks. Nellie gurgled. He smiled as widely as a mouth could stretch. "They are gone," he said. "They took the bait. Let us give thanks to the Lord."

"Mr. Frayne?" asked his wife.

"He's gone home."

"Good. I mean, he'd be welcome, but now we can bring Flora down to eat with us."

"Oh, is that her name? Well, certainly. I should have thought of that myself."

Jane left the kitchen, set the ladder against a wall, climbed it, opened the trapdoor, murmured. In a short while she returned with Flora at her heels. The colored girl walked warily, eyes darting to and fro. A gown of the wife's rustled about her ankles. The knife quivered in her hand.

"Thee can surely put that from thee now," Edmonds told her. "We're safe."

"We really is?" Her gaze searched his. She laid the knife on the counter.

"Thee should never have taken it up, thee knows," Edmonds said.

A measure of strength had risen in the worn body. Pride rang: "Ah wasn' goin' back there nohow. Ah'd die fust. Hope Ah'd kill fust."

"'*Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.*'" Edmonds shook his head sadly. "I

dread His punishment of this sinful land when it comes." He stepped forward and took the swart hands in his. "But let's not talk of such things. On second thought, we should eat right away and give thanks later, when we can feel properly joyful."

"What then, massa?"

"Why, Jane and I will see to it thee get a hot bath. Later thee'd better sleep. We can't risk keeping thee here. The hunters might be back tomorrow. As soon as it's dark, thee and I'll be off to the next station. Have no fears, Flora. Thee ought to reach Canada in another month or less."

"Yo's mighty good, massa," she breathed. Tears trembled on her lashes.

"We try our best here to do what the Lord wants, as well as we can understand it. And by the way, I'm nobody's master. Now for pity's sake, let's eat before the food gets cold."

Shyly, Flora took Jacob's chair. "Ah don' need much, thank yo', ma—suh an' ma'm. The lady done gimme somethin' awready."

"Well, but we've a plenty of meat to get onto those bones of thine," answered Jane, and heaped her plate for her—pork roast, mashed potatoes, gravy, squash, beans, pickles, cornbread, butter, jam, tumbler on the side full of milk that had sat in the cool of the springhouse.

Edmonds kept up a drumfire of talk. "Here's somebody who hasn't heard my jokes and stories a score of times," he said, and finally coaxed a few slight laughs from his guest.

After pie and coffee the grownups left William in charge of Nellie and retired to the parlor. Edmonds opened the family Bible and read aloud while they stood: *"—And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land and unto a good land and a large, unto a land overflowing with milk and honey—"*

Flora shivered. The tears ran free down her cheeks. "Let mah people go," she whispered. Jane hugged her and cried too.

When they had prayed together, Edmonds regarded the girl a while. She met his look, flinching no longer. A sunbeam through a window turned her darkly aglow. For the

first time today he felt unsure of himself. He cleared his throat. "Flora," he said, "thee needs rest before nightfall, but maybe thee would sleep better for having told us something about thyself. Thee doesn't have to. It's just, well, here we are, if thee would like to talk to friends."

"'Tain't much to tell, suh, an' some of it's too awful."

"Do sit," Jane urged. "Never mind me. My father is a doctor and I'm a farm wife. I don't flinch easy."

They took chairs. "Did thee have far to go?" Edmonds asked.

Flora nodded. "'Deed Ah did, suh. Don' know how many miles, but Ah counted de days an' nights. Sebenteen o' dem. Often thought Ah was gonna die. Didn' min' dat too much, long's dey didn' catch me. Dey was gonna sell me down de ribber."

Jane laid a hand over hers. "They were? What on earth for? What were you doing there? I mean, your duties—"

"Housemaid, ma'm. Nuss to Massa Mon'gom'ry's chillun, like Ah was to hisself when he little."

"What? But—"

"'Twasn' too bad. But dey sell me, Ah knowed Ah'd be a field han' ag'in, or wuss. B'sides, Ah'd been thinkin' 'bout freedom a long time. We heahs things an' passes dem on to each othah, us black folks."

"Wait a minute," Edmonds broke in. "Did thee say thee was a—a mammy to thy master when he was a child? But thee can't be that old."

As Flora answered, he thought that already she bore herself like one free and, yes, proud. Maybe too proud. "Oh, Ah is, suh. Dat's why dey was fixin' to sell me. Wasn' nothin' Ah did wrong. But yeah by yeah, Ah saw how Massa an' Missus was watchin' me mo' an' mo' strange, same as ever'body else. Den when she died—well, Ah knowed he couldn' stan' habbin' me dere no mo'. Could yo' of?"

Both the Edmondses sat silent.

"Happened befo'," Flora went on after a minute during which the grandfather clock had seemed to tick as loud as doom. "Dat's how come Ah knows what it's like bein' a field han'. Not jes' watchin' an' feelin' sorry fo' dem. No, Ah been dere. When dat ol' Massa sol' me to Massa Mon'gom'ry's father, he didn' say nothin' 'bout mah age

den. So Ah figgered dere was mah chance." She stopped, swallowed, looked at the carpet. "Better not tell yo' how Ah got'm to notice me an' git me trained fo' de big house."

Edmonds felt his cheeks go fiery. Jane patted the hand beneath hers and murmured, "Thee needn't tell, dear. What choice has a slave ever had?"

"None, ma'm, an' dat's a fack. Ah was 'bout fo'teen de fust time Ah was sol', away from mah father an' mother, an' dat man an' bofe his sons—" Flora's glance touched the Bible on its stand. "Well, we s'pose fo'gibe, ain't we? Po' young Marse Brett, he done get killed in de waw. Ah saw his pappy when de wuhd come, an' would'a felt sorry fo' him 'cep' Ah was too tired fum wuhk."

A chill went along Edmonds' backbone. "What war?"

"De Rebolution, it was. Yay, eben us slabes heard 'bout dat."

"But then thee— Flora, no, it can't be! That would make thee . . . about a hundred years old."

Again she nodded. "Ah buried mah men, mah real men, an' Ah buried chillun, when dey wasn' sol' off fum me, an'—" Suddenly her firmness broke. She reached out toward him. "It's been too long!"

"Were you born in Africa?" Jane asked low.

Flora fought for calmness. "No, ma'm, in a slabe cabin. But mah dad, he was stolen away fum dere. Used to tell us young'uns 'bout it, de tribe, de foe-rest—said he was part Ay-rab, an'—" She stiffened. "He daid. Dey all daid, and nebba free, nebba free. Ah swo' to mahse'f Ah was gonna be, in deir names Ah was. So Ah followed de Drinkin' Gourd an'—an' heah Ah is." She buried her face in her hands and wept.

"We must be patient," Jane said across the bowed head. "She's overwrought."

"Yes, what she's been through, I suppose that would drive anybody kind of crazy," Edmonds agreed. "Take her away, dear. Give her that bath. Put her to bed. Sit with her till she sleeps."

"Of course." They went their separate ways.

Though Jacob came home jubilantly, supper was quiet. His parents had decided to leave Flora resting as long as possible. Jane would pack a basket of food for the next stage of the journey. Once she said, "Matthew, I wonder

what she meant by following the Drinking Gourd. Does thee know?"

"Yes, I've heard," he answered. "It's the Big Dipper. The one constellation nobody can mistake. They have a song about it, the slaves, I believe."

And he wondered what other songs went secretly through the land, and what songs might awaken in the future. Battle hymns? No, please, God, of Thy mercy, no. Withhold Thy wrath that we have so richly earned. Lead us to Thy light.

As dusk fell, he and Jacob rolled forth the buggy and harnessed Si to it. "Can I come along, father?" the boy asked.

"No," Edmonds said. "I'll be gone till nearly sunrise. Thee has school tomorrow after chores." He rumpled the bright head. "Be patient. Man's work will come on thee quite soon enough." After a moment: "Thee made a fine start today. I can only hope the Lord won't later want far more."

Well, but Heaven waited, the reward that has no bounds. Poor half-mad Flora. What if somebody really did have to live on and on like that, in bondage or hunted or—whatever menial thing she could become in Canada? Edmonds shuddered. God willing, as she met friendship along the Underground Railroad, she ought to recover her wits.

A lantern glowed. Jane brought the fugitive out and helped her into the buggy. Edmonds mounted to the driver's seat. "Good night, my dear," he said, and gently touched whip to horse. Wheels creaked down the drive and onto the road. The air was still fairly warm, though a touch of oncoming cold went through it. The sky ranged from purple in the west to velvety black in the east. Stars were blinking forth. The Big Dipper stood huge. Presently Edmonds made out the Little Dipper and Polaris in it, that guided north toward freedom.

XIV

Men of Peace

1

THE RANCH house was small, a one-room sod cabin, but the more defensible for that. Its two windows had heavy inside shutters and each wall a pair of loopholes. Picket stakes surrounded it, six deep. Men built like this in the west Texas cattle country—such of them as weren't dead or fled.

"Lord, but I wish we'd cleared out in time," Tom Langford said. "You and the kids, at least."

"Hush, now," replied his wife. "You couldn't run the spread without me, and if we gave up we'd lose everything we've worked for." She leaned across the table, over the firearms and ammunition that covered it, to pat his arm. A sunbeam through a hole on the east side struck through the gloom within and made living bronze of her hair. "All we got to do is hold out till Bob brings help. Unless the redskins quit first."

Langford kept himself from wondering whether the vaquero had gotten clean away. If the Comanches had spied him and sent pursuit with remounts, he must already lie scalped. No telling. Though you could see a long ways around here, by day, the war band had appeared at dawn, when folks were just getting started on the chores, and arrived faster than you might believe. Of the hands, only Ed Lee, Bill Davis, and Carlos Padilla had made it to the house with the family, and not before a bullet smashed Ed's left arm.

Susie had set and bandaged that limb as best she was able after the warriors recoiled from gunfire and withdrew out of sight. At the moment Ed had Nancy Langford on his lap.

The three-year-old clung hard to him, terrified. Bill kept watch at the north end, Carlos at the south, while Jim flitted between east and west in the pride and eagerness of his own seven years. A sharpness of powder still hung in the air, and some smoke seemed to have drifted in from the barn as well. The Indians had torched it, the only wooden building on the place. The roar of its burning reached the defenders faintly, like a noise in a nightmare.

"They're comin' back!" Jim shrilled.

Langford grabbed a Winchester off the table and sprang to the west wall. Behind him he heard Lee say, "Bill, you help the missus reload. Carlos, you be with Tom. Jim, you go 'round and tell me where I'm needed." The voice was ragged with pain but the man could work a Colt.

Langford peered through his loophole. Sunlight brightened the bare ground outside. Dust puffed and swirled ruddy from the hoofs of oncoming mustangs. He got a brown body in his sights, but then the pony veered and the rider vanished, except for one leg. Indian trick, hang yourself down the other side. But a Comanche without a horse was only half himself. Langford's rifle cracked and nudged his shoulder. The mustang reared, screamed, went over, kicked. The warrior had thrown himself clear. He was lost in the dust and rampage. Langford realized he had pretty much wasted that shot, and picked his next target with care. The bullets had to last.

Riders would never take this house. They'd learned as much, first time. They galloped around and around, whooping, firing. One toppled, another, another. I didn't get them, Langford knew. Carlos did. A real marksman, him. Brave, too. Could likely have gotten away from where he was when they showed up, but stuck with us. Well, I never did hold with looking down on a man just because he's Mexican.

"Comin' on foot, over here!" Jim cried.

Yes, of course, the mounted braves provided covering fire, distraction, for those who snaked amongst the pickets. Langford allowed himself a glance backward. Bill Davis had left the table to join Ed Lee on the north. The black cowhand wasn't the best with a gun in these United States, but his targets were close, slowed down by the barrier, scornful of death. He blasted away. Susie brought him a reloaded

rifle, took his emptied weapon back, fetched Ed a fresh pistol. The screams, hoofquake, shooting went on and on, world without end. You weren't scared, no time for that, but at the back of your head you wondered if there had ever been anything else or ever would be.

Suddenly it was over. The wild men gathered up their dead and wounded and pulled off again.

In the silence that followed, the clock sounded nearly as loud as—a hammer nailing down a coffin lid. It was a big old grandfather clock, the single treasure from her parents' home that Susie had wanted carted out here. The dial glimmered through a blue haze. Langford squinted eyes which the powder smoke stung and whistled softly. Just about ten minutes since the attack began. No more, dear God?

Nancy had crawled into a corner. She huddled hugging herself. Her mother went to give whatever comfort she could.

2

THE WIND across the high plains still bore much winter in it. This range wasn't as bleak as the Llano Estacado, over which the travelers had come, but the spring rains had not started in earnest and only a breath of green touched endless sere grass. Trees—willow or cottonwood clumped by whatever streams ran through these miles, the occasional lonesome oak—reached bare limbs into a bleached sky. Game was plentiful, though. It wasn't buffalo, except for white bones, the work of white hunters; buffalo were fast getting scarce. However, pronghorn, peccary, jackrabbit ran everywhere, with wolves and cougars to prey on them, while elk, bear, and cougar haunted the canyons. Jack Tarrant's party hadn't seen any cattle since well before they left New Mexico. Twice they passed abandoned ranches. The red terror woke to all its old fury while the states were at each other's throats, and the Army had a lot of quelling yet to do, seven years after Appomattox.

Sunlight dazzled eastward vision. At first Tarrant couldn't see what Francisco Herrera Carillo pointed at. *"Humo,"* the trader said. *"No proviene de ningún campamento."* He was a pale-brown man with sharp features; even on the trail he kept his chin shaven, mustache trimmed, clothes neat, as if

to remind the world that among his forefathers were Conquistadores.

Tarrant looked a bit like him, given aquiline nose and large, slightly oblique eyes. After a moment he too made out the stain rising athwart heaven. "Not from a camp, when it's visible from below the horizon," he agreed slowly in the same Spanish. "What, then? A grass fire?"

"No, that would be wider spread. A building. I think we have found your Indians."

Burly and redbearded, hook newly strapped on to stick out of his right sleeve, Rufus Bullen stumped over to join them. "Christ!" he growled. Two missing front teeth made his English slightly slurred. If others than Tarrant noticed the new growth that had begun to push stubs through the gums, they had said nothing about it. "You mean they've set fire to a ranch?"

"What else?" Herrera replied coolly, holding to his own language. "I have not been in these parts for some time, but if I remember right and have my bearings, that is the Langford property. Or was."

"What're we waiting for? We can't let 'em—" Rufus broke off. His shoulders sagged. *"Inutilis est,"* he mumbled.

"We will probably arrive too late, and can certainly do nothing against a war band," Tarrant reminded him, also in Latin.

Herrera shrugged. He had grown used to the Yanquis dropping into that lingo. (He recognized an occasional word from the Mass, but no more, especially since they spoke it differently from the priests.) This quest of theirs was mad anyway. "You wish to speak with the Comanches, no?" he observed. "You can hardly do that if you fight them. Come, let us eat and be on our way. If we're lucky, they will not have moved on before we get there."

His sons Miguel and Pedro, young but trailwise, had wakened at dawn and gotten busy. A coffeepot steamed and two pans sizzled on a grill above a fire of buffalo chips—an abundance of which remained—and mesquite. As hard as the seekers pushed, without time off to hunt, no bacon was left except fat for cooking, but they kept plenty of corn meal to make tortillas and two days ago the father had had the good luck to knock down a peccary. It had been quite a ways off. Every Comanchero was necessarily a crack shot.

The travelers ate fast, cleaned camp gear, obeyed nature, left soap and razors till later, hit the saddle and set off. Herrera varied the pace between trot and canter, now and then a walk. The two whom he guided had learned to heed him. Easy though it seemed, this sparing of horseflesh covered many miles a day. Besides, the remuda amounted to just a pair of ponies each and three pack mules.

The sun climbed, the wind sank. Warmth crept into the air and drew sweet sweat odors from the mounts. Hoofs thudded, leather creaked. The tall dry grass rustled aside. For a while the smoke rose higher, but presently it thinned, blew apart, faded away. Wings as black wheeled where it had been. "You can usually tell a Comanche camp from afar," Herrera remarked. "The vultures wait for the leavings."

It was hard to tell whether Rufus flushed. Hats failed to keep skin like his from reddening and chapping. His voice did grate: "Dead bodies?" That was in Spanish, which he could speak after a fashion.

"Or bones and entrails," Herrera replied. "They have always been hunters, you know, when they are not at war." A minute went by. "Your buffalo killers destroy their livelihood."

"Sometimes I think you like them," Tarrant murmured.

"I have dealt with them since I was Pedro's age, as did my fathers before me," Herrera said. "One comes to a little understanding, whether one will or no."

Tarrant nodded. Comancheros had been trading out of Santa Fe for a century, since de Anza fought the tribes to a standstill and made a peace that endured because he had gained their respect. It was a peace with the New Mexicans alone. Spaniards elsewhere, any other Europeans, the Mexicans who ruled later, the Americans—Texan, Confederate, Yankee—who despoiled the Mexicans, those remained fair game; and indeed by now there had been such bloodshed and cruelty on both sides that truce between Comanches and Texans was no more thinkable than it was between Comanches and Apaches.

Tarrant forced his mind back to his horse. He and Rufus had gotten fairly good at riding range style; but damn it, what they really were was seamen. Why couldn't their

search have led them into the South Pacific, or along the shores of Asia, or anywhere but this unbounded emptiness?

Well, the search might be near an end. No matter how often he had thought it before, that coursed through his blood and shivered up his spine. O Hiram, Psammetk, Pytheas, Althea, Athenais-Aliyat, Armand Cardinal Richelieu, Benjamin Franklin, how far has the River borne me from you! And all the lesser ones, beyond counting, down in dust, wholly forgotten save for whatever might glimmer in him, a comrade of decades or a drinking companion in a tavern, a wife and the children she bore him or a woman chance-met for a single night—

Herrera's shout slammed him back into the day: *"¡Alto!"* and a rush of alien gutturals. Rufus dropped left hand to pistol. Tarrant gestured him from it. The boys brought the pack animals to a stop. Their eyes darted around, they were new to this and nervous. Despite his earlier times between jaws ready to snap shut, Tarrant's flesh prickled.

Two men had come around a brush-grown hillock where they must have been on watch. Their scuffy-looking mustangs closed the distance in a few pulsebeats. They checked the gallop with invisible touch of knees and twitch of hackamore; seated merely on blankets, they seemed parts of the beasts, centaurs. Their own frames were stocky, bandy-legged, swarthy, clad in breechclouts, leggings, and moccasins. Midnight hair hung in twin braids past broad faces painted in the red and black of death. Leather sunshades had been left behind and the war bonnet of the northern plains was unknown here. One man had stuck a few feathers into a headband. The other bore a great shaggy cap or helmet from which sprang buffalo horns. He carried a Henry repeating rifle. A bandolier of cartridges crossed his chest. His companion nocked an arrow to a short bow. Archers were rare of late, or so Tarrant had heard. Maybe this warrior was poor, maybe he preferred the ancestral weapon. No matter. That barbed iron head could punch through ribs to the heart, and more shafts waited in their quiver.

Herrera talked on. Buffalo Horns grunted. The bowman slacked his string. Herrera turned in the saddle to regard his employers. "The fight is not ended," he told them, "but the Kwerhar-rehnuh will receive us. Chief Quanah himself is here." Moisture glistened on his face. He had gone a bit

pale around the nostrils. In English he added, for many Comanches knew some Spanish: "Be ver-ree careful. Sey 'ave much anger. Sey can easy kill a w'ite man."

3

THE RANCH buildings had already been visible. As he drew closer, they seemed to Tarrant, if anything, more small and lonesome in the middle of immensity. He recognized what must be the owners' home, a bunkhouse, and three lesser outbuildings. Sod, they were little damaged. A barn was smoldering ashes and charred fragments; the family had doubtless spent a lot of money and hope on getting the lumber hauled to them. A couple of wagons had been pushed into the flames. A chicken coop had been emptied and smashed. Hoofs had trampled saplings that were to have grown into shelter against sun and wind.

The Indians were camped where a windmill stood skeletal by the cattle trough for which it pumped water. That put them out of rifleshot from the house and, probably, sight through loopholes. About thirty tipis lifted their gaudily decorated buffalo hide cones across what had been a pasture. At a fire near the middle, women in buckskin gowns prepared captured, butchered steers for eating. They were rather few. The braves numbered maybe a hundred. They loafed about, napped, shot dice, cleaned firearms or whetted knives. Some sat grim in front of lodgings from within which sounded keening; they mourned kinsmen slain. A few, mounted, kept an eye on the many horses that grazed in the distance. They were as tough as their masters, those mustangs that could keep going on winter's grass.

When the newcomers caught the notice of the camp, excitement kindled. Most people ran to crowd around and jabber. The stoic reserve of Indians was a myth, unless they were in pain or dying. Then a warrior's pride was that not the most prolonged and agonizing torture his captors or their women could think of would make him cry aloud. It was an ill thing to fall into such hands.

Buffalo Horns shouted and pushed his pony through the ruck. Herrera called greetings to men he knew. The smiles and waves that he got in return made Tarrant feel easier. If

they took due care, his party ought to outlive this day. After all, to these folk hospitality was sacred.

Close by the windmill was a tipi whereon were painted signs that Herrera whispered were powerful. A man too dignified to leave it for curiosity's sake stood outside, arms folded. The travelers drew rein. Tarrant realized that he looked on Quanah, half-white war chief of the Kwerharrehnuh. The name of that band meant "Antelopes"—an American misnomer for the pronghorn, like "buffalo" for bison or "corn" for maize; and curious it seemed for the lords of the Staked Plains, the fiercest of all those Comanches whom the United States had yet to conquer.

Save for lightning-like bands of yellow and ocher, he wore simply loincloth and moccasins, with a Bowie knife sheathed on a belt. Yet there could be no mistaking him. From his mother's race he took straight nose and a height that towered, thickly muscled, over his followers. However, he was even darker than most of them. His regard of the strangers was lion-calm.

Herrera greeted him deferentially in the tongue of the Nermernuh, the People. Quanah nodded. *"Bienvenidos,"* he rumbled forth, and continued in accented but fluent Spanish. "Dismount and come in."

Tarrant felt relieved. In Santa Fe he had learned some of the Plains Indian sign language, but used it haltingly; and Herrera had told him that few Comanches were adept in it anyway. The trader had said Quanah might or might not condescend to speak Spanish with Americans. He had a certain grasp of English too, though he would scarcely handicap himself with it when he didn't have to. *"Muchas gracias, señor,"* Tarrant said, to establish that he was the head of this band. He wondered whether he should have used the honorific "Don Quanah."

Herrera left the remuda in charge of his sons and accompanied Tarrant and Rufus into the tipi behind the chief. Its outfit was sparse, little more than bedrolls; this was a war band. The light within fell gentle after the glare outside, the air smelled of leather and smoke. The men settled cross-legged in a circle. Two wives left, posting themselves at the entrance in case of a task for them.

Quanah was not about to smoke any peace pipe, but Herrera had said it would be okay to offer cigarettes. Tarrant

did while introducing himself and his friend. Deftly left-handed, Rufus took a matchbox from his pocket, extracted and struck a stick, lighted the tobacco. To have such a formidable-seeming man serve them honored both the principals.

"We have come a weary way in the wish of finding you," Tarrant added. "We thought the Antelopes would be on their home grounds, but you had already left, so we must ask anyone we met, and the earth itself, where you were gone."

"Then you are not here to trade," said Quanah in Herrera's direction.

"Sr. Tarrant engaged me in Santa Fe to bring him to you, when he had learned I would be able to," the trader answered. "I did pack along some rifles and ammunition. One will be a gift to you. As for the rest, well, surely you have taken many cattle."

Rufus sucked in a sharp breath. It was notorious that New Mexican ranchers wanted stock and would buy without questions. Comancheros got small detachments of Indians to drive herds they had lifted out of Texas to that market, in exchange for arms. Tarrant laid a hand on the redhead's knee and muttered in Latin, against the outrage he saw, "Stay quiet. You knew this."

"Make your camp with us," Quanah invited. "I expect we will be here until tomorrow morning."

Hope quivered in Rufus' tone: "Uh, you will spare them in yonder house?"

Quanah scowled. "No. They have cost us comrades. The enemy shall never boast that any defied us and lived." He shrugged. "Besides, we have need of a short rest, as hard as we have fared—the better to fight the soldiers afterward."

Yes, Tarrant understood, this was not really a plundering expedition, it was a campaign in a war. His inquiries had informed him of a Kiowa medicine man, Owl Prophet, who called for a great united thrust that would forever drive the white man from the plains; and last year such horror erupted that Washington's attempts at peace came to an end. In fall Ranald Mackenzie took the black troopers of his Fourth Cavalry into these parts, against the Antelopes. Quanah led a retreat that was a running fight, brilliantly waged—Mackenzie himself received an arrow wound—high

up onto the Llano Estacado until winter forced the Americans to withdraw. Now he was returning.

The stern gaze shifted to Tarrant. "What do you want with us?"

"I too bear gifts, señor." Clothing, blankets, jewelry, liquor. Despite his remoteness from this conflict, Tarrant could not bring himself to convey weapons; nor would Rufus have stood for it. "My friend and I are from a distant land—California, by the western waters, which I'm sure you have heard of." In haste, because that territory belonged to the foe: "We have no quarrel with anyone here. The races are not foredoomed to blood feud." A risk that he deemed he should take: "Your mother was of our people. Before setting forth, I learned what I could about her. If you have any questions, I will try to answer them."

Stillness fell. The hubbub outside seemed faint, distant. Herrera looked uneasy. Quanah sat expressionless, smoking. Time passed before the chief said, heavily: "The Tejanos stole her and my small sister from us. My father, Peta Nawkonee the war chief, mourned for her until at last he took a wound in battle that got inflamed and killed him. I have heard that she and the girl are dead."

"Your sister died eight years ago," Tarrant replied low. "Your mother soon followed her. She too was sick with grief and longing. Now they rest at peace, Quanah."

The tale had been easy enough to obtain, a sensation remembered to this day. In 1836 an Indian band attacked Parker's Fort, a settlement in the Brazos valley. They slew five men and mutilated them as was Indian wont, preferably before death. They gang-raped Granny Parker after a lance pinned her to the ground. Two of the several other women they violated were left with injuries almost as bad. Two more women they carried away, together with three children. Among these was nine-year-old Cynthia Anne Parker.

The women and boys were eventually ransomed back. Though this was by no means the first time the Comanches took females for slaves, the tale of just what those two suffered came to stand for hundreds; and the Texas Rangers rode with vengeance in their hearts.

Cynthia Anne fared better. Capriciously adopted, raised as a girl of the Nermernuh, she forgot English, forgot well-

nigh everything of her early childhood, became an Antelope and presently a mother. By all accounts, hers was a happy marriage; Peta Nawkonee loved his wife and wanted no woman after he lost her. That was in 1860, when Sul Ross led a Ranger expedition in retaliation for a raid and fell upon the Comanche camp. Its men were off hunting. The Texans shot what women and children fled too slowly, and a Mexican slave whom Ross believed to be the chief himself. Barely in time, a man saw, through dirt and dung-grease, that the hair of one squaw was golden.

The Parker clan and the state of Texas did everything they could for her. It was no use. She was Naduah, who only yearned back to the prairie and the People. Repeated attempts to escape finally forced her kinfolk to keep a guard on her. When disease robbed her of her daughter, she howled, tore and slashed her own flesh, sank into silence and starved herself to death.

Out on the plains, her younger son perished as wretchedly. Sickness dwelt always among the Indians, tuberculosis, arthritis, worms, ophthalmia, the smallpox that Europeans brought, a litany of ills without end. But her older son flourished, gathered a war band, became headman of the Antelopes. He refused to sign the Medicine Lodge treaty that would put the tribes on a reservation. Instead, he carried terror along the frontier. He was Quanah.

"Have you seen their graves?" he asked levelly.

"I have not," Tarrant said, "but if you wish, I can visit and tell them of your love."

Quanah smoked for a while longer. At least he didn't outright call the white man a liar. Finally: "Why have you sought me?"

Tarrant's pulse quickened. "It is not you, chief, great though your fame be. Word has come to me of somebody in your following. If I have heard aright, he hails from the north and has traveled widely and long. Yes, very long, longer than anybody knows, though he never seems to grow old. His must be a strange power. On your home grounds, uh, Nermernuh who stayed behind told us that he came along on this faring. My desire is to speak with him."

"Why?" demanded Quanah. The bluntness, unlike an Indian, betokened tension below the iron surface.

"I believe he will be glad to talk with me."

Rufus puffed hard on his cigarette. Laid across his lap, the hook trembled.

Quanah raised his voice to the squaws. One of them left. Quanah returned his look to Tarrant. "I have sent for Dertsahnawyeh. Peregrino." —the Spanish for the Comanche name: Wanderer.

"Do you hope he will teach you his medicine?" he went on.

"I have come to find out what it is."

"I do not think he could tell you, if he were willing, which I do not think he would be."

Herrera peered at Tarrant. "You only told me you wanted to find out what might lie behind those rumors," the trader said. "It is dangerous to meddle in warriors' affairs."

"Yes, I call myself a scientist," Tarrant snapped. To Quanah: "That is a man who seeks for whatever truth lies hidden behind things. How do the sun and the stars shine? How did the earth and life come to be? What really happened in the past?"

"I know," replied the chief. "Thus you whites have found ways to do and make many terrible things, and the railroad runs where the buffalo grazed." Pause. "Well, I suppose Dertsahnawyeh can take care of himself." Starkly: "As for me, I must think how to capture yonder house."

There was nothing more to say.

The tipi entrance darkened. A man trod in. While clad like the rest, he bore no war paint. Nor was he a native of these lands, but tall, slender, lighter-hued. When he saw who sat with Quanah he spoke gently in English. "What do you want of me?"

4

THEY WALKED over the prairie, Tarrant, Peregrino, Rufus trailing a step or two behind. Light spilled out of vastness, a measure of warmth lifted from soil. Dry grass rattled. Camp and buildings soon vanished among the tall tawny stalks. Smokes continued in sight, rising straight and slow toward the vultures.

Revelation was strangely subdued. Or perhaps it wasn't strange. They had waited so long. Tarrant and Rufus had felt hope grow into near certainty while they quested. Per-

egrino had nurtured an inner peace to which any surprise was like a passing breath of air. Thus he endured his loneliness, until he outlived it.

"I was born almost three thousand years ago," Tarrant said. "My friend is about half as old."

"I never counted time until lately," said Peregrino. They might as well use that name, out of the many he had had. "Then I guessed five or six hundred years."

"Before Columbus— What changes you've seen!"

Peregrino smiled as a man might at a graveside. "You more. Have you come on any like us, besides Mr. Bullen?"

"Not quite. A woman once, but she disappeared. We've no idea whether she's still alive. Otherwise, you're my first since him. Did you ever?"

"No. I tried but gave up. For all I knew, I was solo. How did you get on my trail?"

"That's kind of a story."

"We got plenty time."

"Well—" Tarrant drew a tobacco pouch from his pants and, from his shirt, the briar pipe it would have been unwise to smoke before Quanah. "I'll start with Rufus and me arriving in California in '49. You've heard about the Gold Rush? We got rich off it. Not as miners, as merchants."

"You did, Hanno," said the man at his heel. "I tagged along."

"And damn useful you've been, in more tight spots than I can list," Tarrant declared. "Eventually I dropped from sight for a few years, then showed up in San Francisco under my present alias and bought a ship. I've always favored the sea. By now I own several; the firm's done right well."

Having loaded his pipe, he laid fire to it. "Whenever I could afford to, I've hired men to look for signs of immortals," he proceeded. "Naturally, I don't tell them that's what they're after. By and large, those of our kind who survive must do it by staying obscure. These days I'm an eccentric millionaire interested in lineages. My agents figure me for an ex-Mormon. They're supposed to locate—oh, individuals who seem much like others that dropped from sight earlier, and are apt to appear carrying a pretty fair grubstake—that sort of thing. What with railroads and steamships, I can at last spread my net across the world. Of course, it's not that big yet, and the mesh is awfully coarse,

which may be why it's caught nothing except a few that turned out false."

"Until today," said Peregrino.

Tarrant nodded. "A scout of mine, exploring around Santa Fe, caught rumors about a medicine man among the Comanches, who didn't really belong to them—the description sounded like a Sioux or a Pawnee or whatever—but he'd gained a good deal of authority and . . . he'd been heard of elsewhere, earlier, several different times and places. Not that any civilized person had pieced this together. Who'd take the fancies of savages seriously? Uh, pardon me, no offense. You know how whites think. My agent didn't suppose it was worth pursuing. He noted it in a couple of sentences in his report just to show me how industrious he was.

"That was last year. I decided to follow it up myself. Lucked out and found two aged people, an Indian and a Mexican, who remembered— Well, it seemed, if he existed, he'd joined Quanah. I hoped to find the Comanches in winter quarters, but as was, we had to track them." Tarrant laid a hand briefly on Peregrino's shoulder. "And here we are, my brother."

Peregrino halted. Tarrant did. For a space they looked into each other's eyes. Rufus stood aside, bemused. At last Tarrant formed a wry grin and murmured, "You're wondering whether I'm a liar, aren't you?"

"How do you know I speak truth?" the Indian replied as low.

"Tactful fellow, you. Well, in the course of time I've cached evidence, as well as getaway gold, here and there. Come with me and I'll show you enough of it. Or you can simply watch me for twenty or thirty years. I'll provide for you. Meanwhile, why else on earth should I spin you a yarn like this?"

Peregrino nodded. "I believe you. But how do you know I'm not out to swindle you?"

"You couldn't have foreseen my arrival, and you did leave many years' worth of trail. Not on purpose. No white who didn't know what to look for would ever have suspected. The tribes—what do they make of you, anyway?"

"That depends." Peregrino's gaze went over miles where grass waved above buffalo skulls, on beyond the horizon.

When he spoke slowly, often stopping to form a sentence before he uttered it, his English became a language other than what he had been using. "Each lives in its own world, you know; and those worlds are changing so fast.

"At first I was a medicine man among my birth-people. But they took to the horse and everything that went with that. I left them and drifted for—winter after winter, summer after summer. I was trying to find what it meant, all that I lived through. Sometimes I settled down a while, but it always hurt too much, seeing what was happening. I even tried the whites. At a mission I got baptized, learned Spanish and English, reading and writing. Afterward I went deep into Mexican and Anglo country both. I have been a market hunter, trapper, carpenter, wrangler, gardener. I talked with everybody who would talk with me and read every printed word that came my way. But that was no good either. I never belonged there.

"Meanwhile tribe after tribe got wiped out—by sickness, by war—or broken and herded onto a reservation. Then if the whites decided they wanted that land too, out the redskins went. I saw the Cherokees at the end of their Trail of Tears—"

The quiet, almost matter-of-fact voice died away. Rufus cleared his throat. "Well, that's how the world is," he grated. "*I* seen Saxons, vikings, Crusaders, Turks, wars o' religion, witches burned—" Louder: "I seen what Injuns do when they get the upper hand."

Tarrant frowned him to silence and asked Peregrino, "What brought you here?"

The other sighed. "I finally thought—oh, I was slow about it—this life of mine that went on and on and on, with nothing to show for it but graves—it must have some purpose, some use. And maybe that was just in the long experience, and being ageless would make folks listen to me. Maybe I could help my people, my whole race, before they went under, help them save something for a new beginning.

"About thirty years ago, I came back to them. The Southwest was where free tribes were likely to hang on the longest. The Nermernuh—you do know 'Comanche' is from Spanish, don't you?—they had driven out the Apaches; they had fought the Kiowas as equals and made allies of them; for three hundred years they had stood off the Span-

ish, the French, the Mexicans, the Texans, and carried war to the enemy in his home country. Now the Americans aim to crush them once for all. They've earned better than that. Haven't they?"

"What are you doing?" Tarrant's question seemed to hover like the dark wings overhead.

"To tell the truth, I was among the Kiowas first," Peregrino said. "They are more open in their minds than the Nermernuh, also about long life. Comanches believe a real man dies young, in battle or the hunt, while he is strong. They don't trust their old ones and treat them bad. Not like my birth-people, so long ago. . . . I let my . . . my reputation grow with time. It helped that I know some things to do for the wounded and the sick. I never set myself up as a prophet. Those crazy preachers have been the death of thousands, and the end is not yet. No, I just went around from band to band, and they came to think I was holy. I did whatever I could for them in the way of healing or advice. Always I counselled peace. Finally—it's a long story—I joined up with Quanah, because he was becoming the last great chief. Everything will turn on him."

"Peace, did you say?"

"And whatever we can save for our children. The Comanches have nothing left from their ancestors, nothing they can truly believe in. That eats them out from the inside. It leaves them wide open for the likes of Owl Prophet. I found a new faith among the Kiowas and I'm bringing it to the Nermernuh. Do you know the peyote cactus? It opens a way, it quiets the heart—"

Peregrino stopped. A tiny laugh fluttered in his throat. "Well, I don't mean to sound like a missionary."

"I'll be glad to listen later," said Tarrant, while he thought: I have seen so many gods come and go, what's one more? "Also to any ideas you may have about making peace. I told you I have money. And I've always made a point of getting wires in my hands. You savvy? Certain politicians owe me favors. I can buy others. We'll work out a plan, you and I. But first we've got to get you away from here, back to San Francisco with us, before you take a bullet in your brain. Why the hell did you come along with these raiders anyway?"

"I said I have to make them listen to me," Peregrino ex-

plained wearily. "It's uphill work. They're suspicious of old men to start with, and when their world is falling to pieces around them they're afraid of magic as strange as mine and— They've got to understand I'm not unmanly, I am on their side. I can't leave them now."

"Wait a minute!" Rufus barked.

They stared at him. He stood foursquare, legs planted wide apart, hat pushed back from roughened red face. The hook that had pierced foemen looked suddenly frail under this heaven. "Wait a minute," stumbled from him. "Boss, what're you thinking? The first thing we got to do is save those ranchers."

Tarrant moistened his lips before it dragged out of him: "We can't. We're two against a hundred or worse. Unless—" He cast a glance at Peregrino.

The Indian shook his head. "In this the People would not heed me," he told them, dull-voiced. "I would only lose what standing I have."

"I mean, can we ransom that family? Comanches often sell prisoners back, I've heard. I've brought trade goods along, besides what was intended for presents. And Herrera ought to turn his stock over to me if I promise him payment in gold."

Peregrino grew thoughtful. "Well, maybe."

"That's giving those devils the stuff to kill more whites," Rufus protested.

Bitterness sharpened Peregrino's tone. "You were telling as how this sort of thing is nothing new on earth."

"But, but the barbarians in Europe, they were *white*. Even the Turks— Oh, you don't mind. You ride with these animals—"

"That'll do, Rufus," Tarrant clipped. "Remember why we've come. Saving a few who'll be dead anyway inside a century is not our business. I'll see if I can, but Peregrino here is our real kinsman. So pipe down."

His comrade whirled about and stalked off.

Tarrant watched him go. "He'll get over it," he said. "Short-tempered and not very bright, but he's been loyal to me since before the fall of Rome."

"Why does he care about . . . dayflies?" the medicine man wondered.

Tarrant's pipe had gone out. He rekindled it and stared

into the smoke as it lost itself beneath the sky. "Immortals get influenced by their surroundings, too," he said. "We've mostly lived in the New World these past two hundred years, Rufus and I. First Canada, when it was French, but then we moved to the English colonies. More freedom, more opportunity, if you were English yourself, as of course we claimed to be. Later we were Americans; same thing.

"It affected him more than me. I owned slaves now and then, and shares in a couple of plantations, but didn't think much about it either way. I'd always taken slavery for granted, and it was a misfortune that could happen to anybody, regardless of race. When the War Between the States ended it and a great deal else, to me that was simply another spin in history's wheel. As a shipowner in San Francisco I didn't need slaves.

"But Rufus, he's a primitive soul. He wants something to cling to—which is what immortals never can have, right? He's gone through a dozen Christian faiths. Last time he got converted was at a Baptist revival, and a lot of it still clings to him. Both before and after the war he took seriously what he kept hearing about the white race's right and duty to lord it over the colored."

Tarrant chuckled unmerrily. "Besides, he's been without a woman since we left Santa Fe. It was a terrible disappointment to him when he found on the Staked Plains that Comanche women don't free-and-easy receive outsiders like they do, or used to do, farther north. There must be a white woman or two in yonder cabin. He doesn't imagine he lusts after them himself—oh, he wouldn't dream of anything except being respectful and gallant and getting adoring looks—but the thought of redskin after redskin on them seems to be more than he can bear."

"He may have to," Peregrino said.

"Yes, he may." Tarrant grimaced. "I must admit I don't relish it, nor the idea of ransoming them with guns. I'm not quite as case-hardened as . . . I must behave."

"I think nothing will happen for hours."

"Good. I have to give Quanah my presents, go through any formalities—you'll advise me, won't you?—but not right away, hm? Let's walk on. We've a lot of talking to do, you and me. Three thousand years' worth."

5

WARRIORS GATHERED around. Now they were still, in wildcat dignity, for this was a ceremonial occasion. The westering sun cast gleams over obsidian hair and mahogany skin; on the eastern side it lit flames in eyes.

Between the ranks, before his tipi, Quanah received Tarrant's gifts. He made a speech in his father's language, lengthy and doubtless full of imagery in his fathers' wise. Standing by the visitor, Peregrino said in English when it was done: "He thanks you, he calls you friend, and tomorrow morning you will pick out of his horses whichever you like best. That is generous for a man on the warpath."

"I know," Tarrant said. To Quanah, in Spanish: "My thanks to you, great chief. May I ask a favor, in the name of the friendship you so kindly give us?"

Herrera, in the front row though well back, started, tautened, and squinted. Tarrant hadn't stopped by him upon returning, but had collected his presents and gone straight here. Word flew quickly about, and when he saw the braves assemble, Herrera came for politeness and wariness.

"You may ask," said Quanah, impassive.

"I wish to buy free those folks you hold trapped. They are useless to you. Why should you spend more time and men on them? We will take them away with us. In exchange we will pay a good price."

A stir went through the Comanches, a rustle, a buzz. Those who understood whispered to those who had not. Hands tightened on hafts, here and there on a firearm.

A man near the chief uttered a string of harsh words. He was gaunt, scarred, more deeply lined in the face than was common even for aged Indians. Others near him muttered as if in agreement. Quanah lifted a hand for attention and told Tarrant, "Wahaawmaw says we have our fallen to avenge."

"They fell, uh, honorably."

"He means all our fallen, through all the years and lifetimes, deathtimes we have suffered."

"I didn't think you people—thought that way."

"Wahaawmaw was a boy in that camp where the Tejanos took Quanah's mother," Peregrino related. "He found

cover and escaped, but they shot down his own mother, brother, two little sisters. A while back he lost his wife and a small son; the soldiers were using a howitzer. The same has happened, different places, to many who are here."

"I'm sorry," Tarrant said to any who would listen. "But those people yonder had nothing to do with that, and—well, I carry plenty of fine things like those I've given your chief. Wouldn't you rather have them than a few stinking scalps?"

Wahaawmaw claimed the right to speak. He went on for minutes, snarling, hissing, flinging up his hands and crying aloud to heaven. Anger answered in a surf-noise. When he was done and had folded his arms, Peregrino scarcely needed to translate: "He calls this an insult. Shall the Nermernuh sell their victory for blankets and booze? They'll take more loot than they can carry off the Tejanos, and the scalps as well."

He had warned Tarrant to expect this kind of outcome. Therefore Tarrant looked straight at Quanah and said, "I can make a better offer. We have rifles with us, boxes full of cartridges, things you need as you need horses if you are to wage war. How much, for those poor lives?"

Herrera took a step forward. "No, wait," he called.

Quanah forestalled him. "Are these in your baggage? If so, good. If not, you are too late. Your companion has already agreed to trade his for cattle."

Tarrant stood moveless. Wahaawmaw, who must have gotten the gist, crowed at him. "I could have told you," Herrera said through the rising crowd-noise.

Quanah brought that down while Peregrino breathed in Tarrant's ear, "I will see whether I can talk them into changing the deal. Keep your hopes on a tight rein, though."

He launched into oratory. His fellows responded likewise. For the most part they spoke soberly. The effort always was to reach a consensus. They had no government. Civil chiefs were little more than judges, mediators, and even war chiefs only commanded in battle. Quanah waited out the debate. Toward the end, Herrera had something to say. Soon after that, Quanah pronounced what he took to be the verdict, and assent passed among his followers like an ebb-tide

wave. The sun stood low. Wahaawmaw cast Tarrant a triumphant glare.

Sadness dulled Peregrino's English. "You have guessed, no? It did not work. They have not gotten much blood yet, and are thirsty for it. Wahaawmaw claimed it would be bad luck to give quarter, and quite a few were ready to believe that. They can spare the half a dozen to round up this ranch's herd and bring it to New Mexico. They enjoy that trip. And the Comanchero told them he is not a man to pull out of a bargain once it's been struck. That made them extra touchy about their own honor. Also . . . Quanah didn't argue either way, but they know he has an idea for taking the house that he would like to try, and they are curious what it may be." He stood silent for part of a minute. "I did my best. I really did."

"Of course," Tarrant answered. "Thanks."

"I want you to know I don't like what will happen, either. Let's ride off and not come back till morning, you and me—Rufus if he wants."

Tarrant shook his head. "I've a notion I'd better stay around. Don't worry. I've seen enough sacks in the past."

"I suppose you have," said Peregrino.

The meeting broke up. Tarrant gave Quanah his respects and walked among knots of warriors, whose looks on him ranged from sullen to gleeful, toward Herrera's camp. It was several yards from the nearest tipi. The New Mexican found men to talk with and thus delayed himself.

His sons had a fire started. They were busy with preparations for supper, before the quick prairie dark should fall. Long sunbeams trailed through smoke. Bedrolls waited. Rufus sat idle, hunched, a bottle in his single fist. He looked up when Tarrant approached and asked, needlessly once he had seen, "What happened?"

"No dice." Tarrant lowered himself to the trampled grass and reached out. "I'll take a swig of that whiskey. Not much, and you'd better watch it closer." Its bite went beneficent down his gullet. "I've failed altogether. Peregrino won't leave the Comanches, and they won't take ransom." Curtly he described the situation.

"That son of a bitch," Rufus breathed.

"Who? Quanah? He may be enemy, but he's honest."

"No, Herrera. He could have—"

The trader glided into view. "Did I hear my name?" he asked.

"Yeah." Rufus lurched to his feet, bottle in hand. He stayed with English, except for, "*Vipera es*. You snake. You greaser. You could'a—could'a—sold Hanno—sold the boss those guns an'—"

Herrera's right hand moved toward his Colt. His sons edged left and right, not yet drawing their knives. "I could not change a bargain that had been made," he said. Spanish was too soft a language to convey the full coldness. "Not unless they agreed, and they refused. That would have hurt my reputation, damaged my business."

"Sure, you breed, you're always ready for sellin' white men, white women, sellin' 'em for—for money. Blood money." Rufus spat at Herrera's feet.

"We will not speak of blood," said the trader most quietly. "*I* know who my father was. And I saw him weep when the Yanquis robbed our country from us. Now I must step aside for them in the streets of Santa Fe. The priest tells me I should not hate them, but need I care what becomes of them?"

Rufus groaned. His hook slashed. Herrera slipped back in time. The pistol sprang forth. Tarrant jumped to his feet and caught Rufus by the arms before the redbeard could try to draw. Slowly, the boys sheathed their blades.

"Behave yourself," Tarrant panted. "Sit down."

"Not with these!" Rufus coughed in Latin. He shook free of the grasp on him. "And you, Hanno. Can't you remember? Like that woman we saved, way back when in Russia. And that was just a single man, and he wouldn't have cut her belly open afterward, or given her to the females with their knives and torches—" He stumbled off, away from everybody, still gripping the bottle.

Looks followed him for a little. Then Tarrant said to Herrera, "Let him be. He'll get his wits back. Thanks for your patience," with less than total sincerity.

6

TWICE DURING the afternoon, Tom Langford ventured outside. When he saw the encampment, he stepped quickly in again and rebarred the door. Toward evening he said, "I s'pect

they'll try a night attack. Why else would they hang around this long? Maybe again at dawn, but could be any time. We'll just have to keep alert. If we stand 'em off then, they ought to up and go. Injuns don't know how to lay a siege."

Bill Davis laughed softly and richly. "We ain't wuth it," he opined.

"*Los vecinos vendrán indudablemente a ayudarnos*— 'Elp weell come," Carlos Padilla ventured.

"I dunno how fast, if ever," Langford sighed. "S'posin' Bob got through, the neighbors are scattered pretty thin these days. Maybe a cavalry troop is somewhere close enough."

"We are in the hands of God," Susie declared. She smiled at her husband. "Yours too, dear, and strong hands they are."

Ed Lee tossed and muttered on the Langfords' bed. His injury had lit a fever in him. The children were more than ready for sleep.

First there was supper, cold beans, bread, the last milk. They had no firewood to speak of, and little water. Langford asked his wife to say grace. Nobody minded when Carlos crossed himself. Afterward the men one by one and bashfully went behind a sort of curtain Susie had rigged in a corner to hide the bucket all must share. Langford had emptied it whenever he stepped out. He hoped nobody more would have any real business there till the Indians were gone. That would be kind of nasty, in these close quarters with a woman and a girl. The privy was sod, it ought to be around yet. If not, well, they'd have the tall grass for walls, the freedom of these acres for which he had saved and toiled and now fought.

Dusk thickened to night. A single candle burned on the table amidst the guns. The Langfords and the hale men stood watches, two peering out loopholes taken in turn while two caught naps, on the floor or alongside poor Ed. Stars crowded what they glimpsed of sky. The ground was gray-black vague. A waning sliver of moon would be scant help when it rose shortly before the sun. Meanwhile the cold and the stillness gnawed away.

Once the wife whispered from her side of the room, "Tom?"

"Yeah?" He allowed himself a look at her. In this dim

light he couldn't see dirt, exhaustion, hollowed cheeks and black-rimmed eyes. She was the girl of his courting days, from whose front porch he'd walk home on the rainbow.

"Tom, if—if they do get in and you have the chance—" She must take a breath. "Would you shoot me—first?"

"Christ, no!" he choked, and could taste the horror.

"Please. I'd bless you."

"You might live, honey. They do sell prisoners to our people."

She stared at the floor, then quickly, remembering her duty, out a loophole. "I wouldn't want to live. Not after—"

"Do you s'pose I'd ever turn my back on you? Reckon you don't know me as well as I thought."

"No, but you— I'd be without you on earth. Why not together in Heaven, at once?"

He knew the redskins wouldn't spare his life. Unless he was lucky, he wouldn't be a man when he died. Not that knives and fire, or being staked out under the sun with his eyelids cut off, would leave him in shape to think much about that. "Well, you might still manage to get the kids through."

Again her head drooped. "Yes. I'm sorry. I clean forgot. Yes, I was bein' selfish."

"Aw, don't you fret, sweetheart," he said as cheerfully as he was able. "Nothin' bad's goin' to happen. Next week our biggest worry will be how we can keep from braggin' too loud."

"Thank you, darlin'." She turned her attention outward.

The night wore on. They had divided it into four watches, then all to be afoot in advance of dawn, when attack was likeliest. About three in the morning by the grandfather clock, the Langfords finished their second trick, roused the hands, and stretched themselves out, he on the floor, she beside Ed. Should the hurt man stir from the heavy sleep into which he had dropped, she'd know it and see to whatever need was his. The other men would shoot better, the more well rested they were.

A shotgun blast kicked Langford awake.

Bill thudded against the wall and fell. The lead had sleeted across the cabin and taken him in the back. By candlelight and monstrous flickery shadows the blood that gushed from him shone blacker than his skin.

Carlos crouched on the north side, rifle aimed and

useless. Two broad muzzles thrust in by the west loopholes. One smoked. It withdrew. Instantly another took its place. Meanwhile the second roared.

Langford jumped to the bedside and Susie. Sick understanding billowed through him. Hostiles, just three or four, had crawled under cover of night, slowly, often stopping, shadows in the gloom, till they were among the stakes and under the eaves. When they shoved their guns through, maybe they hoped they'd fire straight into an eye.

No matter. Shooting blind, wedging the barrels to and fro, they made defense impossible.

Whoops lifted, nearer and nearer. Thunder beat on the door. No tomahawks, Langford knew; that was a regular woodcutting ax, probably his. Panels splintered. A gust blew out the candle. Langford fired and fired, but he couldn't see anything for sure. The hammer clicked on emptiness. Where the hell were the loaded guns? Susie screamed. Maybe he should have saved a bullet for her. Too late. The door was down and the dark full of warriors.

7

THE RACKET brought Tarrant and the Herreras from their bedrolls, hands to weapons. Tumult went murky among the tipis. *"El ataque,"* the trader said beneath yowls and shots.

"What're they doing?" Tarrant grated. "Another frontal assault, in the dead of night? Crazy."

"I do not know," Herrera said. The noise rose rapidly to crescendo. He bared teeth, a dim flash under the stars. "Victory. They are taking the house." Tarrant bent to put on his boots. "Where do you go? Stay here. You could too easily get killed."

"I've got to see if I can do anything."

"You cannot. Myself, I stay, not out of fear but because I do not want to see what comes next."

Tarrant's pain lashed: "You told me you don't care."

"Not much," Herrera admitted. "But it would be evil to gloat, nor have I the heart for it. No, my sons and I will pray for them." He plucked the other man's sleeve. You slept fully clad in such a place as this. "Do stay. You, somehow, I like."

"I'll be careful," Tarrant promised, and loped off.

He skirted the Comanche camp. More and more torches came to life there, flared, bobbed, streamed sparks on their hasty way. Sight of them dimmed the stars that in their uncountable thousands gleamed frost-bright across black. Nevertheless he had light enough to turn the soil gray for him.

Where the devil was Rufus? Probably snoring out on the prairie alongside the empty bottle. Just as well. No matter how self-controlled, a white man took a risk, showing himself to red men in blood-rut.

So why did he, Hanno, Lugo, Cadoc, Jacques Lacy, William Sawyer, Jack Tarrant, a hundred different aliases, behave like this? He knew he couldn't save the ranchers, and didn't mean to try. They must perish as star-many had perished before them and would in the future, over and over, world without end. History chewed them up and spat them out and soon most rotted forgotten, might as well never have been. Maybe the Christians were right and mankind was like that, maybe it was simply in the nature of things.

His intention was practical. He hadn't survived this long by hiding from the terrible. Rather, he kept alert, aware, so he'd know which way to jump when the sword swung. Tonight he'd observe from the fringes. If an impulse arose to wipe out his party too, he could talk it down, given help from Peregrino and maybe even Quanah, before it got out of control. In the morning he'd start back toward Santa Fe.

The chief stood huge near the cabin, a long-helved ax on his shoulder. Torchlight guttered across painted face and body, horned headdress; it was as if he flickered in and out of hell. The braves were mostly less clear, blobs of night that swarmed, pranced, screeched, waved their brands like battle flags. Squaws capered with them, knives or sharpened sticks in hand. The doorway gaped hollow.

They kept clear a space in front of it. Three dead men sprawled at the threshold, dragged forth. The Anglo's left arm was splinted; someone had cut his throat before stopping to think about sport. Rib ends stuck out of a hole torn in the Negro's back. A third seemed Mexican, though he was so slashed and pulped it was hard to be sure; he had gone down fighting.

Lucky bastards. Two squaws held fast a small boy and a smaller girl who screamed, blind with fear. A tall Anglo sat

slumped. Blood matted his hair and dripped onto clothes and earth. He was stunned. Two warriors locked the arms of a young woman who writhed, kicked, cursed them and called on her God.

A man bounded from the ruck. A torch swung near him for a moment and Tarrant recognized Wahaawmaw. He had slung his rifle to free his hands. The right gripped a knife. He laughed aloud, caught the collar of the woman's dress in his left, slashed downward. The cloth parted. Whiteness gleamed, and a sudden string of blood-beads. Her captors forced her down on her back. Wahaawmaw fumbled at his breechclout. The man prisoner stirred, croaked, struggled to regain his feet. A brave gave him a gun butt in the stomach and he sagged, retching.

A grizzly bear growl resounded. From around the cabin stormed Rufus. His Colt was drawn. He swept his hook back and forth. Two Indians stumbled aside, faces gashed open. He reached the woman. The men who pinned her sprang up. He shot one through the forehead. He hooked an eye from the other, who recoiled shrieking. His boot smashed into Wahaawmaw's groin. That warrior tumbled, to squirm by the white man. He sought to choke down agony, but it jerked past his lips.

Flambeau flare made Rufus' beard its own hue. He stood with his legs on either side of the woman, hunched forward, swaying a little, flaming drunk but the Colt rock-steady before him. "Aw right," he boomed, "you filthy swine, first o' you makes a move, I'll plug him. She's gonna go free, an'—"

Wahaawmaw straightened on the ground and rolled over. Rufus didn't see. There was too much else for him to watch. "Look out!" Tarrant heard himself yell. The Indian howls drowned his voice. Wahaawmaw unslung his rifle. Prone, he fired.

Rufus lurched back. The pistol fell. Wahaawmaw shot again. Rufus crumpled. His weight sank onto the woman and held her fast.

Wild, Tarrant shoved men aside. He sprang into the clear space and went on his knees beside Rufus. *"O sodalis, amice perennis—"* Blood bubbled from the mouth and into the red beard. Rufus gasped. For an instant it seemed he grinned, but Tarrant couldn't really know in the shifty

torchlight or even by the light of the stars. He clasped the big body to him and felt life ebb away.

Only then did he hear what a silence had fallen. He looked aloft. Quanah stood above him, the ax held out like a roof or a buffalo-hide shield. Had he roared his folk into quietude? They were a massive blur, well back from him and the dead, the wounded, the captive. Here and there a blaze briefly picked out a face or made eyeballs glisten.

Tarrant hauled Rufus off the woman. She stirred, stared, mewed. "Easy," he murmured. She got to hands and knees, made her way thus to the man. Squaws had let go of the children, who were already at his side. He'd regained consciousness. At least, he could sit straight and lay his arms around them all.

The warriors Rufus injured had joined the crowd, except for the slain one and Wahaawmaw. He had risen but leaned on his rifle, shakily, holding himself where the pain was.

Tarrant got up too. Quanah lowered his ax. The pair of them regarded each other.

"Bad is this," said the chief at last. "Very bad."

A skipper from Phoenicia learned how to snatch at every chance, no matter how thin a shred. "Yes," Tarrant answered. "A man of yours has killed a guest of yours."

"He, your man, broke murdering into our midst."

"He had a right to speak, to be heard in your council. When your Nermernuh would bar his way and likely attack him, he acted in self-defense. He was under your protection, Quanah. At worst, you could have had him seized from behind, as many men as you command. I think you would have done that if you had gotten the chance, for everyone calls you a man of honor. But this creature shot him first."

Wahaawmaw groaned outrage. Tarrant didn't know how much he had understood. The argument was weak, almost ridiculous. Quanah could dismiss it out of hand. And yet—

Peregrino stepped forth. He overtopped the chief by a couple of inches. He carried a medicine bundle and a wand on which hung three buffalo tails, things he must have brought from his tipi. A hiss and mumble went through the crowd. Torches wavered. Dertsahnawyeh, the undying one, had power to raise awe in the fiercest heart.

"Stay where you are, Jack Tarrant," he said quietly, "while Quanah and I go talk."

The chief nodded. He spoke certain commands. Wahaawmaw snarled but hobbled obediently off to lose himself in the throng. Several warriors came rifles in hand to keep guard on the whites. Quanah and Peregrino departed into the night.

Tarrant went over to the prisoners and hunkered down. "Listen," he said low, "we may be able to get you free. Keep still, don't make any fuss. This band's had a shock that cooled them down some, but don't do anything to remind them they meant to destroy you."

"I got you," the man answered, clearly if not quite firmly yet. "Whatever happens, we owe you our prayers, you and your partner."

"He came like a knight of King Arthur," the woman whispered.

He came like a goddamned drunken idiot, Tarrant thought. I could have headed him off if I'd known. I would have. Oh, Rufus, old buddy, you always hated to be alone, and now you are, forever.

The man offered his hand. "Tom Langford," he said. "My wife Susan. Nancy. Jimmy, uh, James." For out of grime and drying tears and the start of a bruise, the boy had cast his father a reproachful look. Tarrant wanted to hoot laughter.

He choked it down, shook hands, gave his name, and finished, "We'd better not talk more. Besides, the Indians expect me to see to my dead."

Rufus lay about ten feet from the Langfords. It might have been ten thousand miles. Tarrant couldn't wash him, but he straightened the body, closed the eyes, bound up the jaw with a bandanna. He drew his pocket knife and cut himself in the face and along bared arms and chest. Blood welled and dripped, nothing serious but it impressed the watchers. This was their way of mourning, not the white man's. Surely therefore the dead was mightily important, to be avenged with cannon and saber unless his friends were appeased. At the same time, the friend who was here did not wail over him, and that too was eerie. By ones and twos

and threes, the Nermernuh melted off toward the comfort of their camp.

Well, Rufus, you did have fifteen hundred years, and you enjoyed just about every day of them. You wenched and fought and sang and gorged and swilled and adventured, you were a hard worker when we needed work done and a better yet man to have at my back when we needed that and in your rough gruff style a pretty good husband and father whenever we settled down a while. I could have done without your stupid practical jokes, and by ourselves for any length of time your conversation got so boring it was physically painful, and if you saved my life now and then, I staked my own as often to pull you out of some scrape you'd blundered into, and—and a lot of gusto went out of my world tonight, Rufus. A lot of love.

False dawn chilled the east. Quanah and Peregrino were dim in sight until they reached the cabin and halted. Tarrant rose. The guards glided deferentially aside. From the ground the Langfords stared dull-eyed, wrung dry, their children uneasily asleep.

Tarrant stood waiting.

"It is decided," said Quanah. The deep voice rolled like hoofs over the plains. Breath blew ghost-white in the cold. "Let all men know that the Nermernuh are generous. They will heed my wishes in this matter. You, the trader, and his sons may go home. You may take these captives along. They are in exchange for your comrade. He brought his death on himself, but since he was a guest, let that be his price, because the Nermernuh set high their honor. Nor shall his body be harmed, but we will give him decent burial, so that his spirit may find its way to the afterworld. I have spoken."

A shudder passed below Tarrant's skin. He had more than half awaited worse than this. Somehow he kept it hidden and said, "I thank you much, señor, and I will tell my people that the soul of Quanah is large." He believed he meant it.

For an instant the chief let his stateliness drop. "Thank Peregrino. He persuaded me. Begone before sunrise."

He beckoned to the guards. They followed him toward the Comanche camp.

A mortal might have crumbled to pieces as the pressure

came off, cackled and gibbered and swooned. An immortal had more reserves, more bounce. Nonetheless Tarrant's words trembled. "How did you do it, Peregrino?"

"I pushed your argument as far as it would go." Again the Indian took time to build and weigh each English sentence. "He wasn't unwilling to take it. He isn't a fiend, you know; he's fighting for the life of his people. But he must convince them also. I had to . . . call in all my chips, call on the spirits, finally tell him that either he released you or I left him. He does value my advice as well as . . . my medicine. After that it wasn't hard to get him to release this family too. I will help him convince the warriors that was a good idea."

"He was right when he told me to thank you," Tarrant said. "I will for as many centuries as I've got left."

Peregrino's smile was as bleak as the eastern light. "You need not. I had my reasons and I want my price."

Tarrant swallowed. "What is it?"

The tone mildened. "I admit I did have to save you. Maybe you and I are the only immortals in the world, now. We must join together sometime. But meanwhile—"

Peregrino reached out and caught Tarrant's arm. "Meanwhile, here are my people," throbbed from him. "I wasn't born to them, but they are almost the last of us who were born to this land and are still free. They won't be much longer. Soon they will be broken." Even as Tyre and Carthage were, Gallia and Britannia, Rome and Byzantium, Albigensians and Hussites, Basques and Irish, Quebec and the Confederacy. "I told you yesterday out on the prairie, I have to stay with them to the end, reason with them, help them find a new faith and hope. Else they'll dash themselves to pieces, like buffalo over a cliff. So I will be working among them for peace.

"I want you to do the same. As I told Quanah, letting these few go can earn us a little good will. More will die, horribly, but here is a talking point for you. You claim you are rich and have the ear of powerful men. All right, my price for these lives is that you work on your side for peace, a peace that my people can live with."

"I'll try my best," said Tarrant. He truly meant that. If nothing else, the day would come when Peregrino held him to account.

They clasped hands. The Indian strode off. False dawn died away and he was quickly into the shadows.

"Follow me," Tarrant called to the Langfords. "We have to hit the trail at once."

What sum of years had Rufus bought for these four? Two hundred, maybe?

8

In Far Western eyes, the Wichita Mountains were hardly more than hills; but they rose steeply, treeless, yet under the spring rains turning deeply green and starred with wildflowers. In its valley among them a big house and its outbuildings reigned over many acres of cropland, pasture, cattle, and horses, horses.

Grass shone wet after a shower and clouds drifted white when a hired carriage left the main road for the drive to the homestead. A farmhand on a pony, who had been inspecting fences, saw it and rode to inquire. Mr. Parker wasn't here, he said. The driver, who was likewise an Indian, explained that his passenger's business was actually with Mr. Peregrino. Startled, the worker gave directions and stared after the vehicle. It was almost as strange to him as the autos that occasionally stuttered by.

A side track brought it to a frame cabin surrounded by flowerbeds, kitchen garden in back. On the porch a man clad in dungarees and sandals sat reading. He wore his hair in braids but was too tall and slender to be a Comanche. As the carriage approached he laid his book aside, sprang down the steps, and stood waiting.

It stopped. A white man climbed out. His clothes bespoke prosperity only if you looked closely at material and tailoring. For a moment he and the dweller were still. Then they ran to grip hands and look into each other's eyes.

"At last," Peregrino said, not quite evenly. *"Bienvenido, amigo."*

"I'm sorry to have been this long about coming," Tarrant answered. "It happened I was in the Orient on business when your letter reached San Francisco. After I got home, I thought a telegram might draw too much notice. You'd written to me years ago, when I sent you my address, that just

that bit of mail set tongues wagging. So I simply caught the first train east."

"It's all right. Come in, come in." With long practice behind it the English flowed easily, colloquially. "If your driver wants, he can go on to the big house. They'll take care of him. He can cart us to town—how about day after tomorrow? I've things of my own to see to, including stuff I'd like shipped after me. If that's okay with you."

"Of course, Peregrino. Damn near anything you may want is." Having spoken to the other man, Tarrant took a Gladstone bag from the carriage and accompanied his host inside.

The cabin held four rooms, neat, clean, sunny, austerely furnished except for a substantial number of books, a gramophone, a collection of mostly classical records, and, in the bedchamber, certain articles of religion. "You'll sleep here," Peregrino said. "I'll roll up in the back yard. No, not a peep out of you. You're my guest. Besides, it'll be kind of like old days. I often do it anyway, in fact."

Tarrant glanced around. "You live alone, then?"

"Yes. It seemed wrong to me, getting married and having kids when I knew that in the end I'd fake something and desert them. Life among the free tribes was different. How about you?"

Tarrant's mouth pinched together. "My latest wife died last year, young. Consumption. We tried a desert climate, everything, but— Well, we had no children, and this identity has been around nearly as long as is safe. I'm making ready for a change."

They settled themselves in the front room on wooden chairs. Above Peregrino's head a chromolithograph gazed from its frame at Tarrant, a Rembrandt self-portrait. Bad though the copy was, mortal sorrow lingered in those eyes. From his bag Tarrant had taken a bottle of Scotch. Illegally, he filled both glasses his host had fetched. He also offered Havana cigars. Mere creature comforts are still comforts.

"How've you been doing otherwise?" Peregrino inquired.

"Busy," Tarrant said. "Not sure how rich I am—I'd have to go through the books of several aliases—but it's a heap, and bigger every day. One thing I want you for, besides yourself, is to help me think what's most worth spending it on. How about you?"

"Peaceful, on the whole. I cultivate my patch of land, make things in my woodworking shop, counsel my congregation—native church, so I'm not really like a white minister—and teach in a school. I'll be sorry to leave that. Oh, and I read a lot, trying to learn about your world."

"And I suppose you're Quanah's advisor."

"Well, yes. But look, don't think I'm the power behind his sad little throne or anything like that. He's done it all himself. He's a remarkable man. Among whites he'd have been a, a Lincoln or Napoleon. The most I can claim credit for is making some things possible, or at least easier, for him. He went ahead and did them."

Tarrant nodded, remembering— The grand alliance of Comanche, Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Arapaho, Quanah its paramount chief. The bloody repulse at Adobe Walls, the year of warfare and manhunt that followed, and the last starvelings, led by Quanah, going onto the reservation in 1875. The good intentions of an Indian agent three years afterward, when he arranged for the Comanches to ride out under military escort on a final buffalo hunt, and no buffalo remained. And yet, and yet—

"Where is he now?" Tarrant asked.

"In Washington," Peregrino said. Receiving a look of surprise: "He goes there fairly often. He *is* our spokesman, for all our tribes. And, well, too bad about Mr. McKinley, but that did put Theodore Roosevelt in the White House. He and Quanah know each other, they're friends."

He smoked for a while in silence. The ageless are seldom hurried. At length he went on: "Among us Quanah's more than a rather wealthy farmer. He's a headman and judge, he holds us together. The whites don't like the peyote nor his clutch of wives, but they put up with it because he doesn't just keep us going, by doing so he keeps their consciences at ease. Not that he's any sobersides. A genial sort, apt to tell stories or use language that'd make a sailor blush. But he is . . . reconciliation. He calls himself Quanah Parker, in memory of his mother. Lately he talks about having her bones and his sister's moved here, so they can rest beside his. Oh, I don't blinker myself. We Indians have a steep, tough road to walk, and a lot of us will fall by the wayside. But Quanah's gotten us started."

"And you brought him to that," Tarrant said.

"Well, I worked against the prophets, I used what influence I had toward getting peace into the minds of the People. And you, from your side, kept your promise."

Tarrant grinned crookedly. It had cost. You couldn't simply buy politicians, you had to buy or push men who in their turn could strike deals with the grim incorruptibles. But Quanah did not go to jail or hang.

"I suspect you're too modest," Tarrant said. "Never mind. We've done our work. Maybe we've justified our long lives; I don't know. So you're ready to travel?"

Peregrino nodded. "I can't do anything more here that others can't whom I've helped train. And I have been on this reservation more than a quarter century. Quanah's covered for me, kept me pretty much tucked in a corner, discouraged those who remember from talking to outsiders about me. But it isn't like the prairie. Folks are wondering. If any real word leaked to the newspapers—ah, that worry's at an end. I'll leave him a letter, and my blessing."

He looked out the window. It faced west. His hand lifted to his lips the brew of a people who themselves were once barbarians, southward raiding, northward retreating in war after war for their freedom. He said, "It's time for me to start over."

XV

Coming Together

1

RAIN ROARED. It washed away heat and grime, turned the air into flying, stinging gray. When lightning flashed, the hue became brief mercury, while thunder trampled down noise of motors, horns, water spurting from wheels. One bolt stabbed the new Empire State Building, but dissolved in the steel web under the masonry. Though the hour was early afternoon, headlights glimmered on cars and buses. Even midtown, pedestrians became few, trudging hunched beneath umbrellas or dodging from marquee to awning. Taxis were not to be had.

Uptown, Laurace Macandal's street lay altogether bare. Ordinarily it bore life enough, and after dark bustled and glittered. Several night clubs had sprung up among the neighborhood's modest tenements, small shops, and this old mansion she had renovated. Hard times or no, white folks still came to Harlem for jazz, dance, comedy, a little freedom from care such as they told each other Negroes were born to. Just now, everybody was inside, waiting out the weather.

She glanced at a clock and beckoned to one of the maids. "Listen well, Cindy," she said. "You haven't been long in service, and something very important will happen today. I don't want you making mistakes."

"Yes, Mama-lo." Awe shivered in the girl's voice.

Laurace shook her head. "That, for instance. I have told you before, I am only 'Mama-lo' at holy times."

"I, I'se sorry, . . . ma'm." Tears blurred sight of the woman who stood before the girl—a woman who looked

young and yet somehow old as time; tall, slim, in a maroon dress of quiet elegance, a silver snake bracelet on her left wrist and at her throat a golden pendant whose intertwined circle and triangle surrounded a ruby; too dark to be called high yellow, but with narrow face, arched nose, hair straight and stiff. "I keeps forgettin'."

Laurace smiled and reached to pat the maid's hand. "Don't be afraid, dear." Her voice, which could be a trumpet, sang like a violin. "You're young, with much to learn. Mainly I want you to understand that my visitor today is special. That's why no men will be around except Joseph, and he's to stay with the car. You will help in the kitchen. Don't leave it. No, there is nothing wrong with the way you serve at table, and you're prettier than Conchita, but she ranks higher. Rank must be earned, by service as well as faith and study. Your time will come, I'm sure. Mainly, Cindy, you are to keep silence. You may not speak a single word to anybody, ever, about who my guest was or anything else you might happen to see or hear. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'm."

"Good. Now be off with you, child. Oh, and do work harder on your English. You'll never get anywhere in the world unless you sound educated. *Are* educated. Master Thomas tells me you aren't doing so well at arithmetic, either. If you need extra help, ask him for it. Teaching isn't just his job, it's his calling."

"Y-yes, ma'm."

Laurace inclined her head and half closed her big eyes, as if listening. "Your good angel hovers near," she said. "Go in peace."

The girl trotted off, pert in her starched uniform, radiant in her sudden joy.

Alone, Laurace prowled about, picked up objects, fiddled with them, put them down again. She had made this room Victorian, oak wainscots, heavy furniture, thick carpet and drapes, glass-fronted cabinets for carefully chosen curios, a shelf of books still more select, on top of which rested the white bust of a man who had been black. Electric bulbs in a glass chandelier were dim; rain's twilight crowded close. The effect was impressive without being overly strange.

When, from a bow window, she saw the car she had dispatched arrive at the curb, she set restlessness aside and

straightened. Most would depend on what impression she herself made.

The chauffeur got out, unfolded a large umbrella, came around to the right side and opened the rear door. He escorted his passenger to the porch, where he rang the bell for her. Laurace didn't see that, but she heard and knew. She likewise knew of the two maids who received the visitor, took her coat, and guided her down the hall.

As she entered the room, Laurace went to meet her. "Welcome, welcome," she said, and clasped both hands in hers.

Clara Rosario's fingers responded only slightly, as did her mouth to the smile offered her. She seemed alien, her own finery a little too bright-colored. Though her hair was marcelled midnight, skin tawny, lips full, she was of white race, hazel-eyed, straight-nosed, wide across the cheekbones. Laurace stood three inches higher. Nonetheless Clara carried herself boldly, as well she might, given a figure like hers.

"Thank you," she said, with a staccato accent. Glancing about: "Quite a place you got here."

"We'll be private in the sanctum," said Laurace. "It has a liquor cabinet. Or would you prefer tea or coffee? I'll order it brought."

"Uh, thanks, but I could use a drink right now." Clara laughed nervously.

"You can stay for dinner, can't you? I promise you a *cordon bleu* meal. By then we should have completed our . . . business, and be able to relax and enjoy it."

"Well, not too late. They expect me there, you know? I jolly them along and— Could be trouble, too, for me to head off. Men are kind of on edge these days, wondering what's going to go wrong next, you know?"

"Besides, we don't want anybody wondering what you're up to," Laurace agreed. "Don't worry. I'll send you back in plenty of time." She took Clara's arm. "This way, please."

When the door had shut behind them, Clara stood a while, tensed. Between curtained windows, the smaller room was wholly foreign. Straw mats covered the floor, leopard pelts the curiously shaped chairs. Two African masks dominated one wall. On a shelf between them rested a human skull. Opposite stretched an eight-foot python

skin. At the farther end stood a marble altar. Upon its red-bordered white cloth were a knife, a crystal bowl full of water, and a bronze candlestick with seven twisty branches. Lighting was from a single heavily shaded lamp on a table beside silver boxes for cigarettes and matches and an incense holder whose smoke turned breath pungent. Almost lost in their everydayness were the cabinet and console radio that flanked the entrance, or the coffee table which near the middle held glasses, ice bucket, seltzer, carafe, ashtrays, small dishes of delicacies.

"Don't be alarmed," said Laurace. "You must have seen magicians' lairs in the past."

Clara nodded. "A few times," she gulped. "You mean you—"

"Well, yes and no. These things aren't for use; they're meant to convey sacredness, power, mystery. Also," Laurace added matter-of-factly, "nobody would dare open that door without my leave, under any circumstances whatsoever. We can talk in perfect safety."

Clara rallied. She would not have endured through her centuries without ample courage; and her hostess offered nothing but friendship, of a sort and provided it be possible. "I guess we've gone mighty different ways, you and me."

"Time we bring them together. Would you like some music? I can get two good stations."

"No, let's just talk." Clara grimaced. "I don't need music all the time, you know? I run a high-class house."

"Poor dear." Much sorrow was in the gentleness. "You don't have it so easy, do you? Have you ever?"

Clara lifted her head. "I get by. How about that drink?"

She chose a strong bourbon-and-branch, together with a cigarette, and settled onto the sofa before the table. Laurace poured a glass of Bordeaux and sat down on a chair across from her. For a space there was silence, apart from the dulled noise of the rainstorm.

Then Clara said, half defiantly, "Well, what about it? What are we going to talk about?"

"Suppose you start," Laurace answered, her words continuing soft. "Whatever you want. This is just the first of our real meetings. We'll need many more. We have everything to learn about each other, and decide, and finally do."

Clara drew breath. "Okay," she said fast. "How did you

find me? When you showed up at my apartment and, and told me you're immortal *too*—" It had not brought on hysteria, but Laurace had soon realized she'd better go. Afterward it had been a matter of three careful telephone conversations, until now. "I thought at first you were crazy, you know? But you didn't act it and how could a crazy person have found out? Later I wondered if you wanted to blackmail me, but that didn't make sense either. Only . . . all right, how do you know what I am, and how can I know you really are what you claim?" She raised her glass in a jerky motion and drank deep. "I don't want to offend you, but, well, I've got to be more sure."

"Naturally you're cautious," Laurace said. "Do you think I'm not? We've both had to be, or die. But look around you. Would something like this belong to any criminal such as you ever knew?"

"N-no. . . . Unless the prophet of a cult— But I never heard of you, and I would have, as rich as you must be."

"I'm not. Nor is the organization I lead. It does require me to maintain the appearance of, m-m, solidity. As to your questions, though." Laurace sipped of her wine. Her voice grew slow, almost dreamy:

"I don't know when I was born. If any record was made, I couldn't tell where to find it, and probably it's long lost. Who cared about a pickaninny slave? But from what I remember, and what I deduced after I began to study, I must be about two hundred years old. That isn't much, set against your age. Fourteen hundred, did you say? But of course I wondered, more and more desperately, whether I was quite alone in the world or not.

"Any others like me must be hiding the fact like me. Men can go into a variety of occupations, lives. Women have fewer opportunities. When at last I had the means to search, it made sense to begin with the trade that a woman might very well, even most likely, be forced into."

"Whoredom," said Clara starkly.

"I told you before, I pass no judgments. We do what we must, to survive. One such as you could have left a trail, a trail often broken but perhaps possible to follow, given time and patience. After all, she wouldn't expect anybody would think to try. Newspaper files, police and court records, tax rolls and other registers where prostitution had been legal,

old photographs—things like that, gathered, sifted, compared. Some of my agents have been private detectives, some have been . . . followers of mine. None knows why I wanted this information. Slowly, out of countless fragments, a few parts fitted together. It seemed there had been a woman who did well in Chicago back in the nineties till she got into some kind of trouble, curiously similar to one in New York later, in New Orleans later still, again in New York—"

Clara made a slicing gesture. "Never mind," she snapped. "I get the idea. I should have remembered, in fact. It happened before."

"What?"

"Back in Konstantinopolis—Istanbul—oh, Lord, nine hundred years ago, it must have been. A man tracked me down pretty much the same way."

Laurace started to rise, sank back, leaned forward. "Another immortal?" she cried. "A man? What became of him?"

"I don't know." Belligerently: "I wasn't glad to be found then, and I'm not sure I am now. You are a woman, I guess that makes a difference, but you've got to convince me, you know?"

"A man," Laurace whispered. "Who was he? What was he like?"

"Two. He had a partner. They were traders out of Russia. I didn't want to go off with them, so I shook them, and never heard anything since. Probably they're dead. Let's not talk it about it yet, okay?"

The rain-silence descended.

"What a horror of a life you have had," Laurace finally said.

Clara grinned on the left side of her mouth. "Oh, I'm tough. Between the times I work, when I live easy on what I've earned and saved—or sometimes, yeah, I've married money—it's good enough that I want to keep going."

"I should think—you told me you've mostly been a, a madam since you came to America—isn't that better than it . . . used to be for you?"

"Not always."

2

SHE HATED sleeping where she worked. In Chicago she had an apartment five blocks away. Usually she could go home about two or three A.M., and the afternoons were her own; then business was slack enough for Sadie to manage. She'd go shopping downtown, or enjoy the sunshine and flowers in Jackson Park, or visit one of the museums built after the Columbian Exposition, or ride a trolley out into the countryside, all sorts of things, maybe with a couple of the girls, maybe by herself, but always ladylike.

Gas lamps flared. Pavement stretched ash-gray, empty as the moon. Lightly though she walked, her footfalls sounded loud in her ears. The two men who came out of an alley were like more shadows until they fell in on either side of her.

She choked down a gasp. Fear chilled and keened. He on the right was a hulk, bristle-chinned and smelly. He on the left was hardly more than a boy. He had no color in his face except for the pus yellow the lamps gave it, and from time to time he giggled.

"Hello, Mrs. Ross," the big man said. His voice was gritty. "Nice evening, ain't it?"

Fool, she raged at herself, fool, I should have been careful, I should have spent what a bodyguard would cost, but no, I couldn't be bothered, I had to save every cent toward my next years of freedom— In a way that was ancient with her, she killed the fear. She couldn't afford it.

"I don't know you," she said. "Let me be."

"Aw, we know you. Mr. Santoni, he showed us on the street when you was passing by. He asked us we should have a little talk with you."

"Go, before I call a policeman."

The boy tittered. "Shut up, Lew," said the big man. "You get too impatient." To her: "Now don't be like that, Mrs. Ross. All we want to do is talk with you a while. You just come along quiet."

"I'll talk to your boss, Mr. Santoni, I'll speak to him again if he insists." Buy time. "Later today, yes."

"Oh, no. Not so soon. He says you been real unreasonable."

He wants to add my business to his string, he wants to

end every independent house in the city, we're to do his will and pay him his tribute. Christ, before it's too late, send us a man with a sawed-off shotgun!

It was already too late for her. "He wants Lew and me should have a little talk with you first. He can't waste no more of his time arguing, you got me? Just come along quiet now, and you'll be all right. Lew, put that goddamn shiv back."

She tried to run. A long arm snapped her to a halt. The way they pinioned her was effective; further resistance could have led to a dislocated shoulder. Around the next corner waited a cabriolet and driver. The horse hadn't far to go before it reached a certain building.

Several times the big man must restrain the boy. Afterward he would sponge her, speak soothingly, give her a smoke, before they resumed. Drawing on past experience, she avoided damage that would be permanent, on her if not on a mortal. They actually let her out of the cab in front of a doctor's house.

The hospital staff were amazed at how fast she healed, quite without marks. While they did not interrogate her, they understood more or less what had happened and expected it would be a very meek, obliging, frequently smiling person who left them. Well, a body so extraordinary might generate a personality equally resilient.

Just the same, Carlotta Ross cut her losses, sold whatever she could and dropped from sight. She had never heard of the rival who later bushwhacked Santoni. She seldom bothered taking revenge. Time did that for her, eventually. She was content to start over elsewhere, forewarned.

3

"I GET along, though. I'm used to the life. Pretty good at it, in fact." Clara laughed. "By now, I'd better be, huh?"

"Do you loathe all men?" Laurace asked.

"Don't pity me! . . . Sorry, you mean well, I shouldn't've flared up. No, I've met some that I guess were decent. Not usually in my line of work, though, and not for me. I don't have to take them on any more myself; just take their money. I couldn't have anybody for real anyway. Can I? Can you?"

"Not forever, obviously. Unless someday we find others of our kind." Laurace saw the expression before her. "Others we like."

"Mind if I have a refill of this drink? I'll help myself." Clara did, and took a cigarette from her purse. Meanwhile she asked, no longer aggressive, almost shy: "What about you, Laurace? How do you feel? You were a slave once, you've said. That must have been as bad as anything I ever knew. Maybe worse. Christ knows how many slaves I've seen in my life."

"Sometimes it was very bad. Other times it was, oh, comfortable. But never free. At last I ran away. White people who were against slavery got me to Canada. There I found work as a housemaid."

Clara studied Laurace before murmuring, "You don't talk or behave like a servant."

"I changed. My employers helped me. The Dufours, they were: kindly, mildly prosperous, in Montreal. When they saw I wanted to better myself, they arranged schooling for me—after working hours, and servants worked long hours in those days, so it took years—but I'll always be grateful to the Dufour family. I learned correct English, reading, writing, arithmetic. On my own, consorting with *habitants,* I picked up French of a sort. I turned into quite a bookworm, as far as circumstances allowed. That gave me a patchwork education; but as the years went on, I gradually filled many of the gaps in it.

"First I had to master memory. I was finding it harder and harder to pull whatever I wanted out of such a ragbag of recollections. It was becoming hard to *think.* I had to do something. You faced the same problem, I daresay."

Clara nodded. "Awful, for maybe fifty years. I don't know what I did or how, can't recall much and everything's jumbled. Might have gotten into real trouble and died, except—okay, I fell into the hands of a pimp. He, and later his son, they did my thinking for me. They weren't bad guys, by their lights, and of course my not growing old made me special, maybe magical, so they didn't dare abuse me, by the standards of the, uh, eighth century Near East, it must have been. I think they never let on to anybody else, but moved me to a different city every few years. Meanwhile, somehow, bit by bit, I got myself sorted out, and when the

son died I felt ready to strike off on my own again. I wonder if most immortals aren't that lucky. Somebody insane or witless wouldn't last long without a protector, most times and places. Would she?"

"I've thought that myself. I was luckier still. By the early twentieth century we had a science of psychology. Crude, largely guesswork, but the idea that the mind can be understood and fixed makes a huge difference. I found autohypnosis did wonders— We'll talk about this later. Oh, we have so much to talk about."

"I guess you never got too badly confused, then."

"No, I kept control throughout. Of course, I moved around. It hurt to leave the Dufours, but people were wondering why I didn't age like them. Also, more and more I wanted independence, true independence. I went from job to job, acquired skills, saved my money. In 1900 I moved back to the States. There a colored person was less conspicuous, and here in New York you can go as unnoticed as you care to. I opened a small cafe. It did well—I am a good cook—and in time I was able to start a larger place, with entertainment. The war boomed business. Afterward Prohibition made profits larger yet. White customers; I kept another, less fancy den for blacks. One of my white regulars became a friend. At City Hall he saw to it that I didn't pay off exorbitantly or have to worry about the mob muscling in."

Clara considered her surroundings. "You didn't buy this with the proceeds from two speakeasies," she said.

Laurace smiled. "Shrewd, aren't you? Well, the truth is that presently I took up with a pretty big-time rumrunner. White, but—"

4

DONALD O'BRYAN loved wind and water. At home he filled shelves with books about sailing ships, hung pictures of them on the walls, built models of them whose exquisite detail seemed impossible for such large hands. Besides the power cruiser he used in his business, he kept a sloop on Long Island Sound. When he started taking his black "housekeeper" on day trips, she went unchallenged by

members of the yacht club. Everybody liked Don but nobody who was smart messed with him.

Heeled over on a broad reach, the boat rushed through swoosh and sparkle. Gulls soared white above the wake, into which he had merrily cast scraps from lunch. When you ran before the wind, its booming was hushed to a cradle song and the air grew almost snug, so that you caught the live salt smell of it.

Reaching, a steersman must be careful. Don had secured the boom against an accidental jibe, but control remained tricky. He managed without effort. His body belonged where he was. His being had turned elsewhere.

Between watch cap and pea jacket, the snub-nosed face had lost its earlier cheerfulness. "*Why* won't you marry me?" he pleaded. "I want to make an honest woman of you, really I do."

"This is honest enough for me," she laughed.

"Flora, I love you. It's not only that you're grand in bed, though you are, you are. It's . . . your soul. You're brave and dear and a thousand times more bright than me. It's proud I'd be to have you bear my children."

Humor died. She shook her head. "We're too different."

"Was the Queen of Sheba too different from King Solomon?"

"In this country she would be."

"Is it the law you fret about? Listen, not every state forbids marriage between the races, and the rest have to respect it once it's happened where it's allowed. That's in the Constitution."

The same Constitution that says a man can't take a glass of beer after a hot day's work, she thought. "No, it's what we'd have to live with. Hatred. Isolation from both your people and mine. I couldn't do that to our children."

"Not everywhere," he argued. "Listen, you've heard me before, but listen. I won't keep my trade forever. In a few more years I'll have more money piled together than we could spend in a hundred. Because I am really a careful, saving man, in spite of liking a good time. I'll take you to Ireland. To France. You always wanted to see France, you've said, and what I saw made me want to go back, during the war though it was. We can settle down wherever we

like, in some sweet country where they don't care what the color of our skins may be, only the color of our hearts."

"Wait till then, and we'll talk about this." Maybe by then I can bring myself to it, to seeing time eat him hollow. Maybe I'll be sure by then that he won't grow bitter when I tell him—because I can never deceive him, not in any way that matters—and will even be glad to have me there in my strength, holding his hand as he lies on his deathbed.

"No, now! We can keep it secret if you want."

She stared across the dancing waves. "I can't do that either, darling. Please don't ask me to."

He frowned. "Is it you fear being the wife of a jailbird? I swear to God they'll never take me alive. Not that I expect they'll catch me at all."

She looked back at him. A lock of hair curled brown from beneath the cap and fluttered across his brow. How like a boy he seemed, a small boy full of love and earnestness. She remembered sons she had borne and buried. "What difference would it make whether a justice of the peace mumbled a few words over us, if we aren't free to stand together in sight of everybody?"

"I want to give you my vows."

"You have given them, dearest. I could weep for the joy of that."

"Well, there is this too," he said, rougher-toned. "I don't plan on dying, but we never know, and I want to make sure I leave you provided for. Won't you give my heart that ease?"

"I don't need an inheritance. Thank you, thank you, but I don't." She grimaced. "Nor do I want more to do with lawyers and the government than I can possibly help."

"Um. So." He gnawed his lip for a minute. "Well, I can understand that. All right." His smile burst forth like the sun between clouds. "Not that I'm giving up on making you Mrs. O'Bryan, mind you. I'll wear you down, I will. Meanwhile, however, I'll make arrangements. I don't trust bankers much anyway, and this is a profitable time to liquidate my real estate holdings. We'll put it in gold, and you'll know where the hoard is."

"Oh, Don!" The money was nothing, the wish was the

whole world and half the stars. She scrambled to her knees in the cockpit and pressed herself against him.

He bent over. His left arm closed around her shoulders, his mouth sought hers. "Flora," he said huskily. "My beautiful strange Flora."

5

"—WE LOVED each other. I've never been afraid to love, Clara. You should learn how."

The other woman stubbed out her cigarette and reached for a fresh one. "What happened?"

Voice and visage grew blank. "A revenue boat intercepted him in 1924. When he bade fair to outrun them, they opened fire. He was killed."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

Laurace shook herself. "Well, we're familiars of death, you and I." Once more calm: "He left me a quarter million in negotiable instruments. I needed to get away, sold my night clubs and spent the next four years traveling. First Ireland, England, France. In France I improved my French and studied about Africa. I went there, Liberia, then the colonies along that coast, hoping to discover something about my ancestors. I made friends in the bush and added to what I'd learned from books, more of how those tribes live, what they live by, faith, ritual, secret societies, tradition. That caused me to return by way of Haiti, where I also spent a while."

Clara's eyes widened. "Voodoo?"

"Voudun," Laurace corrected. "Not black magic. Religion. What has sustained human beings through some of the cruelest history on earth, and still does in some of its most hideous poverty and misrule. I remembered people here at home, and came back to Harlem."

"I see," Clara breathed. "You did start a cult."

Momentarily, Laurace was grim. "And you're thinking, 'What a nice racket.' It isn't like that in the least."

"Oh, no. I didn't mean—"

"You did." Laurace sighed. "Never mind. A natural thought. I don't blame you. But the fact is, I had no need to prey on superstition. Investments I'd made before going abroad had done well. I didn't like the look of the stock

market, and pulled out in time. Oh, by myself I'd be quite comfortably off." Seriously: "There were my people, though. There was also the matter of my own long-range survival. And, now, yours."

Clara showed near-bewilderment. "What've you done, then, if you haven't founded a church?"

Laurace spoke quickly, impersonally: "Churches and their leaders are too conspicuous, especially if they achieve some success. Likewise revolutionary movements. Not that I wish for a revolution. I know how little bloodshed ever buys. That must be still more true of you."

"I never gave it your kind of thought," Clara said humbly. Her cigarette smoldered unnoticed between her fingers.

"What I am organizing is—call it a society, somewhat on the African and Haitian model. Remember, those outfits aren't criminal, nor are they for pleasure; they are parts of the whole, the cultures, bone and muscle as well as spirit. Mine does contain elements of both religion and magic. In Canada I was exposed to Catholicism, which is one root of voudun. I don't tell anybody what church he should go to; but I open for him a vision of being not only a Christian, but belonging to the whole living universe. I don't lay curses or give blessings, but I say words and lead rites in which I am—not a goddess or Messiah, not even a saint, but she who is closer than most to understanding, to power.

"Oh, we have a practical aspect too. A Haitian would know what I mean by the surname I've taken. But I don't call for gaining control—not by vote, like the Republicans and Democrats, or by violence, like the Communists, or by persuasion, like the Socialists. No, my politics is individuals quietly getting together under leadership they have freely accepted, helping each other, building a life and a future for *themselves*."

Clara shook her head. "I'm sorry, I can't quite see what you mean."

"Don't worry." Warmth was in the reply. "For the time being, think of it on the spiritual side as offering my followers something better than booze and coke. As for the material part, now that breadlines have gotten long, more and more hear about us and come to us, black, white, Puerto Rican, every race. Openly, we're just another among hundreds of volunteer groups doing poor relief. Quietly, as

newcomers prove trustworthy and advance through our degrees of initiation—we take them into a community they can belong to, work in, believe in, modestly but adequately and with hope. In return, when I ask for it, they help me."

Laurace paused before continuing: "I can't explain it much better than that, today. You'll learn. Truth to tell, I'm learning too. I never laid out any grand scheme, I fumbled my way forward, and still do. Maybe this will crash to ruin, or decay. But maybe—I can't foresee. Immortal leadership ought to make an important difference, but how to use it, I'm not yet sure. About all that I feel reasonably sure of is that we have to keep ourselves from being noticeable."

"Can you?"

"We can try. 'We' includes you, I trust." Laurace lifted her wine glass. "Here's to tomorrow."

Clara joined in the toast but remained troubled. "What're your plans for . . . for the near future?"

"Considerable," Laurace answered. "And you can do a great deal. You save your money, right? Well, we, the society, we're stretched thin. We badly need operating capital. Opportunities go begging. For instance, since the crash, stocks are at rock-bottom prices."

"Because we've got a depression. I thought you said you left the market."

Laurace laughed. "If I'd foreseen exactly what would happen two years ago October, I'd have sold short at the right point and now own Wall Street. But I am not a sorceress—nor do I claim to be—and I've learned to play cautious. That doesn't mean timid or unthinking. Look, depressions don't last forever. People will always want homes, cars, a thousand different good, solid things; and sooner or later, they'll again be able to buy them. It may take fifty years to collect our profit, but immortals can wait."

"I see." Clara's features came aglow. "Okay. With that to look forward to, I can stand another fifty years in the life."

"You needn't. Times are changing."

"What men want won't change."

"No, though the laws may. No matter. Clara, shake free of that sordidness as fast as you can unload."

"What for? What else can I do? I don't know anything

except—" With forlorn determination: "I will not turn into a parasite on you. I won't."

"Oh, no," Laurace answered. "We take no parasites in. Quite aside from the money you contribute, you'll earn your keep. You may not appreciate it yet, but you have fourteen hundred years of experience behind you, with the insight, the intuition, that must have brought. Yours may well be a bitter wisdom, but we need it."

"What for?"

"For the building of our strength."

"Huh? Wait, you said—"

"I said I do not intend to overthrow the government, take over the country, anything stupid and ephemeral like that," Laurace declared. "My aim is the exact opposite. I want to build something so strong that with it we can say 'No' to the slavers, the lynch mobs, and the lords of state.

"Men seized my father, bore him away in chains, and sold him. They hounded me when I escaped, and would have caught me if other men had not broken their law. A few years ago, they shot down the man I loved, for nothing worse than providing a pleasure they said nobody must have. At that, he was lucky. He might have died earlier, in their damned useless war. I could go on, but why? You could tell more, as much longer as you've lived.

"What's brought this death and misery, but that men have had power over other men?

"Don't mistake me. I am not an anarchist. Human beings are so made that the few will always rule the many. Sometimes they mean well—in spite of everything, I believe the founders of the United States did—but that doesn't long outlive them.

"The only partial security we who want to lead our own lives will ever have, we must create from within us. Oneness. Ongoing resolution. The means to live independent of the overlords. Only by guiding the poor and helpless toward this can we immortals win it for ourselves.

"Are you with me?"

XVI

Niche

THE HOTEL was new and rather soulless, but it stood near Old Town, with a fine tenth-floor view of roofs and narrow streets climbing to the stones of the Citadel. That mass stood darkling athwart stars dimmed by lamps and lightful panes. On the west side, the corner suite overlooked modern Ankara, Ulus Square, the boulevard, radiance glaring and flashing, opulent storefronts, crowded sidewalks, hasty automobiles. Heat of a day in late summer lingered, and the windows stood open to catch whatever coolness crept in off the river and hinterland. Height muffled traffic noise, even car horns, to an undertone hardly more loud than the large fan whirring on its stand.

For the American patron and his dinner guest, room service had set an elegant table and carried up an excellent meal. Through most of it they had sparred with small talk. The language in which they could most readily converse turned out to be Greek. Now they were at the stage of cheese, coffee, and liqueurs.

Oktay Saygun leaned back, held his Drambuie to the light before he sipped, creased his jowls with a smile. He was a stocky, paunchy man, his nose the single impressive thing about him. While not shabby, his business suit had clearly been years in use and inexpensive when bought. "Ah," he murmured, "delicious. You are a most knowledgeable gentleman, Kyrie McCready."

"I am glad you enjoyed this," replied the other. "I hope you feel more at ease with me."

Saygun cocked his head in birdlike fashion, if the bird be a well-fed owl or parrot. David McCready was two or three centimeters taller than he, lean and limber. Though the

dark hawk visage showed only geniality, the eyes—oddly Levantine for the name he bore—met his own and searched. "Did I give you the opposite impression?" Saygun asked. "I'm sorry. What a poor return for your hospitality. Not my intention at all, I assure you."

"Oh, I don't blame you. A telephone call, an invitation from a perfect stranger. I might want to lure you into some criminal scheme. Or I might be a foreign agent, a spy. These days they must swarm in every capital."

Saygun chuckled. "Who would bother to subvert a little bureaucrat in the purely civilian archives? If anything, you would be the endangered one. Think. You have had your dealings with our bureaucracy. It is impossible not to, especially if one is a foreigner. Believe me, when we set our minds to it we can tangle, obstruct, and bring to a dead halt a herd of stampeding elephants."

"Still, this is an uneasy time."

Saygun turned grave. His look wandered out the window, nightward. "Indeed," he said low. "An evil time. Herr Hitler was not content with engulfing Austria, was he? I fear Mister Chamberlain and Monsieur Daladier will let him work his will on Czechoslovakia too. And nearer home, the ambitions of the Tsars live on in Red Russia." He turned his attention back, took forth a handkerchief, wiped his narrow brow and sleeked down his black hair. "Pardon me. You Americans prefer optimism always, not so? Well, whatever happens, civilization will survive. It has thus far, no matter what changing guises it wears."

"You are quite well-informed, Kyrie Saygun," McCready said slowly. "And something of a philosopher, it seems."

The Turk shrugged. "One reads the newspapers. One listens to the radio. The coffee shops have become a Babel of politics. I seek occasional relief in old books. They help me tell the transient from the enduring."

He drained his glass. McCready refilled it and asked, "Cigar?"

"Why, yes, thank you very much. That humidor of yours appears to hold promise."

McCready fetched two Havanas, a clipper which he offered first to his guest, and a lighter. As he settled himself again, his voice shivered the least bit. "May I get to my business now?"

"Certainly. You would have been welcome to do so earlier. I assumed you wished to become acquainted. Or, if I may put it thus, to feel me out."

McCready's grin was wry. "You did the better job of that, on me."

"Oh? I simply enjoyed a pleasant conversation with an interesting person. Everybody is fascinated by your wonderful country, and your career as a businessman has been remarkable."

McCready started his visitor's cigar for him and became occupied with his own. "We went on at length about me, when talk didn't ramble over ordinary matters. The upshot was that scarcely anything got said about you."

"There was nothing to say, really. I am as dull and insignificant a man as you will ever find. I cannot imagine you maintaining any interest in me." Saygun drank smoke, rolled it around his tongue, exhaled luxuriously, chased it with a taste of liqueur. "However, at the moment I am glad. Pleasures like this seldom come to a minor official in a routine-bounded department of government. Turkey is a poor country, and President Atatürk was rather ruthless about corruption."

McCready's tobacco kindled less smoothly. "My friend, you are anything but dull. You've proved yourself very shrewd, very skillful at hiding whatever you want to hide. Well, it's no great surprise. People in our situation who don't have those qualities, or can't acquire them, probably don't last long."

Beady eyes widened. "'Our' situation? What might that be?"

"Still cautious, are you? Understandable. If you are what I hope, that's an old, old habit. If not, then you are wondering whether I am a confidence man or a madman."

"No, no. Please. Your newspaper advertisement last year attracted me. Enigmatic, but somehow . . . genuine. Indeed, wonderfully phrased."

"Thank you. Though composing it was largely the work of my partner. He has a gift for words."

"I take it you placed the advertisement in many places around the world?" McCready nodded and Saygun continued: "I suppose not only the language but the text, the message, varied according to region. Here—how did it go?—

'Those who have lived so long that our forefathers are like brothers and comrades to them—' yes, that appeals to a Near Easterner, a citizen of an ancient land. Yet the average person who chances to see it gets the impression that a scholar is interested in meeting old people who have studied and meditated upon history, with a view to exploring whatever wisdom may be theirs. Did many respond?"

"No. Most who did were not quite right in the head or tried to cadge money. You were the only one in this country whom my agent decided I might care to follow up."

"It has taken you a considerable time. I had begun to think your organization was not serious, perhaps a hoax."

"I had to study a number of reports. Most I discarded. Then I started off around the world. This is my third interview."

"I gather an agent of yours met those who answered the advertisements everywhere that they were placed. Clearly, you have substantial resources, Kyrie McCready. For a purpose you have yet to reveal to me and, I daresay, have told none of the agents."

The American nodded. "I gave them certain secret criteria to apply." Peering through the smoke: "The most important was that a respondent look young and in good health, even though the call seemingly was for old people. I explained that I don't want the fact publicized but I am searching for natural-born geniuses, with knowledge and insight far beyond their years, especially in history. With minds like that from different civilizations brought into contact, we may found a real science of it, beyond anything that thinkers like Spengler and Toynbee have proposed. The agents doubtless consider me a crackpot on this subject. However, I pay well."

"I see. Have the previous two whom you met proven satisfactory?"

"You know that isn't what I am really searching for," McCready said.

Saygun laughed. "In the present case, that is just as well. I am no genius of any kind. No, a total mediocrity. And content with it, which shows I am doubly dull." He paused. "But what about those other two?"

McCready chopped air with his cigar. "Damnation," he exclaimed, "must we shilly-shally all night?"

Saygun leaned back in his chair. The broad face and small bland smile could be a visor over wariness, glee, anything. "God forbid I repay your generosity with discourtesy," he said. "Perhaps it would be best if you took the lead and made a forthright statement."

"I will!" McCready sat half crouched. "If I'm wrong about you, you won't take me for merely eccentric, you'll believe I'm a raving lunatic. In that case, I suggest you go home and never speak of this evening to anybody; because I'll deny everything and you'll be the one to look silly." In haste: "That's not a threat. For the convenience of us both, I request your silence."

Saygun elevated his glass. "From your viewpoint, you are about to take a risk," he replied. "I understand. I promise." He drank as if in pledge.

McCready stood up. "What would you say," he asked softly, "if I told you I am not an American by birth—that I was born in these parts, nearly three thousand years ago?"

Saygun gazed into his drink a while. The city mumbled. A drape stirred ever so slightly to the first night breath off the plateau of Anatolia. When he raised his eyes, he had gone expressionless. "I would call that a most unusual statement."

"No miracles, no magic," McCready said. "Somehow it happens. Once in ten million births, a hundred million, a billion? The loneliness— Yes, I am a Phoenician, from Tyre when Tyre was new." He began pacing, to and fro on the carpet. "I've spent most of all that time seeking for others, any others like me."

"Have you found them?"

McCready's tone harshened. "Three certain, and of them a single one is still alive to my knowledge, my partner whom I mentioned. He's tracked down two possibilities himself. As for the other two, we don't age, you know, but we can be killed the same as anybody else." Savagely, he ground his cigar out in an ashtray. "Like that."

"Then I suppose the two you have spoken with on this journey, they were disappointments?"

McCready nodded. He slammed fist into palm. "They're what I am officially after, highly intelligent and thoughtful . . . young people. Maybe I can find a place for them, I do have my enterprises, but—" He stopped on the floor, legs

wide apart, and stared. "You're taking this very calmly, aren't you?"

"I admitted I am a dull person. Phlegmatic."

"Which gives me reason to think you're different from them. And my agent did make a quiet investigation. You could pass for a man in his twenties, but you've held your present job more than thirty years."

"My friends remark on it. Not with much envy; I am no Adonis. Well, some individuals are slow to grow wrinkled and gray."

"Friends— You're neither sociable nor unsociable. Affable, but never intimate. Effective enough at your desk, promoted according to seniority, but unambitious; you do everything by the book. Unmarried. That's uncommon in Turkey, but not unheard of, and nobody is interested enough in you to wonder seriously."

"Your judgment is less than flattering." Saygun didn't sound offended. "Reasonably accurate, though. I have told you, I am content to be what I am."

"An immortal?" McCready flung at him.

Saygun lifted a palm, cigar between fingers. "My dear sir, you leap to conclusions."

"It fits, it fits. Listen, you can be honest with me! Or at least bear with me. I can show you evidence that's convinced men more intelligent than either of us, if you'll cooperate. And— How can you just sit there like that?"

Saygun shrugged.

"If nothing else, even if I'm wrong about you and you suppose I'm crazy, you ought to show some excitement," McCready snapped. "A desire to escape, if nothing else. Or— But I think you are ageless yourself, you can join us and together we can— *How old are you, anyway?*"

Into the stillness that followed, Saygun said, a new steel in his tone: "Credit me with some brains, if you please. I have told you I read books. And I have had a year to consider what might lie behind that curious, evasive procedure of yours; and conceivably before then I have speculated about these matters. Would you mind taking your seat again? I prefer to talk in civilized wise."

"My . . . apologies." First McCready went to the sideboard. He mixed a stiff Scotch and soda. "Would you like this?"

"No, thank you. Another Drambuie, if I may. Do you know, it never came to my attention before tonight. But then, only recently has Turkey become a modern, secular state. Marvelous stuff. I must lay some in before the next war makes it unobtainable."

McCready overcame interior tumult and returned to the table. "What do you want to say?" he asked.

Saygun barely smiled. "Well," he replied, "things were growing hectic, weren't they? To be expected, no doubt, when you made such extraordinary claims. Not that I deny them, kyrie. I am no scientist, to decide what is and is not possible. Nor am I so rude as to call my host deluded, let alone a liar. But we should calm down. May I tell you a story?"

"By all means," McCready rasped, and drank deep.

"Perhaps I can better label it a speculation," Saygun said. "A flight of fancy, like some works of Mr. H. G. Wells. What *if* such-and-such were true? What consequences?"

"Go on."

Saygun relaxed, smoked, sipped, let his voice amble. "Well, now, shall we imagine a man born rather long ago? For example, in Italy toward the end of the Roman Republic. Family of the equestrian class, undistinguished, its men seldom much interested in war or politics, seldom succeeding or failing greatly in commerce, often making careers in the civil service. The state and its conquered provinces had grown swiftly, enormously. There was need for clerks, registrars, annalists, archivists, every class of those workers who provide a government with its memory. Once Augustus had taken control, procedures were soon regularized, organization made firm, order and predictability instilled. For a peaceful man, the lower and median ranks of the civil service were a good place to be."

McCready inhaled sharply. Saygun ignored it: "Next I would like to borrow your imaginative concept of the occasional person who never grows old. Since you have obviously considered every ramification, I need not spell out the difficulties that the years must bring to such a man. Perforce, when he reaches the normal retirement age, he gives up his position and moves away, telling his acquaintances that it will be to someplace with a mild climate and a low cost of living. Yet if he is entitled to a pension, he dares not

draw it forever; and if pensions are not customary, he cannot live forever on savings, or even on investments. He must go back to work.

"Well, he seems youthful and he has experience. He reenters the bureaucracy in a different city, under a different name, but quickly proves his worth and earns promotion from junior grade to about the middle of the hierarchy among the record-keepers. In due course he retires again. By then sufficient time has gone by that he can return to, say, Rome and start over.

"Thus it goes. I shan't bore you with details, when you can readily visualize them. For example, sometimes he marries and raises a family, which is pleasant—or if it happens not to be, will pass, so all he needs is patience. This does complicate his little deceptions, hence he spends other periods in tranquil bachelorhood, varied by discreet indulgences. He is never in any danger of being found out. His position in the archives enables him to make cautious but adequate insertions, deletions, emendations. Nothing to harm the state, nothing to enrich himself, no, never. He simply avoids military service and, in general, covers his tracks." Saygun snickered. "Oh, now and then he might slip in something like a letter of recommendation for the young recruit he plans to become. Please remember, though, that he does do honest work. Whether he puts stylus to wax, pen to paper, nowadays types or dictates, he helps maintain the memory of the state."

"I see," McCready whispered. "But states come and go."

"Civilization continues," responded Saygun. "The Principate hardens into the Empire and the Empire begins to crack like drying mud, but people go on getting born and getting married, they ply their trades and die, always they pay taxes, and whoever rules must hold the records of this or he has no power over the life of the people. The usurper or the conqueror may strike off heads at the top, but he will scarcely touch the harmless drudges of the civil service. That would be like chopping off his own feet."

"It has happened," McCready said bleakly.

Saygun nodded. "True. Corruption rewards its favorites with jobs. However, certain jobs are not especially tempting, while at the same time their holders would be hard to dispense with. Then occasionally barbarians, fanatics, mega-

lomaniacs attempt to make a clean sweep. They cause desolation. Nevertheless, more often than not, some continuity endures. Rome fell, but the Church preserved what it could."

"I suppose, though," McCready said, word by word, "this man . . . you are imagining . . . had moved to Constantinople."

Saygun nodded. "Of course. With Constantine the Great himself, who necessarily expanded the government offices in his new capital and welcomed personnel willing to transfer. And the Roman Empire, in its Byzantine incarnation, lasted another thousand years."

"After which—"

"Oh, there were difficult times, but one manages. Actually, my man was stationed in Anatolia when the Osmanlis overran it, and did not get back to Constantinople until they had taken it too and renamed it Istanbul. Meanwhile he had fitted into their order of things without many problems. Changed his religion, but surely you can sympathize with that, and with a certain recurring necessity that an immortal Muslim or Jew faces." Saygun half grinned. "One wonders about possible women. Recurrent intactness?"

His mien went back to mock professorial: "Physically, this man would stay inconspicuous. The original Turks were not very unlike the people here, and soon melted into them the same as Hittites, Gauls, Greeks, Romans, countless nations had done before. The sultans reigned until after the World War. In name, at any rate; frequently not in fact. It made small difference to my man. He simply helped maintain the records.

"Likewise under the republic. I must confess I—my man prefers Istanbul and looks forward to his next period of working there. It is more interesting, and alive with ghosts. But you know that. However, by now Ankara has become quite liveable."

"Is that all he wants?" McCready wondered. "Shuffling papers in an office, forever?"

"He is used to it," Saygun explained. "Perhaps it actually has a trifle more social value than soaring hopes and high adventure. Naturally, I wanted to hear what you had to say, but—forgive me—the situation you describe is ill-suited to

one of my temperament. Let me wish you every good fortune.

"May I have your card? Here is mine." He reached in his pocket. McCready did likewise. They exchanged. "Thank you. We can, if you so desire, mail new cards to each other as occasion arises. The time may possibly come when we have reason to communicate. Meanwhile, absolute confidentiality on both sides, agreed?"

"Well, but listen—"

"Please. I detest disputes." Saygun glanced at his watch. "My, my. Time flies, eh? I really must go. Thank you for an evening I will never forget."

He rose. McCready did too and, helplessly, shook hands. Having bade goodnight, the bureaucrat, still relishing his cigar, departed. McCready stood in the hall door till the elevator bore him off, down into the city and its crowds of the anonymous.

XVII

Steel

THIS WAS not the forest of old, but there was cover aplenty for a hunter, oh, yes, and all too much quarry. First, though, Katya had open ground to cross. She went from the battered yellow brick of the Lazur Chemical Plant on her belly. The pavement beneath her was as rough, after nearly three months of war. It felt colder against her palms than did the wind on her face. Clouds and a little snow had slightly warmed the November air.

She slipped forward a meter or so at a time, stopped, peered about, before the next advance. Heaven rested heavy, hiding the sun behind its gray. Sometimes it let fall a thin white flurry for the gusts to scatter. On Katya's left the ground sloped to the Volga. Ice floes drifted, bumped together, churned and turned on their way down its steel-hued stream. No boats dared moved among them. Scant help could come to the Russians from the east until the river froze hard. The shore opposite seemed deserted, steppe reaching, wan with winter, on and on into Asia.

To her right, beyond the railroad tracks, Mamaev Hill rose a hundred meters aloft. Its slopes were black. Shells and boots quickly beat snow into mud. She identified two or three gun emplacements. Silence brooded. The soldiers who had contested that height for weeks must be catching their breath or a few moments' sleep, briefly brothers in exhaustion and wretchedness, before the next combat erupted.

The stillness foreboded. It was abnormal to hear no fire, anywhere, for this long a stretch. War waited—eyes and gunsights wholly upon her?

Nonsense, she snapped to herself, and moved onward.

Nevertheless, when she came in among walls, breath shuddered from a breast cage that had begun to ache.

She rose and stood crouched. These were not truly walls, after what had happened to them. Concrete blocks still lifted sheer, but doorless doorways and glassless windows yawned on emptiness. A heap of rubble had spilled into the street.

Rifles cracked. A submachine gun chattered. A grenade popped, another, another. Shouts ripped raw. She couldn't make out words. The sounds were unhuman. Her own rifle was off her shoulder and she inside the shell of a building as the first echoes died.

Boots thudded. They hit without rhythm, and too often a shard rattled from them. Whoever drew near stumbled and staggered more than he ran. Katya risked a peek around the doorjamb. From behind a ruin some twenty meters south, a man lurched into the intersection of this street and the one down which he fled. He wore a Red Army uniform and helmet, but carried no weapon. Blood smeared his right hand and dripped down that leg. He stopped. She saw how he panted. He swung his head to and fro. Almost, she called to him, but checked herself. After a few seconds he continued his weaving way in the same direction, out of her view.

She brought her rifle up.

Two more men appeared, at a lope that should soon overtake him. Squarish helmets and gray-green garb proclaimed them Germans. Either could easily have lifted his own firearm and shot the fugitive. So their officer must have told them to bring him back for interrogation. That looked safe, a short run through an area believed to be free of life.

It had stabbed through Katya: Let the thing happen. I mustn't compromise my mission. But she knew too well what awaited that fellow. Also, what he could tell might prove as valuable as anything she would observe.

Decision was nearly instant. Sometimes she weighed a matter for years before she settled on what to do. Sometimes she could simply wait several decades and let time wear the problem away. Yet she had not stayed alive this long by being always hesitant. At need, she leaped with the unheeding energy of youth.

She fired. A German spun on his heel and flopped

bonelessly down. His companion yelled and threw himself prone. His rifle barked. He probably hadn't seen her, but knew at once, more or less, whence that shot had come. Quick-witted. Not for the first time, the thought stirred in Katya that maybe among the invaders was one of her kind, as full of centuries and solitude as she was.

She barely noticed the thought, afar at the back of her skull. She had pulled inside straightway after shooting. A windowframe beckoned. She closed her eyes for three breaths while she considered the geometry of what she had seen. The enemy must be *there*. Quick, before he moves elsewhere. She stepped to the hole and squeezed trigger even as she aimed.

The butt gave her a stiff, friendly nudge. The soldier screamed. He let go his rifle and lifted his torso on hands that spread white, helpless, upon asphalt. She had gotten him in the back. Best silence him. Those yells would call his mates. She drew a bead. His face exploded.

Extraordinary marksmanship. By far the most shots in battle went wild. Comrade Zaitsev would be proud of her. She wished the German would lie still like the first, not writhe and kick and gush blood. Well, he was quiet now.

She hadn't time to cringe. Surely the rest understood something had gone wrong. No matter how cautious, they would find this place within minutes.

Katya dashed forth, over the rubble, up the street, past her prey. Horrible, when it was human. Of course, then it hunted you likewise. She turned left down the cross street.

The Soviet soldier had not gone far. Her ambush had been quick, while he slowed still more. In fact, he was shuffling by a wrecked tram, leaning on it. Katya wondered if he would prove such a burden that she must abandon him. She sped in pursuit. "Stop!" she cried. "I'm your help!" Her voice sounded small and hollow among the ruins, beneath the leaden sky.

He obeyed, turned around, braced himself against the metal, slumped. She drew close and halted. He was quite young, she saw, not shaven lately but with just a dark fuzz over the skin. Otherwise his face was old, pinched, white as the snowflakes that drifted about and powdered his shoulders. His eyes stared and his jaw hung slack. Shock, she

realized. That hand of his was pretty badly mangled. A grenade, no doubt.

"Can you follow me?" she asked. "We'll have to move fast."

His left forefinger rose and wobbled in the air, as if to trace her outline. "You are a soldier," he mumbled. "Like me. But you are a woman."

"What of it?" Katya snapped. She took hold of his forearm and shook him. "Listen. I can't stay. That's death. Come along if you're able. Do you understand? Do you want to live? Come!"

He shuddered. Breath went raggedly down his throat. "I . . . can . . . try."

"Good. This way." Katya shoved him around and forward. Turn right at the next corner, left at the next after that, put a maze between yourself and the enemy. This district was smashed, like the city center toward which she aimed—snags, debris, choked lanes, masonry still fire-blackened in spots, a wilderness where you could shake your hunters. Despite lacking sun or shadows, she kept her sense of direction . . . A growl resounded.

"Take cover!" Katya ordered. The youth joined her beneath a rusted metal sheet which stuck out of a vast heap of wreckage like an awning. A stench hung beneath, oozing from bricks, beams, broken glass, thick and sickly-sweet even in the chill. A shell or bomb must have made a direct hit, bringing this whole tenement down on everybody inside. Children, their mothers, their babushkas? No, most who couldn't fight were evacuated early on. Likeliest it was soldiers who rotted here. Any building could become a fort when defenders fought invaders street by street. Which had these been? . . . It didn't matter, least of all to them.

Her companion retched. He must have recognized the smell. That was a hopeful sign. He was coming out of his daze.

The aircraft swept low above rooflessness. She had a glimpse of it, lean, swift, swastika on its tail, then it was gone. Reconnaissance, or what? Probably the pilot wouldn't have noticed them, or troubled about them if he did. But you could never tell. The fascists had strafed crowds of

evacuees waiting for ferries across the river. Two Soviet soldiers were game more fair.

The throbbing receded. Katya heard no other. "Let's go," she said.

The young man accompanied her for some paces before he exclaimed weakly, "Is this right, comrade? I think we're headed south."

"We are," she told him.

"B-but, but the enemy has that part. Our people, they're in the north end of town."

"I know." She took his elbow and hurried him onward. "I have my orders. Turn back if you wish. I doubt you'll get far. Or you may come with me if you can. If you can't, I'll have to leave you. If you make a noise, or any kind of trouble for me, I must kill you. But I do believe it's your only chance."

He clenched his usable fist. "I'll try," he whispered. "Thank you, comrade."

She wondered whether Zaitsev would thank her. This mission was worth more lives than a single cripple's. Well, sharpshooters must rely on their own judgment oftener than not. And supposing she did get this private back to his unit, her superiors needn't know. Unless he really could tell something worthwhile—

The street ended at Krutoy Gully. On the opposite side of the ravine, buildings were equally damaged but more high and massive than here. That was where the central city began. "We have to get across," Katya said. "No bridge. We crawl down and creep up. You go first."

He nodded, jerkily, nevertheless a nod. Stooping, he scuttled over the open space and wriggled out of sight. She had been prepared to let him draw any fire. She hadn't wanted a stalking horse, but there he was, and if he proved hopelessly clumsy she couldn't let him destroy her too. Instead, he did well enough. So he'd been rather lightly shocked, and was shaking that off with the vitality of youth.

Rifle in hand, every sense honed, she followed. Dirt gritted, leafless bushes scratched. After they started up, his strength flagged. He scrabbled, slid back a way, sank together and sobbed for air. She slung her weapon and went on all fours to his side. He gave her a desperate look. "I can't," he wheezed. "I'm sorry. Go on."

"We're nearly there." Her left hand clasped his. "Now, work, damn you, *work.*" She clambered backward, boot heels dug into soil, straining like a horse at a mired field gun. He set his teeth and did what he was able. It sufficed. They reached the top and found shelter by a heap of bricks. Her tunic was dank with sweat. Wind chilled her to the bone.

"Where . . . are we . . . bound?" coughed from him.

"This way." They got to their feet. She herded him along, keeping them next to walls, halting at each doorway or corner to listen and peer. A couple of fighters flew sentinel well above. Their drone fell insect-faint over the desolation. She began to hear a deeper rumble, artillery. A duel somewhere out on the steppe? Mamaev remained quiet. The whole city did, it seemed, one great graveyard that waited for the thunders of doomsday.

Her destination wasn't far. That would have been madness. She would not have been sent even this deep into the German-held sector, had she not repeatedly shown she could get about unseen as well as any commando—and, she knew, those expert killers were less expendable than she. If the recommended site proved unduly dangerous and she couldn't quickly find a better, she was to give up and make her way back to the Lazur.

From behind one of the trees that still lined a certain boulevard, she gazed across a bomb crater and two crumpled automobiles. The building she wanted did appear safe. It belonged to a row of tenement houses, slab-sided and barrack-like. Though in sorry shape, it rose above what was left of its neighbors, a full six floors. The windows were blind holes.

Katya pointed. "Yonder," she told the young man. "When I signal, get over there and inside fast." She took her binoculars from the case hung about her neck and searched for signs of enemy. Only broken panes, smudges, pockmarks came into view. Snow whirled dry on a gust that whistled. She chopped her hand downward and led the sprint. In the empty doorway she whirled about and crouched ready to fire at anything suspicious. The snow flurry had stopped. A scrap of paper tumbled along before the wind.

Flights of concrete stairs went steeply upward. Their wells

were full of gloom. On the lower landings, doors blown off hinges lay in a chaos of things and dust. Above, they remained shut. On the top floor, she tried a knob. If necessary, she would shoot out the lock, but that door creaked faintly as it yielded.

Here the dimness was less. Smashed windows admitted light as well as cold. The apartment had been fairly good, two rooms plus a kitchen alcove. To be sure, the bathroom was a flight down, shared by the tenants of three floors. Concussion had cracked plaster off lath and spread chunks and powder across furniture and threadbare carpet. Rain blowing in had made a slurry, now hardened, under the sills. Mildew speckled what was left on the walls. The stains also marked drapes, bedclothes, a sofa. Blast had acted as capriciously as usual. A Stakhanovite poster clung garish and two framed photographs were likewise unfallen: a young couple at their wedding, a white-bearded Uncle Vanya who might be the grandfather of bride or groom. Three or four others had crashed. Some strewn books and magazines moldered. A small radio lay among them. A clock had gone silent on its table. Flowers in pots were brown stalks.

Apart from utensils and the like, Katya didn't notice more personal possessions. Maybe they had been meager enough for the family to take along at evacuation. She had no wish to investigate, when she might turn up a little girl's doll or a little boy's bear. She could merely hope the owners had escaped, all of them.

She went through the rooms. People had slept in both. The first faced approximately north, the second east. With the door open between them, she could scan a full half circle, springing from window to window. That vision covered a dozen streets in both directions, because most of the vicinity was a crumbled wasteland. Yet it had never occurred to the enemy either to occupy or to dynamite such a watchpost. Well, everybody got stupid now and then, especially in war. This time Soviet intelligence had spied a Nazi blindness.

Returning to the room of entry, she found the infantryman hunched on the sofa. He had taken off his helmet and outer coat. The sweat in his shirt was rank. (Well, Katya thought, I'm scarcely a rose garden myself. When did I

last have a proper bath? Ages ago, that night in the forest when I went to earth in a peasant's hut—) His hair was curly. A hint of color had risen in his face.

"Beware taking a chill, comrade," she warned. "We'll be here a while." She set her rifle down and unshipped her canteen. "You must need water worse yet than I do, so you go first, but don't take much. Swish it around in your mouth before you swallow. It has to last us."

While he did, she squatted, took his injured hand in both hers, shook her head and clicked her tongue. "Nasty," she said. "Those bones are a mess. At least no major blood vessel was cut. I can do something for it. Hold still. This will hurt."

He caught his breath repeatedly when she cleaned and wrapped the wounds. Thereafter she gave him a piece of chocolate. "We'll share my rations too," she promised. "They're scant, but hunger is a joy set beside our real problems, no?"

The bite revived him somewhat. He managed a shaky smile. "What is your name in Heaven, you angel?" he quavered.

She checked both the windows. Nothing, except the distant cannon fire. "Me an angel?" she replied meanwhile with a grin. "What kind of Communist are you?"

"I'm not a Party member," he said humbly. "I should have joined, my father wanted me to, but— Well, after the war."

She put a chair in front of him and settled down. There was no sense in constantly staring out. She'd hear any important movement, as quiet as things were. A glance every few minutes would serve. "What are you, then?" she asked.

"Pyotr Sergeyevitch Kulikov, private, Sixty-Second Army."

A tingle passed through her spine. She whistled softly. "Kulikov! What a perfectly splendid omen."

"Eh? Oh . . . oh, yes. Kulikovo. Where Dmitri Donskoi smote the Mongols." He sighed. "But that was . . . six hundred years ago, almost."

"True." I remember how we rejoiced when the news reached our village. "And we aren't supposed to believe in omens any longer, are we?" She leaned forward, interested. "So you know the exact date of that battle, do you?" Even

now, exhausted, in pain, penned up to wait for possible death. "You sound educated."

"My family in Moscow is. I hope someday to become a professor of classics." He tried to straighten. His voice took on a ghost of resonance. "But who and what are you, my rescuer?"

"Ekaterina Borisovna Tazurina." The latest of my names, my self-created identities.

"A woman soldier—"

"We exist, you know." She mastered her annoyance. "I was a partisan before the fighting swept me here. Then they put me in uniform—not that that's likely to make any difference if the Germans catch me—and when I'd passed Lieutenant Zaitsev's course, they raised me to sergeant because a sharpshooter needs some freedom of action."

Pyotr's eyes widened. They had heard about Zaitsev from end to end of the Soviet Union. "This must be a special mission for you, not just sniping."

Katya nodded. "Word came from Pavlov's House. Do you know what I mean?"

"Of course. A building hereabouts, right in among the Germans, that Sergeant Pavlov and a few heroes have held since—the end of September, hasn't it been?"

She forgave him repeating the obvious. He was hurt, bewildered, and oh, how young. "They maintain communication with us," she explained. "Certain things they've noticed give reason to believe the enemy plans a major thrust into our end of town. No, I wasn't told what things, no need for me to hear, but I was sent to watch from this point and report whatever I see."

"And you happened to pass by when— Incredible luck for me." Tears welled. "But my poor friends."

"What happened?"

"Our squad went on patrol. My unit's currently in a block of detached houses well south of Mamaev. We didn't expect trouble, as quiet as it's gotten." Pyotr drew an uneven breath. "But all at once it was shooting and screaming and— My comrades dropped, right and left. I think I was the last one alive after . . . a few minutes. And with this hand. What could I do but run?"

"How many Germans? Where did they come from? How were they equipped?"

"I c-couldn't tell. Everything went too fast." He sank his face into his left palm and shuddered. "Too terrible."

She gnawed her lip, angry. "If you're with the Sixty-Second, you've had months of combat experience. The enemy drove you back from—Ostrov, was it? All the way across the plain to here. And still you couldn't pay attention to what was going on around you."

He braced himself. "I can, can try to remember."

"That's better. Take your time. Unless something dislodges us first, we'll be sitting where we are till we've seen what headquarters ought to know about. Whatever that may be."

She checked the windows, came back, sat down again before him, took his good hand. Now that he was out of immediate danger, nature wanted him to sleep and sleep and sleep, but that couldn't be allowed. What he had suffered wasn't overpoweringly severe, he was young and healthy, and when she spoke soothingly she saw how her femaleness helped rouse him.

Fragment by fragment, a half-coherent story emerged. It appeared the Germans had been reconnoitering. Their force was small, but superior to the Russian squad. Knowing themselves to be in hostile territory, they had kept totally alert and seen an opportunity to ambush Pyotr's group. Yes, clearly they wanted prisoners to take back. Katya knew a grim hope that he was in fact the single survivor.

A scouting mission was a strong indication of a major attack in the works. She wondered if she ought to consider that this information fulfilled her task, and return with it at once. Of course, when the squad failed to report, the officer who dispatched it would guess the truth; but that might not be for a considerable time. No, probably the story wasn't worth as much as the possibility of her gaining more important knowledge here.

Send Pyotr? If he didn't make it, the Red Army wouldn't have lost much. Unless he blundered into captivity. Could he hold out a while under torture, or would his broken body betray him into betraying her? It wasn't a chance she wanted to take. Nor was it fair to him.

Helping him summon forth what his whole being cried out to forget—that wrought a curious intimacy. In the end,

while they shared water and bread, he asked shyly, "Are you from hereabouts, Katya Borisovna?"

"No. Far to the southwest," she answered.

"I thought so. You speak excellent Russian, but the accent— Though it isn't quite Little Russian either, I think."

"You've a sharp ear." Impulse seized her. Why not? It was no secret. "I'm a Kazak."

He started. Water spluttered from his lips. He wiped them, a clumsy, shaken gesture, and said, "A Cossack? But you, you're well educated yourself, I can hear that, and—"

She laughed. "Come, now. We're not a race of horse barbarians."

"I know—"

"Our schooling is actually better than average. Or used to be." The ray of mirth vanished behind winter clouds. "Before the Revolution, most of us were farmers, fishers, merchants, traders who went far into Siberia. We did have our special institutions, yes, our special ways." Low: "Our kind of freedom."

That was why I drifted toward them after I ceased teaching embroidery at the cloister school in Kiev. That is why I have been with them and of them, almost from their beginnings, these four hundred years. A scrambling together of folk from Europe and Asia, down along the great rivers and over the unbounded steppes of the South, armed against Tatar and Turk, presently carrying war to those ancient foes. But mainly we were smallholders, we were a free people. Yes, women also, not as free as men but vastly more than they had come to be everywhere else. I was always a person in my own right, possessed of my own rights, and it was never very hard to start a new life in another tribe when I had been too long in one.

"I know. But— Forgive me," Pyotr blurted. "Here you are, a Soviet soldier, a patriot. I heard that, well, that Cossacks have gone over to the fascists wholesale."

"Some did," Katya admitted starkly. "Not most. Believe me, not most. Not after what we saw."

At first we had no knowledge. The commissars told us to flee. We stayed fast. They pleaded with us. They told us what horror Hitler wreaks wherever his hordes go. "Your newest lie," we jeered. Then the German tanks rolled over our horizon, and we learned that for once the commissars

had spoken truth. It didn't happen only to us, either. The war threw me together with people from the whole Soviet Ukraine, not Cossacks, ordinary Little Russians, little people driven to such despair that they fight side by side with the Communists.

Even so, yes, true, thousands and thousands of men have joined the Germans as workers or soldiers. They see them as liberators.

"After all," she went on hastily, "it's in our tradition to resist invaders and rise against tyrants."

The Lithuanians were far away, they mostly left us alone and were content with the name of overlords. But the Polish kings goaded us into revolt, over and over. Mazeppa welcomed the Great Russians in and was made a prince of the Ukraine, but soon he found himself in league with the Swedes, hoping they might set us free. We finally made our peace with the Tsars, their yoke was not unbearably heavy any more; but later the Bolsheviks took power.

Pyotr frowned. "I've read about those Cossack rebellions."

Katya winced. Three centuries fell from her, and she stood again in her village when men—neighbors, friends, two sons of hers—galloped in after riding with Chmielnicki and shouted their boasts. Every Catholic or Uniate priest they or the serfs caught, they hanged in front of his altar alongside a pig and a Jew. "Barbaric times," she said. "The Germans have no such excuse."

"And the traitors have less yet."

Traitors? Vasili the gentle blacksmith, Stefan the laughterful, Fyodor the fair who was a grandson of hers and didn't know it— How many millions of dead there they seeking to avenge? The forgotten ones, the obliterated ones, but she remembered, she could still see starvation shrivel the flesh and dim the eyes, children of hers had died in her arms; Stalin's creatures shot her man Mikhail, whom she loved as much as the ageless can love any mortal, shot him down like a dog when he tried to take for his family some of the grain they were shipping out in cram-full freight trains; he was lucky, though, he didn't go on another kind of train, off to Siberia; she had met a few, a few, who came back; they had no teeth and spoke very little and worked

like machines; and always you went in fear. Katya could not hold herself in. She must cry, "They had their reasons!"

Pyotr gaped at her. "What?" He fumbled through his mind. "Well, yes, kulaks."

"Free farmers, whose land that they had from their fathers was torn from them, and they herded onto kolkhozes like slaves." Promptly: "That was how they felt, you understand."

"I don't mean the honest peasants," he said. "I mean the kulaks, the rich landowners."

"I never met any, and I traveled rather widely. Some were prosperous, yes, because they farmed wisely and worked hard."

"Well, I—I don't want to offend you, Katya, you of all people, but you can't have traveled as much as you think. It was before your time, anyway." Pyotr shook his head. "No doubt many of them meant well. But the old capitalist regime had blinded them. They resisted, they defied the law."

"Until they were starved to death."

"Ah, yes, the famine. A tragic . . . accident?" He ventured a smile. "We're not supposed to call it an act of God."

"I said—No matter." I said they *were* starved to death. The harvests never failed. The state simply took everything from us. That brought us at last to submission. "I only wanted to say that many Ukrainians feel they have a grievance." They never quite gave up hope. In their hearts, they resist yet.

Indignation flashed. "They are stupid!"

Katya sighed. "They certainly made a bad mistake, those who went over to the Nazis."

God help me, I might have myself. If Hitler had been willing, no, if he had been able to treat us as human beings, he would have had us all. This day he would hold Moscow, Leningrad, Novosibirsk; Stalin would cower among his gulags in the farthest corner of Siberia, or be a refugee with the Americans. But no, the fascists burned, raped, slew, tortured, they dashed out the brains of babies and laughed while they machine-gunned children, women, the old, the unarmed, they bayoneted for sport, they racked prisoners apart or doused them with gasoline and set them alight, oh, it sickens me to think of them in holy Kiev!

"You knew what was right, and did it," Pyotr said softly. "You are braver than I."

She wondered if fear of the NKVD had kept him from deserting. She had seen the corpses the Green Hats left along the roads by the thousands, for a warning.

"What made you join the partisans?" he asked.

"The Germans occupied our village. They tried to recruit men from among us, and killed those who refused. My husband refused."

"Katya, Katya!"

"Luckily, we were newly married and had no children." I was rather newly arrived there, bearing a fresh name. That has grown difficult under the Communists. I have to search out slovenly officials. But they are common enough. Poor Ilya. He was so glad, so proud of his bride. We could have been happy together for as long as nature allowed.

"Luckily?" Pyotr knuckled fresh tears. "Regardless, you were very brave."

"I am used to looking after myself."

"As young as you are?" he marveled.

She couldn't help smiling. "I'm older than I look." Rising: "Time for another survey."

"Why don't we each take a window?" he suggested. "We could watch almost without a break. I feel much better. Thanks to you," he ended adoringly.

"Well, we could—" Thunder grumbled. "Hold! Artillery! Stay where you are."

She sped to the north room. Early winter dusk was falling, the wreckage gone vague among shadows, but Mamaev still bulked clear against the sky. Fire flickered there. The crashing waxed, widely about. "Our half-truce is over," she muttered when she came back to look east. "The big guns are busy."

He stood at the middle of the floor, his features hard to see in the quickly thickening murk but his voice uncertain. "Did the enemy begin it?"

Katya nodded. "I think so. The start of whatever they have planned. Now we earn our pay, I hope."

"Really?" The question trembled.

"If we can get some idea of what is going on. How I wish we had a moon tonight." She chuckled dryly. "But I

wouldn't expect the Germans to pick their weather to oblige us. Keep quiet."

She shuttled between windows. Dark deepened. Thin snow on untrafficked streets was slightly helpful to eyes and night glasses. The cannonade mounted.

Abruptly breath hissed between her teeth. She risked leaning out for a better view. Cold fell around her like a cloak.

"What is it?" Pyotr tried to whisper.

"Hush, I told you!" She strained to be sure. Black blots on the next street over from this, headed straight north. . . . A hunter could interpret traces for a soldier. Those were perhaps a hundred men, afoot, therefore infantry, but they dragged several carts on which rested faintly sheening shapes that must be mortars . . .

They passed. She lowered her glasses and groped through the apartment till she found Pyotr. He had sat down, maybe in his weariness he had fallen asleep, but he sprang to his feet when she touched him.

Tautness keened within her. "Germans bound for Kratoy Gully," she said into his ear. "Got to be, on that route. If they wanted to go fight near the hill, they'd be headed westerly and I might never have seen them."

"What . . . do they intend?"

"I don't know, but I can guess. It's surely part of a general offensive against our sector. The cannon—and maybe armor, attacking from the side—those should hold our people's attention. Meanwhile yonder detachment establishes itself in the ravine. It has the makings of a strongpoint. Our headquarters was in Tsaritsa Gorge, farther south, till the Germans took it, at heavy cost. If they take and hold the Kratoy, why, troops can scramble straight through it, or their engineers might throw a new bridge across."

"Do you mean we could lose the whole city?"

"Oh, that alone won't do it." We have our orders, directly from Stalin. Here, at this place he renamed in his own honor, here we stand. We die if need be, but the enemy shall not pass one centimeter beyond us. "Every little thing counts, though. It would surely cost us hundreds of lives. This is what I came for. Now I go back and tell."

She felt him shiver. "We go!"

A dead man's hand clenched around her throat. She swal-

lowed twice before she could say: "Not together. It's too important. This whole district will be aswarm. I'll have all I can do to get through alive, and I'm experienced. You must try by yourself. Wait here till—tomorrow night?—till it looks safer."

Between her hands, he straightened. "No. My comrades are fighting. I ran away once. Not again."

"What use will you be, with that wound of yours?"

"I can carry ammunition. Or—Katya, you might not make it. I might, by sheer luck, and let them know." He laughed, or sobbed. "A tiny, tiny chance, but who can say for certain?"

"Oh, God. You idiot."

"Every little thing counts, you said."

Yes, each scrap thrown into the furnace, it does become part of the steel. "I mustn't delay, Pyotr. Give me, well, half an hour till you start, so I can get clear. Count to, uh—"

"I know some old songs and about how long they take. I'll sing them in my head. While I think of you, Katya."

"Here." She undid objects and tossed them on the sofa. "Food, water. You'll need strength. No, I insist; I'm not injured. God keep you, lad, you—you Russian."

"We'll meet again. Won't we? Say we will!"

Instead, she cast her arms about him and laid her mouth on his. Just for a minute. Just for a memory.

She stepped back. He stood. His breath went like flaws of wind in the dark (springtime wind?) amidst the hammering of the guns. "Do be careful," she said. Taking up her rifle, she felt her way to the door.

And down the stairs. And into the streets.

Tanks roared somewhere on her left. Would the Germans mount a night attack? Likelier a feint. But she was no strategist, merely a sharpshooter. Flashes etched skeletal buildings against a reddened sky. She felt the racket through her bootsoles. Hers was simply to deliver a message.

Or to survive? What had she to do with the cruel follies of mortals? Why was she here?

"Well, you see, Pyotr, dear, I am a Russian too."

A park, a piece of openness between these jagged walls, glimmered white before her. A solitary tree was left, the rest were stumps and splinters around a crater. She skirted

it, keeping to shadows. Likewise would she skirt the ravine, and be most cautious when she came to the railroad tracks that led to the Lazur. She must arrive with her word.

She doubted Pyotr would. Well, if not, he'd stop a bullet or two that might otherwise have gone into somebody more effective. If somehow he kept alive—Maria of the mercies, let him, help him!—of course they'd never see each other, or hear, or anything. Suppose two grains of dust are whirled together for a moment when a storm runs over the steppe. Will it bring them back?

Certainly never her to him. She would be changing identities again before long. Whenever the Four Horsemen rode across the world, they opened easy ways for doing that. She could not have stayed much more with the Cossacks anyhow.

But first—

The guns boomed louder. Given the news she bore, the Soviet artillery would take aim at Kratoy Gully. It would blast the Germans out of there before they could dig in. That would be that, while the war went on.

Work, you guns. Bring down the wrath of Dazhbog and Perun, of St. Yuri the dragonslayer and St. Alexander Nevsky. Here we stand. The thing that bestrides all Europe shall come no farther than us. If we fight in the name of a monster, that makes no difference. And we don't really. Once this Stalingrad was Tsaritsyn. It can become something else someday in the future. But good for now to think that we hold fast in the City of Steel.

We will endure, and prevail, and abide the day of our freedom.

XVIII

Judgment Day

1

At first it was as if half a century had never been. Snow-peaks gleamed against unutterable blue; in this clarity they seemed almost near enough to touch, though any of them might be fifty miles remote. A road that was little more than a track rose, fell, writhed through a darkness of deodars and gnarly wild fruit trees where langurs scampered. Then the forest opened onto pasture strewn with boulders, intensely green after the rains. Sheep and cattle grazed among stone threshing-floors. Tiny terraces carved from the valley walls bore maize, amaranth, buckwheat, barley, potatoes. A westering sun breathed a ghost of purple across the heights that looked into it, while across from them shadows lengthened, intricate over the wrinkles of the land. The air smelled of grass and glaciers.

As his mule brought him nearer the village, Wanderer began to see how much it had in fact changed. It had grown. Most of the new houses were not earth-roofed stone but timber, two or three stories high, with carved and painted galleries; it was curious to find something so like Swiss chalets here on the knees of the Himalayas. Wires ran from a former dwelling which must house a generator, and the fuel tanks outside it also supplied a battered truck. A satellite receiver dish quite likely served more than a single communal television set. The folk were still Bhutias, essentially Tibetan stock, and men still generally wore the traditional long woolen coat, women the sleeved cloak; but he spied occasional sneakers or blue jeans, and he wondered how

many people held by the mingled Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism that had been the faith of their fathers.

Herders and workers in the fields swarmed to meet him, soon joined by those who had been at home. Excitement capered and shouted. Any visit from outside was an event, and this newcomer was extraordinary. His two attendants were simply Gurkhas, familiar enough, guides to manage the animals and serve his needs, but he himself rode altogether strange, clad like a white man but broad of face and bronze of skin, his nose jutting yet his hair and eyes and cheekbones akin to theirs.

One woman, shriveled and toothless with age, made an abrupt sign against evil and scuttled from the crowd into a house. One man, equally old, drew a sharp breath before he bowed very low. They remembered his earlier call on them, Wanderer knew—when they were children and he just the same as today.

His senior Gurkha spoke with another woman, large and strong, who must be something like the mayor. She in turn addressed the villagers. A sort of calm descended. They eddied around the party, silent or talking in undertones, while it made its way through the lanes to a house at the northern edge of the settlement.

This seemed much as it had been. It remained the biggest, of stone and wood, an alien grace to its lines. Glass shone in the windows. Graveled paths twisted about the shrubs, dwarf trees, bamboo, and stones of a small, exquisite garden at the rear. The servants who emerged were of a new generation, but the man and woman who trod onto the verandah and waited were not.

Wanderer dismounted. Slowly, under awed stares and a hush, he walked to the steps and up. He bowed before the two, and they returned the gesture with equal gravity.

"Welcome," said the man, and "Oh, boundlessly welcome!" the woman. He was Chinese, powerfully built, rather flat of countenance and without guile in it. She was Japanese, well-formed in a petite fashion, cat-alert beneath the schooled serenity. Both wore robes, simple though of the best material.

They had used Nepali, of which Wanderer had but a few words. "Thank you," he replied in Mandarin Chinese. "I

have returned as I promised." He smiled. "This time I took the trouble to learn a language you understand."

"Fifty years," the woman breathed, using that tongue. "We could not be sure, we could only wait and wonder."

"At last, at last," the man said as shakily. He raised his voice in the tribal dialect. "I told them we will hold a feast of rejoicing tomorrow," he explained. "Our servants will see to your men. Please come inside where we can be alone and honor you rightfully, sir—uh—"

"John Wanderer," the American supplied.

"Why, that is what you called yourself before," the woman said.

Wanderer shrugged. "What difference, after so long and in a foreign country? I like the name, take it again and again, and otherwise usually a version of it. Who are you being?"

"What does that matter any more?" It came as a bass cry from the man's throat. "We are what we are, together for always."

The room where they conferred was gracious, the furniture Chinese, a variety of objects on shelves. The pair had adventured widely before they raised up this home. That was in 1810, as nearly as Wanderer could figure from the calendar they employed. Subsequently they had absented themselves from time to time for years on end, gone to oversee the businesses that kept them prosperous, brought souvenirs back. Those included books; Tu Shan found his diversion mainly in handicrafts, but Asagao was quite a reader.

In the presence of their fellow immortal, they chose to recall those ancient names. It was as if they snatched for a handhold, now when once more their world was falling to pieces.

Nevertheless joy overrode uneasiness. "We hoped so, hoped you really were what you seemed to be," Asagao said. "How we hoped. More than an end to loneliness. Others like us, why, that gives meaning to these lives of ours. Does it not?"

"I can't say," Wanderer replied. "Besides you, my friend and I know of only one who is certainly alive, and he refuses to associate himself with us. We may be mere freaks." From

the end table next his chair he lifted a cup and took a sip of the pungent local *chong,* followed by a mouthful of tea. They comforted.

"Surely we are on earth for a reason, however mysterious," Asagao insisted. "At least, Tu Shan and I have tried to serve some purpose beyond surviving."

"How did you find us, fifty years ago?" the man asked in his pragmatic way.

No real conversation had been possible then, when everything passed through an interpreter who had better not realize what meaning lay behind the words he rendered. Wanderer could just hint. Presently he thought these two had caught his intent and were doing likewise. They made it clear that they had no wish to depart, nor did they invite him to prolong his stay. Yet they were abundantly courteous, and when he risked his guide's astonishment and suggested that he return in fifty years, their answer throbbed with eagerness. Today they all knew, past any doubt, what they were.

"I was always restless, never fond of cities, for I began as a wild plainsman," Wanderer related. "After the first World War I set off around the world. My friend Hanno—he uses different identities, but between us he is Hanno—he had grown rich in America and gave me ample money, hoping I might come on the track of somebody like us. Nepal was not easy to reach or enter in those days, but I guessed that on that account it could harbor such persons. In Katmandu I caught rumors of a couple in the uplands who lived a kind of baronial existence among tribespeople whose benefactors and teachers they were. In spite of treating themselves well, they were considered holy. The story went that when they grew old they left on pilgrimage, and their son and his wife reappeared in their place. Imagine how such a tale drew me."

Asagao laughed. "Things were never so simple, of course," she said. "Our people aren't fools. They keep up the fiction about us because that is plainly what we want, but they know quite well that the same two come back to them. They don't fear or envy us, their nature is to accept various lots in life. To them, yes, we are sacred and full of power, but we are also their friends. We sought long and far to find ourselves a home like this."

"Besides," Tu Shan grunted, "they don't care to be overrun by worshippers, curiosity seekers, and the government and its tax collectors. At that, we have to deal with several visitors a year; more than that lately. Stories do get about. Only our distance from everything keeps them faint enough to protect us."

Wanderer nodded. "I would probably have ignored them if I hadn't been on the lookout. But nevertheless the modern world seems to be moving in."

"We cannot forbear to bring what is good," Asagao murmured. "Literacy, medicine, awareness, whatever lightens these hard lives without corrupting them too much."

Wanderer bleakened. "It would have happened anyway, wouldn't it? You are losing control, aren't you?"

"I said we get more strangers all the time," Tu Shan snapped. "And inspectors from the king. Such hardly ever sought us out before. Nor did they ask as many questions."

"We know the country is changing, the whole world is in upheaval," Asagao sighed. "Dear has this place been to us, but we understand that we must eventually disappear from it forever."

"Or else become known for what you are," Wanderer agreed low. "Do you wish that? If so, tell me. I'll leave tomorrow, and in America change my name." He left unspoken that he had not uttered any modern name of Hanno's.

"We have thought of it," Tu Shan admitted. "Sometimes in the past we made no pretense." He paused. "But that was always among simple countryfolk, and we could always withdraw and hide again when danger threatened. I am not sure we can do that any longer."

"You cannot, once you are found out. They will track you down if you try, for they have many means these days to hunt men. Afterward you will be slaves, no doubt well-housed and well-fed but never set free, animals for them to study."

"Is it really that bad?"

"I fear it is," Asagao said. To Wanderer: "We have spoken much about it, Tu Shan and I. The king of Nepal might treat us kindly, as his pet animals, but what if the Red Chinese or the Russians demand our persons?"

"At least keep your freedom," Wanderer urged. "You

can proclaim yourselves when the times look auspicious to you, but I do not think they are yet, and once you have done so, there will be no more choices."

"Do you mean for us to go away with you?"

"I hope you will, or at any rate follow me soon. Hanno will provide for you—whatever you need that is in his power to get, and his power is great."

"We could go," she said slowly. "As I told you, we know how much people move about these days, and news leaps across thousands of miles. We have seen foreigners pass by and felt how they wondered about us. Even more do we feel the growing presence of the government. So in the last few decades we have begun making ready, as we did over and over in the past. We have taken care to have no children throughout that time. Our last living ones are long since settled down—we always reared them elsewhere—and believe us dead. We never enlightened them about us." She winced. "That would have hurt too much."

"Then the children born to two immortals are themselves mortal?" Wanderer whispered. She nodded. He shook his head, in pain of his own. "Well, Hanno and I often speculated about that."

"I hate to go," Tu Shan said heavily.

"Go someday we must," Asagao answered. "We knew that from the start. Now finally we can fly straight to shelter, companionship, help. The sooner the better."

He shifted in his chair. "I still have things to do. Our villagers will miss us, and we will miss them."

"Always have we lost to death all those we loved. Let us instead remember these as they are today, alive. Let their memory of us fade gently into a legend that nobody else believes."

The windows were turning blue with dusk.

2

CORINNE MACANDAL, Mama-lo of the Unity and known to it as the daughter of its founder Laurace, halted her pacing when Rosa Donau entered. For a space the two women stood as if in confrontation. Shades drawn, the Victorian room was murkily lighted; eyeballs shone brighter than its

glass or silver. Silence weighted the air, somehow made heavier by an undertone of traffic on the street outside.

After a moment Rosa said unsurely, "I'm sorry to be this late. I was out for hours. Is this a bad time? Your message on my machine was that I should come right away, without calling back."

"No, you did well," Corinne told her.

"What's the matter? You look all tensed up."

"I am. Come." The black woman led the white into the adjoining chamber, where nobody dared enter unbidden. She ignored the arcane objects that crowded it and went directly to the coffee table. Rosa turned as usual to face the altar and touched brow, lips, breast. She had spent too many centuries appealing to saints and appeasing demons to be certain that no real power dwelt in things called holy.

Corinne picked up a magazine that lay open on the table. She handed it to the other and pointed. "Read that," she ordered.

Also here, the light was dim. The journal was one of respectable popular scholarship, like *Smithsonian* or *National Geographic*. Corinne indicated an advertisement near the back. Under the heading LONGEVITY STUDIES stood four column inches of text. The format was staid, the words discreet; most persons who noticed would find them dry, of interest to none except specialists. They leaped at Rosa: "—very long-lived individuals in excellent health . . . young but prospectively long-lived are of similar interest . . . . scientific studies . . . recollections of history as actually experienced . . ."

Her hands began to shake. "Not again," broke from her.

Corinne started, recovered, gave her a searching look, but asked merely, "What do you make of it?"

Rosa dropped the magazine and stared down at its cover. "Probably nothing," she mumbled. "I mean, just what it says, somebody wants to, uh, examine and talk with folks who've gotten really old, or who might."

"*How* old?"

Rosa lifted her glance. "I tell you, it can't have anything to do with us!" she shrilled. "There are scientists trying to get a handle on what aging is, you know?"

Corinne shook her head. "The way this is phrased, somehow it doesn't quite fit that," she said slowly. "And how

better might immortals try to get in touch with others like them?"

"It could be a scam. Or a trap." Desperation chattered. "Don't write to that box number, Laurace. Don't. We've got too much to lose."

"Or to gain? What are you afraid of?"

"What could happen to us. And our work, everything we're doing." Rosa aimed a jerky gesture at the curtained windows. "The Unity'll fall apart without us. What'll become of everybody that trusts us?"

Corinne's gaze went in the same direction, as if it pierced through to the swamp of horrible decay in which this house stood like an island. "I'm not sure we're doing much of anything any longer."

"We are, we are. We're saving some, at least. If we—tell anybody what we are—that's the end. Nothing will ever be the same again."

Corinne swung her vision back to Rosa, tautened, and pounced. "You've seen something like this already, haven't you?"

"No." The Syrian made fending motions. "I mean, well—"

"It escaped you. It's written on you. Neither of us has stayed alive without getting pretty good at body language. Speak, or by God, I—I will contact this Willock fellow."

Rosa shuddered. Resistance collapsed. She swiped at tears. "I'm sorry. Yeah, yes, I did. Had almost forgotten, it was so long ago. Nothing more came of it, so I thought there was nothing to it. Till now."

"When? Where?"

"In the papers, then. I don't remember the date, but it was shortly before the war, World War Two, that is."

"About fifty years ago. Maybe exactly fifty years? Go on."

"Well, it was an ad sort of like this. Not just the same, but, well, I wondered."

"And you kept silent? You never called it to my attention."

"I was scared!" Rosa screamed. "Like I am now!" She stumbled to a chair, sank onto its zebra hide, and wept.

After a little while Corinne went to her, bent down, laid arms about the bowed shoulders and cheek close to cheek.

"I understand, Aliyat, dear," she murmured. "You hadn't been with me but a few short years. You had finally, barely won to something good, something hopeful. After those dreadful centuries—yes, of course you were terrified of any change, and the change here would have been unforeseeable. Oh, I forgive you. You may even have been right."

She straightened. "Still," she said most softly, "that fifty-year interval is strong evidence for another immortal. Isn't it? He or she wouldn't risk a continuous campaign. The short-lived would be too likely to start wondering. Our kind has time, and learns patience."

"How do you know what they're like?" Rosa pleaded. "They could be bad. I told you how I met two men and—well, we didn't get along. If they're still alive, if they're behind this, I wouldn't put anything past them."

Corinne's tone parched. "I gather you made enemies of them. You had better pull yourself together and explain, at long last, what did happen." She waved a hand. "Not today, as overwrought as you are. And . . . yes, we must certainly stay cautious. I'll see what I can discover about Mr. Willock before deciding whether to contact him—and how, if I do."

She gentled again: "Meanwhile, don't worry too much, dear. We have resources. I haven't told you in any detail. Secrecy does become a habit, doesn't it? Besides, this kind of thing isn't your *métier*. But over the years I've developed my own connections, including a few persons in key official positions." The voice clanged. "We won't stay passive. We're not alone any more? Then we've got to claim our share in the world, or else make ready to defend what is ours."

3

THE TAX examiner ruffled several sheets of paper and frowned across his desk. "I think we ought to see your client in person," he said.

"I believed I mentioned to you, Mr. Tomek is vacationing abroad," Hanno replied with studied edginess. "I've shown you my power of attorney in this matter."

"Yes, yes. However. Naturally, you may accompany him, Mr. Levine, if he wants legal counsel at his side."

"Why? Have you any reason to suspect wrongdoing? I

assure you, each detail in each one of his enterprises is in order. Haven't I been able to answer every single question you've put, these past two hours?"

"We have barely begun, Mr. Levine. I have never seen so complicated a web of transactions and interlocking arrangements."

"Go ahead and trace them out. If you turn up anything unlawful, I'll be totally surprised, but I'll be on call." Hanno drew breath. "Mr. Tomek is an old man. He's earned a long rest and as much pleasure as is possible at his age. I don't think you can make any case for calling him in, and if you try, I intend to protest formally, as high up the ladder as necessary." He left implied: Your superiors won't thank you for that.

Nasty young corporation mercenary, said the examiner's attitude, before he sagged a bit and his gray head bent. Fleetingly, Hanno pitied him. What a hell of a way to have spent the few worthwhile decades nature doled out, harassing people in their business and always with paper, never with more than a ghost of whatever blood-joy stirred in village busybody, religious inquisitor, state secret policeman.

Hanno dismissed the feeling: He's making me waste this afternoon, and yes, doubtless the dreariness has just started. He calculated his conciliation. "No offense. You have your duty to do. And you'll find us entirely cooperative. But—" try for a laugh— "I guarantee you won't make wages."

The auditor smiled sourly. "I admit you've given me what we need to conduct a preliminary check. You understand, don't you, we accuse nobody. It would be easy to make honest mistakes in this, uh, cat's cradle."

"Mr. Tomek's staff keeps close track, you know. Now if you have no further need of me today, perhaps I should leave you to your work."

He ought to be calmer, inside as well as outside, Hanno thought when he left. There was nothing worse to fear than a dismal nuisance, because Charles Tomek's affairs were in truth defensible. Every last one of the many steps by which a gross income of millions became a taxable income of some hundred thousands, was legal. Let IRS try its meanest. Not only governments could use computers. Human beings could.

And Washington had no state income tax yet. That had

been one strong reason among many for moving to Seattle. For that matter, he hadn't really shot the afternoon. Thinking he might, he had made no other commitments; much of the long summer day remained for him to enjoy.

Nevertheless the session rankled. He knew why. I've been spoiled, he thought. Once this was a free country. Oh, I always knew that couldn't last, that here too things were bound to grind back to the norm—masters and serfs, whatever names they go by. And so far we continue happier than most of the world ever was. But damn, modern democracy has the technology to regiment us beyond anything Caesar, Torquemada, Suleyman, or Louis XIV dared dream of.

He sighed, standing in the elevator, suppressing the wish for a smoke although he was alone. Quite apart from the laws that multiplied around him like bacteria, he owed consideration to the lungs of poor, vulnerable mortals. Indeed, he hadn't brought his tax liability down as far as he could have. A man who lived in a country ought to contribute his fair share to its maintenance and defense. Everything else was extortion.

John Wanderer disagrees, Hanno reflected. He speaks of human needs, threatened biosphere, scientific mysteries, and says it's romanticism to suppose private enterprise can cope with them all. No doubt he's right to some extent. But where do you draw the line?

Maybe I've been around too long, maybe it's prejudiced me. But I remember, for example, those glorious public works that government gave to Egypt, century after century, and how they benefitted the people—pyramids, statues of Rameses II, grain tribute to Rome, Aswan Dam. I remember small shops I've closed, men and women thrown out of jobs, because the regulations and required record-keeping changed them to losing propositions.

He came forth into downtown. A wind, strong and cold, thrust odors of salt water through automobile stench. Sunlight spilled from heaven. Crowds bustled. A street musician fiddled a tune he liked, to judge by his stance and his face. The wind flapped the skirts of a particularly delicious girl, as brave a sight as Old Glory on her staff above one building. The vitality caught at Hanno, blew the darkness out of him.

For a minute, practicality lingered. He must consider seriously, and soon, phasing out Charles Tomek. Death and

cremation abroad, widower, childless, assets willed to various individuals and certain foundations. . . . In due course Tomek's pet lawyer had better move away, drop out of sight. That would be much simpler to arrange; hundreds or thousands of men in the United States must bear the name Joseph Levine . . . And the dozen additional identities in four different countries, ranging from magazine publisher to day laborer, yes, they all needed attention. Those which he had created as boltholes, mere camouflage, against a day of need, probably remained safe. Others, though, were for diversification, so he could be active, carry out his undertakings and investments, without making any of them unduly noticeable; and by now some of them, such as Tannahill, were becoming so. How long could he keep up the dance?

How long did he actually wish to? He well understood that his resentment of the modern state sprang in large part from its erosion of privacy; and privacy, like liberty, was a pretty new and fragile idea. Gods damn it, he was a seaman, he wanted a deck again under his feet. But for most of the twentieth century he had only been able to operate, if he would keep his secret, in offices, by mail and wire and telephone and computer, chasing paper profits, hardly better off—except for his yachts, women, feasts, luxuries, travels, and the hunt that was his ultimate purpose in life—hardly better off than that poor publican, his enemy.

To what end? Wealth? It was a Phoenician's way to strength. But how much strength would he ever find use for? No amount of money would stave off a nuclear warhead. At best, it would buy refuge for him and his, and the means to start over once the ashes had settled. For that, a million or two dollars were ample. Meanwhile, why not shut down his businesses in the course of the next ten or a dozen years, then take a holiday for whatever time this civilization hung together? Didn't he deserve it?

Did his comrades want that, though? They were so earnest in their different ways, those three. And, of course, any day his renewed search might turn up others. Or anything else might happen.

The wind whooped. Suddenly Hanno laughed aloud with it. He ignored the stares he got. Maybe living through history had made him a touch paranoid. Yet he had also learned from it that every hour of freedom was a precious

gift, to be savored in fullness and stored away where thieves could not break in and steal. Here half a beautiful afternoon and a whole evening had fallen into his hands. What to do with them?

A drink in the revolving bar on the Space Needle? The view of mountains and water was incomparable, and Lord knew when the next clear day would happen along. No. This past interview had driven him too much into himself. He desired companionship. Natalia was still at work, pridefully and wisely declining to let him support her. Tu Shan and Asagao were afar in Idaho, John Wanderer in the Olympics on one of his backpacking trips. He could drop into, say, Emmett Watson's for a beer and some oysters and general friendliness—no, the danger of meeting a self-appointed poet was too great. Jokes aside, he didn't feel like chitchat with somebody he'd never see again.

That left a single possibility; and he hadn't visited Giannotti's lab for quite a spell. Nothing spectacular could have happened there or he'd have been notified, but it was always interesting to get a personal progress report.

By the time of that decision, Hanno had reached the lot where he left the Buick registered to Joe Levine. He considered driving straight to his destination. Surely no one had put a tail on him. But accidents could happen, and sometimes did. Immortality made caution a habit. Moreover, he intended to end up with Natalia. Therefore he bucked through traffic to Levine's place near the International District. It had parking of its own. In the apartment he opened a concealed safe and exchanged Levine's assorted identification cards for Robert Cauldwell's. A taxi brought him to a public garage where Cauldwell rented a space. Entering the Mitsubishi that waited, he returned to the streets.

He liked this tightly purring machine much better. Damn, it seemed only yesterday that Detroit was making the best cars for their price on earth.

His goal was a plain brick building, a converted warehouse, in a light-industry section between Green Lake and the University campus. A brass plate on its door read RUFUS MEMORIAL INSTITUTE. Those who asked were told that Mr. Rufus had been a friend of Mr. Cauldwell, the shipowner who endowed this laboratory for fundamental biological science. That satisfied their curiosity. The

work being done interested them much more, emphasizing as it did molecular cytology and the effort to discover what made living beings grow old.

It had been a plausible way for Cauldwell to dispose of his properties and retire into obscurity. Two magnate identities were more than Hanno could maintain after the government got thoroughly meddlesome. Tomek was pulling in the most money by then, and leaving less of a trail. Besides, this might offer a hope—

Director Samuel Giannotti was at his workbench. The staff was small though choice, administration was kept to an unfussy minimum, and he continued to be a practicing scientist. When Hanno arrived, he took time to shut down his experiment properly before escorting the founder to his office. It was a book-lined room as comfortably rumpled-looking as his large, bald-headed self. A swivel chair stood available for each man. Giannotti fetched Scotch from a cabinet, ice and soda from a fridge, and mixed mild drinks while Hanno charged his pipe.

"I wish you'd give that foul thing up," Giannotti said, settling down. His voice was amicable. The seat creaked to his weight. "Where'd you get it, anyway? From King Tutankhamen?"

"Before my time," Hanno drawled. "Do you mind? I know you've quit, but I didn't expect you'd take the Christer attitude of so many ex-smokers."

"No, in my line of work we get used to stenches."

"Good. How's that line go from Chesterton?"

"'If there is one thing worse than the modern weakening of major morals it is the modern strengthening of minor morals,'" quoted Giannotti, who was a devotee. "Or else, later in the same essay, 'It is the great peril of our society that all its mechanism may grow more fixed while its spirit grows more fickle.' Not that I've often heard you worry about morals or the spirit."

"I don't worry aloud about the oxygen supply, either—"

"Obviously."

"—or the other necessities of survival. It would annoy me less that we're heading into a new puritanical era if the puritanism concerned itself about things that matter." Hanno struck match to tobacco and drew the fire alight.

"Well, I worry about you. Okay, your body has recovered

from traumas that would have finished off any of us ordinaries, but that doesn't mean your immortality is absolute. A bullet or a swig of cyanide would kill you as easily as me. I'm not at all convinced your cells can stand that kind of chemical insult forever."

"Pipe smokers don't inhale, and for me cigarettes are *faute de mieux*." Hanno's brows knotted slightly. "Just the same . . . do you have any solid scientific reason for what you said?"

"No," Giannotti admitted. "Not yet."

"What are you turning up lately, if anything?"

Giannotti sipped from his glass. "We've learned of some very interesting work in Britain. Fairweather at Oxford. It looks as though the rate at which cellular DNA loses methyl groups is correlated with lifespan, at least in the animals that have been studied. Jaime Escobar here is setting up to pursue this line of inquiry further. I myself will re-examine cells of yours from the same viewpoint, with special reference to glycosylation of proteins. On the QT, of course. I'd like fresh material from the four of you, blood, skin, biopsy sample of muscle tissue, to start new cultures for the purpose."

"Any time you want, Sam. But what does this signify, exactly?"

"You mean 'What might it signify, at a guess?' We know little thus far. Well, I'll try to sketch it out for you, but I'll have to repeat stuff I've told you before."

"That's all right. I am a simon-pure layman. My basic thought habits were formed early in the Iron Age. Where it comes to science, I can use plenty of repetition."

Giannotti leaned forward, caught up in his quest. "The British themselves aren't sure. Maybe the demethylation is due to cumulative damage to the DNA itself, maybe the methylase enzyme becomes less active in the course of time, maybe something else. In any event, it may—at the present stage this is only a suggestion, you understand—it may result in deterioration of mechanisms that hitherto kept certain other genes from expressing themselves. Maybe those genes become free to produce proteins that have poisoning effects on still other cellular processes."

"The checks and balances begin to break down," Hanno said mutedly, through a cloud of blue smoke.

"Probably true, but that's so vague and general a statement, practically a tautology, as to be useless." Giannotti sighed. "Now don't imagine that we have more than a single piece of the jigsaw puzzle here, if we have that much. And it's a puzzle in three dimensions, or four, or *n*, with the space not necessarily Euclidean. For instance, your regeneration of parts as complex as teeth implies more than freedom from senescence. It indicates retention of juvenile, even fetal characteristics, not in the gross anatomy but probably on the molecular level. And that fantastic immune system of yours must tie in somehow, too."

"Yeah." Hanno nodded. "Aging isn't a single, simple thing. It's a whole clutch of different . . . diseases, all with pretty much the same symptoms, like flu or cancer."

"Not quite, I think," Giannotti replied. They had been over the same ground more than once, but the Phoenician was right about his need for that. He must have won to a terrifying degree of knowledge about himself, Giannotti sometimes thought. "There does appear to be a common factor in the case of every mortal organism with more than a single cell—and maybe the unicellulars too, maybe even the prokaryotes and viruses—if only we can find what it is. Conceivably this demethylation phenomenon gives us a clue to it. Anyhow, that's my opinion. I concede my grounds are more or less philosophical. Something as biologically fundamental as death ought to be in the very fabric of evolution, virtually from the beginning."

"Uh-huh. Advantage to the species, or, I should say, the line of descent. Get the older generations out of the way, make room for genetic turnover, allow more efficient types to develop. Without death, we'd still be bits of jelly in the sea."

"There may be something to that." Giannotti shook his head. "But it can't be the whole story. It doesn't account for humans outliving mice by an order of magnitude, for instance. Or species that live indefinitely, like bristlecone pines." Weariness dragged at his smile. "No, most likely life has adapted itself to the fact, made the best it could of the fact, that sooner or later, one way or another, entropy will ring down the curtain on its wonderful chemical juggling act. Whether your kind represents the next step in evolu-

tion, a set of mutations that created a fail-safe system, I can't say."

"But you don't think so, do you?" Hanno asked. "We don't breed true."

"No, you don't," Giannotti said with a barely perceptible wince. "However, that may come. Evolution is cut-and-try. If I may anthropomorphize," he added. "Often it's hard not to."

Hanno clicked his tongue. "You know, when you say things like that, I have trouble believing you're a believing Catholic."

"Separate spheres," Giannotti answered. "Ask any competent theologian. And I wish you would, for your own sake, you poor lonely atheist." Quickly: "The point is, the material world and the spirit world are not identical."

"And we'll outlive the galaxies, you and I and everybody," he had said once toward dawn, when the bottle was low. "You may spend ten thousand years, or a million or a billion, in the flesh, but it will hardly mean more, then, than the three days that a premature baby had. Maybe less; the baby died innocent . . . But this is a fascinating problem, and it does have unlimited potentialities for the whole world, if we can solve it. Your existence cannot be a mere stochastic accident."

Hanno didn't argue, though he preferred their everyday banter, or straightforward talk about the work. He had found after years of acquaintance that here was one of the rare people whom he could trust with his secret; and in this case it might, just possibly, bring an end to the need for secrecy. If Sam Giannotti could endure knowing of lives that went on for millennia, and keep silent about them even with his wife, because of a faith whose elements Hanno remembered as having been ancient in Hiram's Tyre—so be it.

"But never mind," the scientist went on. "What I wish more, right now and always, is the same as ever. That you'd release me from my promise and let me make known—or better, make known yourself—what you are."

"Sorry," Hanno said. "Must I repeat why not?"

"Cast off that suspiciousness, can't you? I forget how many times I've told you, the Middle Ages are behind us. Nobody will burn you for a witch. Show the world the proofs you showed me."

"I've learned to be leery of doing anything irrevocable."

"Will I never make you understand? I'm shackled. I can't so much as tell my staff the truth. We piddle around and— If you come out of the closet, Bob, discovering the immortality mechanism will become the human race's top priority. Every resource will go to it. The knowledge that it is possible is half the battle, I swear. They might crack it inside of ten years. Meanwhile, can't you see the dying down of war, arms races, terrorism, despotism, given such a prospect before everyone? How many needless deaths can you stand to have on your conscience?"

"And I've told *you* before, I doubt the outcome would be anything like that sweet," Hanno snapped. "Three thousand years of experience, as close as makes no difference, say otherwise. An overnight revelation like that would upset too many applecarts."

He had no cause to repeat how he controlled the veto. If and when necessary, he would dispose of the things he had used to convince Giannotti. John Wanderer, Tu Shan, and Asagao were accustomed to following his lead, he far and away their senior. Should one of them rebel and reveal, that person possessed no evidence of the kind that Hanno had assembled. After forty or fifty years of observation, people might take the claim seriously; but why would an immortal spend so great a while in custody? Richelieu had been right, three and a half centuries ago. The risks were too large. If your body stayed youthful, you kept a young animal's strong desire to live.

Giannotti sank back into his chair. "Oh, hell, let's not rehash a stale argument," he muttered. Louder: "I do ask you to put that pessimism and cynicism of yours aside and think again. When everybody can have your lifespan, you'll have no more reason to hide."

"Sure," Hanno agreed. "Why d'you suppose I founded this place? But let the change come gradually, with forewarning. Give me and my friends and the world time to prepare. Meanwhile, you said it, the argument has long since gone moldy."

Giannotti laughed, as a man may laugh when he can lower a burden from his shoulders. "Okay. Shop talk and gossip. What's new with you?"

—Time goes fast in congenial company. The hour was

past six when Hanno pulled up in front of Cauldwell's house.

The unpretentious building on Queen Anne Hill had a magnificent view. He stood for a minute and savored it. Beneath a westering sun the distant mountains seemed to glimmer only half real, as if they rose in a dream or in elfland. Southward, beyond the slim silhouette of the Space Needle, the light turned Elliot Bay to molten silver and touched treetops with gold. Farther on, Rainier bulwarked heaven, blue rock-mass and white purity. Air went cool into breath. Traffic noises were a whisper, and a robin loosed scraps of melody. Yes, he thought, this was a lovely planet, an Aladdin's hoard of wonders. Too bad how humans mucked it up. Nevertheless he intended to stick around.

A bit reluctantly, he went inside. Natalia Thurlow was there and the door not locked. She sat before the television watching the news. A jowly face and beaky nose filled the screen. The voice was lubricated, sonorous:

"—join in your noble cause. It is the cause of men and women of good will everywhere. This squandering of untold wealth on weapons of mass destruction, while human beings go hungry and homeless, must end, and end soon. I pledge myself—" The view panned back to show a packed auditorium. On the stage, American and Soviet flags flanked Edmund Moriarty. The United Nations banner was spread directly behind, and a streamer above read CONCERNED CITIZENS' COMMITTEE FOR PEACE.

"Judas priest!" Hanno groaned. "Do you want me to barf on our nice new carpet?"

Natalia turned the set off and came to give him a hug and a kiss. He responded energetically. She was a rangy blond in her mid-thirties who knew well how to please him, not least by being an independent sort.

Having disengaged, she ran fingers through the hair he had rumpled. "Hey, big boy, you came out of that bad mood in a hurry," she laughed. "Not quite so fast, if you please. Dinner won't wait for more than a short drink. I expected you earlier." Usually she cooked. Hanno was good at it, but she found it relaxing after a day of working on computer software. She cocked her head. "Of course, afterward—"

"Well, all I want is a beer," he said. "Sam and I hoisted a couple at the lab."

"What? I thought you had less fun in prospect."

"So did I, but I got out of the Internal Reaming Service sooner than I feared." He had mentioned he was in for such a session, though not the identities actually involved. He sought the kitchen. She had already poured herself a sherry.

Returning with his mug of Ballard Bitter to sit down on the couch beside her, he found she had gone serious, half angry. "Bob," she said, "I insist you quit making nasty cracks about the government. Sure, it has its faults, including heavy-handedness, but it is ours."

"'Government of the people, by the people, and for the people.' Yeah. Trouble is, the three classes of people aren't the same."

"I've heard you on the subject before, in case you've forgotten. If you're right about that being the nature of government, why bitch at this one? It is the only thing that stands between us and what is far worse."

"Not if Senator Moriarty has his way."

"Wait a minute," she said sharply. "You're entitled to call him mistaken, but not to call him . . . a traitor, the way I've heard you imply. He speaks for millions of perfectly decent Americans."

"So they imagine. His real constituency is industries that vote their tariff protections and subsidies, bums who vote their handouts, and intellectuals who vote their slogans. As for this new-found pacifism of his, that's the current fashion. Before, his breed was always hell-bent to get us into foreign wars, except that we mustn't win any that were fought against Communists. Now he's picking up extra votes—someday they may help him into the White House—by telling us that violence never settles anything. If only the city fathers of Carthage could talk to him."

She put irritation aside and riposted with a grin, "Plagiarizing Heinlein, are you?"

He had come to admire the deftness with which she could defuse a quarrel. They'd had too many lately. Chuckling, he relaxed. "You're right, I am a fool to waste good drinking time on politics, especially when it's in the company of a sexy woman."

Inwardly there passed through him: He may have delivered himself into my hands, though. I'll get a tape of the proceedings tomorrow. If they went as I imagine, well, the

next issue of *The Chart Room* is almost ready to go to press. I barely have time to pull Tannahill's editorial and slip in another that'll be pure *Schadenfreude* to write.

Natalia laid a hand over his. "You're pretty sexy yourself, for your information," she said. "Horrible old reactionary, but if word got around about what you're like in bed, I'd have to fight the women off with a shillelagh."

Her smile faded. She sat quiet a while before adding softly, "No, I take that first part back. I think you're down on governments because you've seen victims of their blunders and, yes, cruelties. It would be better if you were in charge. Under that crusty exterior, you're fine and considerate."

"And too smart to want power," he interpolated.

"And you are not old, either," she went on. "Not in any way that counts."

"Sixty-seven, last time I looked." At Robert Cauldwell's birth certificate. "I could be your father, or your grandfather if my son and I had been a tad precocious." I could be your hundredfold-great-grandfather. Quite possibly I am.

He felt her gaze on him, but didn't meet it. "When *I* look, I see a person who appears younger than me. It's eerie."

"Persistent ancestors, I've told you." A bottle of hair dye, to pretend indulgence of that small vanity. "I've also told you you should start shopping for a newer model. I honestly don't want it to get too late for you."

"We'll see." A single time in their three-year union had she suggested marriage. Were he using a different, younger personality he might well have gone through with it. As was, he couldn't explain what a dirty trick on her it would be.

The thought flitted through him that if he did make known what he was and Giannotti's estimate of the rate of progress thereafter proved right, Natalia could become immortal herself. Probably rejuvenated, too; given such a command of biochemistry, that ought to be easy. But while he was fond of her, he had not permitted himself to fall really in love for centuries; and he didn't feel ready to unleash incalculable consequences on the world. Not this evening, at least.

She put on gaiety. "Who's your Danish pen pal?"

He blinked. "What?"

"In today's mail. Otherwise nothing special— Hey, important, is it?"

His heart thudded. "I'll see. Excuse me a minute."

He'd not thought about the post. It lay on a corner table. As he took the envelope postmarked Copenhagen, he saw the printed name and address of a hotel and, hand-written above it, "Helmut Becker."

His agent in Frankfurt, receiving responses to an advertisement published throughout northern Europe, then following up on any that seemed to come from a person who might fit his requirements—of course, Becker had merely been told that the Rufus Lab wanted to contact members of long-lived families; if they were young but showed intelligence, as evinced by an interest in history, that was ideal—

Hanno forced his mouth and hands into steadiness. He opened the letter. It was in stilted English, but there was no reason Natalia shouldn't read it. She knew about the project, considered the approach unscientific but tolerated it together with the rest of his eccentricities. In fact, he should give her every appearance of openness, to hide the excitement that roared within him. "Apparently I've got a little trip ahead of me," he told her.

4

THEY WERE friendly folks in the Lost River country, and besides, Chinese farmers had always done well throughout Idaho. So when Mr. and Mrs. Tu became tenants of the property that Tomek Enterprises owned, neighbors made them welcome. Their background was interesting to hear about, he a small landowner in Taiwan, she the daughter of a Japanese trade representative there. Marriages like that faced problems in Asia, even this long after the war. Also, they had some difficulties with the Kuomintang government, nothing terrible but enough to make them feel restricted and harassed. Through her family they met Mr. Tomek himself, who arranged for them to come to America. At first their English was broken, but they soon became pretty good at it.

Still, they never quite fitted in. They managed the fields and herds well. They kept the house spic and span, and if

some things in it were kind of odd, you had to expect that. They were well-behaved, polite, helpful. However, they held themselves back, joined no church or social club or anything, got along in company but didn't really open up, repaid invitations with fine food and pleasant conversation but took no lead in sociability. Well, they *were* Orientals, and maybe that made them feel sensitive about having had no children.

After six years they did stir gossip and uneasiness. They'd gone off on vacations from time to time, like most people, except that they said practically nothing about where it was to or what they'd done. Now they came back with a pair of youngsters from Chicago, slum kids, been in trouble, one of them black. It wasn't an adoption, the Tus explained; they simply aimed to see what a real home in a healthy environment could do. They had letters to show this was okay with the authorities.

Their neighbors worried about mischief, misleading of their own children, maybe drugs. Edith Harmon, who was a forceful lady, took it upon herself to call when Shan was away and have a heart-to-heart talk with Asagao. "I understand your feelings, dear, and it's kind of you, but we have so much do-gooding these days."

Asagao smiled and asked, "Is do-badding better?" She went on at once: "I promise you it will be all right. My husband and I have guided lives before now."

"Really?"

"It gives meaning to ours. Or perhaps you have heard about the Buddhist concept of acquiring merit. Here, let me warm that coffee for you."

And it did succeed. There was a little friction at first, especially in school. The boy got into a couple of fights, the girl was caught shoplifting. Their fosterers straightened them out fast and thoroughly. Shan might not be the smartest man alive, but he was no dummy either, and he had a way of getting others to do what he wanted that did not come just from great physical strength. Asagao was quiet, gentle, and—the neighborhood discovered—sharp as a tack. The kids worked hard on the ranch and soon worked hard in school. They became popular. After four years they left, of an age and qualified to take jobs waiting for them

elsewhere. Folks missed them, and didn't object to the new waifs who then arrived. Instead, the community felt proud.

The Tus didn't go looking for children. They told how they had been appalled at what they read or saw on TV, afterward witnessed for themselves. Inquiring around, they came on an outfit, small but with branches in several big cities, that tried to make placements. Mutual trust developed. The original experience showed what they had to offer and what sort of kids would likely benefit from it. After that, the organization chose and sent.

Shan and Asagao figured three at a time was as much as they could rightly handle, and not if those all came at once. So two years had passed when they got the third member of the second group. She was a fourteen-year-old from New York. They met her at the Pocatello airport and drove her back to their place.

To start with, Juanita was a handful and a half, nervous as a trapped bobcat, often sullen, sometimes exploding in screams and curses that shocked the ranch hands. They had learned patience and firmness, though. The youngsters already there had gotten to a point where they too were a steadying, calming force. Above all, the married couple was, and also the beautiful land, open air, honest labor, hearty food. It helped that this was summer; Juanita didn't have school to cope with as well. Soon she was turning into quite the little lady.

One day Asagao asked her to come along, the two of them alone, and help pick berries in a hidden nook of the hills, more than an hour away on horseback. They packed a lunch and took their time. On the way home, shy young dreams began to reach lips. Asagao well knew how to keep talk aflow without pushing.

Yesterday a thunderstorm had broken a hot spell. The air was full of wayward breezes and soft smells. Light was lengthening from the west, but still held that upland brilliance which made the mountains seem almost next door and yet left you feeling what a vastness you looked across. Clouds towered white into dizzying depths of blue. The valley rolled in a thousand shades of green, twinkly with irrigation, on and on toward the orchards and ranch buildings. Red-winged blackbirds darted and cried over the pasture, and cattle near the fence line lifted large eyes to watch the

horses pass. Leather squeaked, hoofs plopped, riding was oneness in a lazy sweet rhythm.

"I really would like to learn about your religion, Mrs. Tu," Juanita said. She was a dark, thin girl who walked with a limp. Her father used to beat her, as he did her mother, till at last she put a kitchen knife in his shoulder and ran off. In the saddle she was on her way to centaurhood, and corrective surgery was scheduled for later this year. Meanwhile she did her share of chores, assigned to allow for the handicap. "It must be wonderful if—" she flushed, glanced aside, dropped her voice—"if it's got believers like you and Mr. Tu."

Asagao smiled. "Thank you, love, though we are quite ordinary, you know. I think you had better get back into your own church. Of course we'll be glad to explain what we can. All our children have been interested. But what we live by can't actually be put in words. It's very alien to this country. It might not even be a religion by your standards, but more a way of life, of trying to get in harmony with the universe."

Juanita gave her a quick, searching regard. "Like the Unity?"

"The what?"

"The Unity. Where I come from. Except they—they couldn't take me. I asked a guy who belongs, but he said it's . . . a lifeboat as full as it can carry." A sigh. "Then I got lucky and got found by—for—you. I think prob'ly this is better. You'll fix me to go live anyplace. The Unity, you stay with it. I think. But I don't know much about it. They don't talk, the members."

"Your friend must have, if you heard about it."

"Oh, word gets around. The dope dealers, now, they *hate* it. But I guess it's only in the New York area. And like I said, the higher you go in it, the less you tell. Manuel, he's too young. He grew up in it, his parents did too, but they say he's not ready yet. He doesn't know much except about the housing and education and—well, members help each other."

"That sounds good. I have heard of such organizations."

"Oh, this isn't a co-op exactly, and it's not like, uh, the Guardian Angels, except for what they call sentinel stance, and— It's sort of like a church, except not that either.

Members can believe anything they want, but they do have—services? Retreats? That's how come I wondered if this was like the Unity."

"No, can't be. We're simply a family. We wouldn't have any idea how to run anything larger."

"I guess that's why the Unity stopped growing," Juanita said thoughtfully. "Mama-lo can only keep track of so much."

"Mama-lo?"

"The name I've heard. She's kind of a—a high priestess? Except it isn't a church. But they say she's real powerful. They do what she wants, in the Unity."

"Hm. How long has this been going on?"

"I don't know. A long time. I heard the first Mama-lo was the mother of this one, or was she the grandmother? A black woman, though I hear she's got a white woman works close with her, always has had."

"This is fascinating," Asagao said. "Do go on."

—Evenings after dinner were usually for being together. Foster parents and children talked, played games, sat quietly reading. Sometimes they watched the single television set, but only by mutual consent, subject to adult overrule. A person who wished to be alone could withdraw to his or her room with a book or pursue a hobby in the little workshop. Thus the hour was late when Tu Shan and Asagao walked out. They ranged widely and were gone long. Nevertheless they spoke in Chinese. To be sure, their dialect of it still came most easily to them of the tongues they had mutually mastered in their centuries.

Night lay cool and still. Land reached shadowy, treetops loomed darkling beneath the extravagant stars of the high West. Once an owl hooted, repeatedly, before ghosting past.

"They could so well be our kind." Asagao's tone shivered. "Something built up slowly, over generations, yet centered on one or two individuals, who talk about being mother and child but remain mysterious and work in the same style. We two were chiefs, under one title or another, of different villages; our businesses in the cities were incidental. Hanno made his businesses into his power, protection, and disguise. Here may be a third way. Down among the poor, the rootless, the disinherited. Give them lead-

ership, counsel, purpose, hope. In return they will provide you your little kingdom, or queendom; and there you can live safe, hidden, for mortal lifetimes."

"It may be," Tu Shan replied in the slow fashion that was his when he thought hard. "Or perhaps not. We will write to Hanno. He will investigate."

"Or should we do that?"

"What?" He checked his stride, startled. "He knows how. We are countryfolk, you and I."

"Will he not keep these immortals underground, as he has kept Wanderer and us, as he would keep that Turk did the man not stay aside on his own account?"

"Well, he has explained why."

"How sure are we that he is right?" Asagao demanded. "You know how I have studied. I have talked with that learned man, Giannotti, whenever he examined us again. Do we truly need to go on beneath our masks? It was not always necessary for us in Asia. It never was for Wanderer among his wild Indians. Is it in America today? Times have changed. If we made ourselves known, it could well mean immortality for everyone within a few years."

"Maybe it would not. And what then would people do to us?"

"I know. I know. And yet— Why must we take it for granted that Hanno is right? Why shouldn't we decide for ourselves whether he is the wisest because he is the oldest, or else has grown set in his ways and now is making a horrible mistake, out of needless fear and . . . utter selfishness?"

"M-m-m—"

"At worst we die." Asagao lifted her head against the stars. "We die like everybody else, except that we have had so many, many years. I am not afraid to. Are you?"

"No." Tu Shan laughed a bit. "I dislike the thought, yes, I admit that." Sobering: "We do have to tell him about this Unity thing. He has the means, the knowledge, to find out. We don't."

Asagao nodded. "True." After a moment: "But once we have learned whether or not these are like us—"

"We owe Hanno much." Entry to this nation, through Tomek's influence over a certain Congressman. Help in getting acquainted with it. Establishment here, once they realized that American cities would never be for them.

"We do. We also owe humanity much, I think. And ourselves. Freedom to choose is our right too."

"Let us see what happens," Tu Shan proposed.

They walked on a while in silence. A bright rapid star rose in the west and crossed the lower constellations. "Look," Tu Shan said. "A satellite. This *is* an age of marvels."

"I believe that is Mir," she answered slowly.

"What? . . . Oh, yes. The Russian one."

"The space station. The only space station. And the United States, since *Challenger*—" Asagao had no further need to speak. As long as they had lived together, they could each often follow what was in the other's mind. Dynasties flourish and fall. Empires do, nations, peoples, destinies.

5

"—AND MAY holiness be with your good angels. Let the Fire burn strong and the Rainbow bear peace. Go now toward God. Fare you well."

Rosa Donau raised her hands in benediction, brought them over her bosom, and bowed to the cross that stood on the altar before her between the red and the black candles in their lily-shaped holders. Opposite, her fellow celebrants did likewise. They were a score, male and female, mostly dark of skin and gray of hair, elders of the families that would be living here. The service had lasted an hour, simple words, chants to a drum-beat, a sacred dance, hypnotic in its very restraint and softness. The gathering departed without speaking, though several threw her wide smiles and a number signed themselves.

She remained for a time, sought a chair and a deeper calm. As yet, the chapel was sparsely furnished. Behind the altar hung a picture of Jesus, more gaunt and stern than was common although his hand was upraised in blessing. Painted directly on plaster, the Serpent of Life encircled him. It was flanked by emblems that could be of the loas or the saints, however you wished. The symbols right and left could be luck, magic, sanctity, or—just encouragement, she knew; lift up your heart, honor with bravery the life that is in you.

Here was no doctrine but the sacredness of creation be-

cause of the Creator's presence in it, no commandment but loyalty to your kindred of the spirit. The animistic, pantheistic imagery was only a language for saying that. The rites were only to evoke it and to bind the kindred together. You could believe whatever else you thought must be true. Yet not since she was a maiden, fourteen hundred years ago, had Aliyat felt such power as lingered here.

Within her, if not in the altar or the air. Hope, cleansing, purpose, something she could *give* instead of forever taking or squandering. Was that why Corinne had asked her to lead the consecration of this building?

Or was Corinne simply too occupied with the question of who, or what, laired behind that innocent-seeming call to the long-lived? She had certainly gone close-mouthed. Aliyat knew merely that she soon learned the Willock named was no more than an agent under the impression he was handling matters for a scientific outfit. (Could that even be true?) Maybe Corinne had asked those contacts of hers in the government, police, FBI, whoever and wherever they were, to look into the matter. No, probably not; too dangerous; it might alert them to the fact that Mama-lo Macandal was not all she seemed. . . .

Well, not to worry, she had said; and a hard life did teach a girl how to concentrate on what was close to hand. Aliyat sighed, rose, blew out the candles, turned off the lights as she left. The chapel was on the second floor. Besides making it fit for use, workers had rebuilt the rotting staircase to the hallway outside it; but otherwise, so far they were occupied elsewhere. A naked bulb glared on peeling, discolored plaster. This was a nasty district, way down on the lower west side. However, here the Unity could cheaply acquire an abandoned tenement house for its members to restore to decency. She couldn't help wondering whether there would ever be more such undertakings. Let it get bigger and it would become too noticeable, and beyond the control of that pair whose cover and stronghold it was. Nonetheless, people who belonged were bound to grow up, marry, have children.

She descended to a jumble of equipment and materials in the lobby. The night watchman rose to greet her. Another man got up too, young, big, ebony-hued. Aliyat recognized

Randolph Castle. "Good evenin', Missus-lo Rosa," he rumbled. "Peace an' strength."

"Why, hello," she replied, surprised. "Peace and strength. What are you doing here so late?"

"Thought I'd walk you back. Figured you might stay on after the rest had left."

"That's very kind of you."

"Just bein' careful," he said grimly. "We don't wanna lose you."

They bade the watchman goodnight and went out. The street was poorly lit, its murk apparently empty, but you never knew what might wait in those shadows and taxis didn't cruise the area. Her place wasn't far, a light housekeeping room in the Village. However, she was glad to have formidable company.

"Wanted to talk with you anyway," he said once they had started off. "If you don't mind."

"No, of course not. That's a main part of what I'm for, isn't it?"

He must force the words out. "No pers'nal troubles this time. It's for ever'body. Only I don't know as how we can tell Mama-lo."

Aliyat brushed fingers across his clenched fist. "Go on," she urged gently. "Whatever you say will be safe with me."

"I know. Oh, I know." She had heard his confession of wrongdoing and helped him set matters right. After a number of hollowly thudding footfalls: "Look, Mama-lo don't re'lize how bad this area is. None of us did, or I guess we wouldn't've bought into it. But I been findin' out."

"Crime, drug dealing. We've handled those before. What else?"

"Nothin'. But these dealers, they're mean. They know 'bout us an' they don't intend we should get no foothold here, no ways."

Chill struck through her. She had met absolute evil in century after century, and knew its power.

Once she had laughed this presence of it off. "Who cares, as long as we keep our own people clean?" she said. "Let others wreck themselves if they want. You smuggled in booze and ran speakeasies during Prohibition. I did pretty much the same. What's the difference?"

"I'm surprised you don't know better than to ask that,"

Corinne answered. She paused. "Well, you've been trying hard to steer clear of everything wicked. Listen, dear. The stuff that's coming in these days is *different. We say nothing in the Unity against taking an occasional drink, we use wine in some of our ceremonies, but we teach our members not to get drunk. You cannot* not *lose your mind to stuff like crack. And . . . the old gangsters could get vicious enough, I'm not sure now that I should ever have condoned their business, but compared to the dealers today they were the Holy Innocents." Her fingers writhed together. "Today it's like the slave trade come back."*

That was years ago, when things were only starting to get bad. Aliyat had learned since then. And the Unity took action at each of its settlements. A solid band of dwellers who kept watch, called the police whenever they had information, set an example, helped the lost find the way home to humanness, and stood together in half-military wise: they could make a neighborhood unprofitable, actually dangerous, for pushers.

"I been threatened, myself," Castle said. "Other guys have too. I think, we really think, if we don't pull out, the mob's gonna try an' blow us away."

"We can't abandon the project," she told him. "We've sunk more than we can afford to lose into it. The Unity isn't rich, you know."

"Yeah, I know. So what can we do?" He straightened. "Fight back, tha's what we can do."

"People aren't allowed to defend themselves in New York City," she snapped.

"Uh-huh. Only—well, sure, we can't tell Mama-lo. We can't let her know. She'd have to forbid, wouldn't she? No matter what we'd lose. But if some of us was ready to fight back, an' word o' that got aroun' underground, why, maybe we'll never have to. How 'bout that? You been aroun' a lot. What do you think?"

"I'll need to hear a great deal more. And, yes, think hard." Already Aliyat suspected what her decision would be.

"Sure. We'll talk whenever you can spare the time, Missus-lo Rosa. We're dependin' on you."

On me! she thought, and pride thrilled.

They walked mute thereafter to the entrance of her home

building. She gave him her hand. "Thanks for being so honest, Randy," she said.

"Thank you, Missus-lo." In this brighter illumination, his smile gleamed. "When can we meet again?"

Temptation blazed. Why not at once? He was strong and handsome in his rugged fashion, and it had been a long time, and . . . she wondered if she had at last become able to give of herself, whole-heartedly, without hate or contempt or even suspicion.

But no. He might be shocked. Certainly many members would be, if they found out. Better not chance it.

"Soon," she promised. "Right now I have some record-keeping chores to finish. In fact, I'd better put in a couple of hours tonight, before I go to sleep. Soon, though."

6

FROM THE lounge where he sat, turning over the pages of a British magazine without the text especially registering on his mind, Hanno could see into the foyer. Twice a woman entered and his heart jumped; but she went on toward the elevator. The third time proved the charm. She spoke with the clerk at the desk, turned, and moved hesitantly his way. At once he rose from the leather of the armchair. It crossed his mind that long residence in this country might not have given a Russian Western habits of punctuality; and a Russian perhaps hundreds of years old—

She came in and halted. His vision flashed across her. Becker's description was sketchy, and the German had been under orders not to ask for photographs, lest a prospect take alarm. She was about as tall as Hanno, which put her on the short side among modern Nordics though average among her own kind. A full figure, lithely and erectly borne, gave the impression of more height. Her features were broad, blunt, comely. Blond hair in a Dutch bob framed fair skin. Quietly dressed, she wore low shoes and carried a shoulder bag.

Her brows lifted. Tongue touched lips. If she was nervous, which would be more than understandable, she mastered it gamely. "Mr. . . . Cauldwell?"

How could that husky voice sound familiar? Just *déjà vu,*

no doubt. Hanno bowed. "At your service, ah, Dr. Rasmussen," he said. "Thank you for coming."

She constructed a smile for him. "Miss Rasmussen will do, if you please. You will remember I am a veterinarian, not a physician." Her English came readily, though the heavy accent was more Slavic than Danish. "I am sorry to be late. It is because of an emergency in my office."

"That's okay. You couldn't leave an animal to suffer." He recalled how much they made of shaking hands here and extended his. "I am glad you could, and would, come at all."

Her grip was firm. The blue gaze intensified upon him, no longer shy. Not forward, either; watchful; he thought of a hunter. Yes, but it was also—puzzled, more than this curious meeting warranted? "Your agent made it sound . . . interesting," she said. "I can promise nothing until I have heard more."

"Of course. We need to talk quite a lot; and then, if I am not presuming, I would like the pleasure of your company at dinner." Win or lose, he would. Why did she excite him so? "The talk should be private. This hotel doesn't have a bar, but we can find one close by, or a coffee shop or anything you wish, as long as we won't be distracted or overheard."

She went straighter to business than he had dared hope. "I think you are a gentleman, Mr. Cauldwell. Let us use your room."

"Wonderful!" Old manners returned and he offered her his arm. She took it with a natural grace making up for the fact that she had obviously not had much practice.

They were silent in the elevator, never quite looking at each other. Damn, he thought, something about her haunts me. Could I have seen her before? Hardly possible. Oh, I have visited Denmark now and then, but while she's sightly, she wouldn't stand out in a crowd of such women as they've got here.

He had taken a top-floor suite. The hotel was fairly old, far from Copenhagen's loftiest, but these windows gave a view over bustling downtown and lovely, soaring spires. Furnishings were comfortable, a little faded, reminiscent of a gentility well-nigh vanished from the world. She smiled more easily than at first. "You have good taste in places to stay," she murmured.

"This is a favorite of mine," he said. "Has been for a long time."

"Do you travel much?"

"Going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it. Please be seated. What would you like to drink? I have a small refrigerator, beer, akvavit, Scotch, soda, or I'll be glad to send down for anything else."

"Coffee, thank you."

A cautious choice. He rang. Turning around, he saw that she hadn't taken cigarettes from her bag. Probably then, unlike most Danes, she didn't smoke. He wished for his pipe to soothe him but decided against it and settled facing her.

"I am not sure how much Becker made clear to you," he began.

"Very little. I am frank about that. He told of the . . . Rufus Institute? . . . in America and how it wanted to study persons who . . . can expect to live for many years. The interest in history—there are more measures of intelligence than that. I went away feeling very unsure. When you telephoned from across the ocean, I wondered whether to make this appointment. But I will hear you, Mr. Cauldwell."

"I am the man who founded the Institute."

She studied him. "You must be rich."

He nodded. "Yes." Himself alert for any clue whatsoever: "I am a great deal older than I look."

Did the breath hiss inward between her teeth? "To me you seem young."

"As you do to me. May I ask your age?"

"I told Mr. Becker." Starkness stood forth. "No doubt he, or you, or a detective of yours checked the public records."

He lifted a palm. "Hold on. Please. We both need to be honest, but let's not push ahead too hard. Allow me a few questions. You are Russian by birth?"

"Ukrainian. I reached Denmark in 1950. By now I am naturalized."

He made his lips shape a soundless whistle. "Almost forty years ago, and you must have been adult then."

Her grin was taut. "You are searching for people who age slowly, no? How old are *you,* Mr. Cauldwell?"

"I wonder if we shouldn't postpone that subject a while," he said carefully.

"Perhaps . . . we . . . should." Both of them shivered.

"I don't want to pry," he said, "but I had better know. Are you married? I am not, currently."

The flaxen head shook. "Nor I. I have not married in this country. I got permission to change my last name. 'Olga' is common enough in Denmark, but the rest of it, nobody could spell or pronounce."

"And 'Rasmussen' here is like 'Smith' in the USA. You didn't want to be more conspicuous than you could help, did you?"

"Not at first. Things have changed since." She sighed. "I have wondered lately if I might even go back, now when they say the terror has been ended. Never a day but I have longed for my motherland."

"You could have too much explaining to do."

"Probably. I did go away as a refugee, an outlaw."

That was not precisely what I meant, he thought; and I suspect she realizes it.

"The Danish government knows, down in its archives," she proceeded. "I said little to Mr. Becker, but you may as well hear. During the war I was a soldier in the Red Army. Many Ukrainians wanted to be free—of Stalin or of the Soviet Union itself, because we are the old, true Russians. Kiev was the seed and the root of the whole Russian nation. The *Moskaly* came later. Many of us welcomed the Germans for liberators. That was a terrible mistake, but how could anybody know, when for more than twenty years all we heard was lies or silence? Some men enlisted with Hitler. I never did, I tell you. One resists the invader, whoever he is. But when the Germans retreated, they left parts of the Ukraine in revolt. Stalin needed years to crush it. Have you heard this?"

"I know something about it," he said bleakly. "If I remember aright, the resistance movement had a headquarters in Copenhagen. Just the same, hardly a word about what was happening got into the liberal—" no, in Europe "liberal" retained its original meaning—"the Western establishment press."

"I had been discharged, but I had friends, kinsmen, people of mine in the rebellion. Some openly fought, some were sympathizers who gave what help they could whenever they dared. I knew I was under suspicion. If I did not soon

betray somebody to Stalin's secret police, they would come for me. Then it would be the labor camp or the bullet in the head or worse." Anguish reawakened. "But how could I join the rebels? How could I shoot at Russian soldiers, my comrades of the war? I fled. I made my way to the West."

"That was an awesome doing," he said, altogether sincerely. It had meant hunger, thirst, hiding, running, walking, slipping past guard posts, surviving on what scraps of food she chanced to find, for a thousand miles and more.

"I am strong," she replied. "I had my sharpshooter skills. And I had prepared myself." Fingers gripped the arms of her chair. "It was not my first time like that."

Thunder racketed in his skull. "I have . . . had adventures . . . of my own . . . in the past."

A knock sounded. Hanno got up and admitted a bellboy, who brought a tray with urn, cups, sugar, cream, and *kringler.* While he oversaw its placement and tipped the man, he said, because lightness was necessary but stillness impossible, "You've had a peaceful time since, I gather."

He felt the same need was driving her. "I got asylum in Denmark." From what officials, and how? he wondered. Not that it mattered. If you knocked around in the world long enough, you learned the ways of it, and the byways. "I wanted that because of the Ukrainian connection, but I came to love this country. They are dear people, and the land is so mild. I worked on a farm, decided I would like to be a veterinarian, went to school, studied English and German also, to talk with foreigners who might bring me their pets. Now I have a practice out in Kongens Lyngby, a nice suburb."

The bellman had left. Hanno walked back to stand above her. "But you are of retirement age, or nearly," he said. "Your friends marvel at how you still appear young. They tease you about a fountain of youth. They begin to wonder, though, why you don't retire. The government does too. Where will you go, Olga?"

She gazed steadily up at him. "Yes, they keep excellent records in Denmark. Where would you suggest that I go? And what is *your* real name?"

His pulse hammered. "All right," he said, "no more pussyfooting. I didn't want to scare you off. However, I believe I can come right out with the truth after all." He resumed

his chair, not to seem threatening or attempting of dominance. One like her would react fiercely to that, he judged. "What I am about to tell you will sound like insanity, or some wild confidence game, unless you are what I'm pretty sure you are. Do not take fright. Listen to me. Go open the door and stand by it if you wish."

She shook her head. Her breasts rose and fell.

"As close as makes no difference," Hanno said, "I am three thousand years old. Do you care to tell me— What?"

She had gone wholly white. For a moment she sagged back in her chair. He half rose to help and reassure. She straightened. "Cadoc," she whispered.

"Huh?"

"Cadoc. You. It comes back to me. The trader in Kiev. Kiyiv, we called it then. When was that? Nearly one thousand years past, I think."

Memory smote like a sudden look into the sun. "You . . . your name—"

"I was Svoboda then. In my heart I always am. But who are you really?"

Of course, he thought in his daze, neither would remember a briefly met mortal for very long, out of an uncountable myriad gone down into dust. But neither had ever quite forgotten, either. He called to mind now the phantom that had stirred in him at moments strewn through the centuries.

"S-Svoboda, yes," he stammered. "We rescued you."

"And the night was golden. We could have had more!"

They left their chairs and stumbled into each other's arms.

7

OUTSIDE, THE District of Columbia stewed in its summer. Air conditioning breathed coolness through Moriarty's office. The heat that he felt was dry, a fire. He slapped the magazine down onto his desk. The noise cracked. "You bastard," he mumbled. "You evil, malignant—"

The intercom chimed. "Mr. Stoddard to see you, Senator," announced his receptionist's voice.

Moriarty caught a breath and gusted it back as a laugh. "Perfect timing!" he exclaimed. "Send him right in."

The man who entered was short, undistinguished-looking, and coldly competent. Sweat from outdoors glistened on his cheeks. He carried a briefcase. "How do you do, sir," he greeted. His glance went from face to desk and back again. "You've been reading the latest, I see."

"Of course," Moriarty snapped. "Sit down. Have you seen it?"

"Not yet." Stoddard took a chair. "I've been busy investigating the person responsible, you know."

The fleshy man behind the desk picked up the magazine again and placed it under his dashingly styled reading glasses. "Listen to this. The editorial. Deals with my speech in aid of the CCCP. I'm taking a paragraph at random, more or less." Trained, his voice shed the throb of indignation and recited methodically:

"'The senator was introduced by peace and disarmament activist Dr. Fulvia Bourne. He dealt with the embarrassment in masterly fashion. Rather than refer to her speech at the previous day's banquet, whether to endorse or disavow such colorful phrases as "the Pentagon, a pentacle crowded with the demons of nuclear madness," or "the CIA—the Children Immolation Agency," he made an unspeech of it and simply called her a modern Joan of Arc. That St. Joan took arms in the cause of liberation became an unfact. Thence it was an easy transition to the necessity for statesmanship, for "patience abroad but impatience at home." Evidently the patience is to be with the likes of Srs. Castro and Ortega. After all, the senator's esteemed party colleague, the Reverend Nahaliel Young, addresses both these gentlemen as "Dear Comrade." We are to have no patience whatsoever with, say, South Africa. As for domestic policy, an impatience to complete the destruction of the productive classes in America—'

"Arrh!" erupted. "Why go on? Read it for yourself, if you can stand to."

"May I ask a question, Senator?" Stoddard murmured.

"Certainly. I've always stood for free and open dialectic."

Stoddard's gaze weighed Moriarty. "Why do you let this Tannahill get your goat? He isn't writing anything that other opponents of yours don't."

The broad countenance reddened. "He puts no bounds on his nastiness. Opposition is different from persecution.

You know how he tries not just to make trouble nationally, but to drive a wedge between me and my constituency."

"Oh, he does operate out of New England and make a lot of regional references, but he's not in your state, Senator. And really, *The Chart Room* has a small circulation."

"It only takes a small dose of virus, slipped to the right people, to infect a whole population. Tannahill's getting attention not just from old-line conservatives and neo-fascists, but on campuses, among the young." Moriarty sighed. "Oh, yes, the snake has his First Amendment rights, and I admit his gibes at me hurt more than they ought. I should be used to cruelty."

"If I may say so, you often leave yourself open to the likes of him. I'd have advised you against addressing that rally."

"In politics you take what allies you can find, and make the best of them."

"Like South Africa? Sorry." Stoddard didn't sound repentant.

Moriarty frowned but continued: "The Committee does include some extremists, but damn it, they're extremists in a good cause. We need their energy and dedication." He cleared his throat. "Never mind. Let's get to business. The business of discovering who this Tannahill is and who's behind him. What can you tell me?"

"Nothing much, I'm afraid. As far as my investigators have dug, and they're good at their work, he's clean. True, they didn't manage to dig to the very bottom."

"Oh?" Moriarty leaned forward. "He remains the mystery man on that estate of his?" The remark was irresistible: "He would have settled in New Hampshire, wouldn't he? 'Live free or die.' He may even believe it."

"He's not a Howard Hughes-like recluse, if that's what you mean, Senator," Stoddard replied. "In fact, what makes him hard to learn about is that he's seldom at his place. He gets around—everywhere, maybe, though for the most part my men couldn't find out where he does go. Neither his household servants nor his magazine staff were any help to speak of. They're two handfuls of hand-picked individuals, long with him, loyal to him, close-mouthed. Not that they keep any shameful secrets." He chuckled. "No such luck. They simply don't know what the boss does away

from them, and they have an antiquated Yankee notion that it's nobody's business."

Moriarty gave his assistant a sharp glance. Sometimes he wondered whether Stoddard was not aiding him strictly for the pay. However, the fellow performed well enough that one must put up with his occasional impudence. "What have you found?" Moriarty asked. "No matter if you repeat things I already know."

"I'm afraid that's what I'll mainly be doing." The other man drew a sheet of paper from his briefcase and consulted the notes on it. "Kenneth Alexander Tannahill was born August 25, 1933 in Troy, Vermont, a little town near the Canadian border. His parents moved away shortly afterward. A former neighbor, to whom they wrote a couple of letters, said they'd gone to Minnesota, but he couldn't remember precisely where. A North Woods hamlet. Everything's shadowy, nothing on record but the bare minimum of official stuff and a few old stories in an upstate newspaper."

Excitement tingled in Moriarty. "Do you mean this could be an assumed identity? Suppose the real Tannahills all died, say in an accident. A man with money, who wanted to cover his tracks, could set a detective agency to locating such a deceased family, one that suited his needs."

"Maybe." Stoddard sounded skeptical. "Damn hard to prove."

"Draft records from before the end of conscription?"

"I'd rather not try springing anything like that loose for you, Senator."

"No, I suppose not. Unless we can turn up clues that justify it to the proper authorities."

"Tannahill has never claimed he was ever in the service. We got that much. But a lot of men his age never were, in spite of Korea and Vietnam, for a variety of reasons. He's given no hints as to why he wasn't. Uh, it isn't that he acts evasive or secretive. Associates describe him as a genial sort with a ready fund of jokes and quips; though he does require competence from his employees, and gets it. He simply has a knack for turning conversation away from himself."

"He would. Go on. Never married, I believe?"

"No. Not homosexual or impotent. There have been a few women over the years whom we've identified. Nothing

especially serious, and none of them bear him any grudge."

"Too bad. What kind of trail has he left on the West Coast?"

"Essentially zilch. He first surfaced in New Hampshire, bought his house and grounds, started his magazine, all as a—not exactly an employee of Tomek Enterprises. 'Associate' or 'agent' might be a better word. At any rate, Tomek finances him, and I'd guess that a lot of his trips are for purposes of reporting back to the old man."

"Who's pretty shadowy himself, isn't he?" Moriarty stroked his chin. It puffed out a bit under his fingers. "I've been thinking more and more that that line may well be worth pursuing."

"Senator, my advice to you is to drop this whole business. It's expensive as hell, it takes up staff time you badly need in an election year, and I'm ninety-nine percent convinced it could never produce anything politically useful."

"Do you think I am only a politician, Hank?"

"I've heard you describe your ideals."

Moriarty reached decision. "You're right, we can't go on chasing ghosts. At the same time, I feel it in my bones, something here won't bear the light of day. Yes, I have personal motivations too. Exposing it would be a coup; and I'm sick of Tannahill's baiting and want to lash back. We'll have to leave off the effort to get background information, I suppose, but I won't give up entirely." He bridged his fingers and peered over them. "Where is he at the moment?"

Stoddard shrugged. "Someplace this side of the moon . . . probably."

Moriarty bit his lip. *The Chart Room* had been extra vicious about the decline of the American space program. "Well, he'll have to come back eventually. I want his house and his office under surveillance. When he does show up, I want a twenty-four-hour tail on him. Understand?"

Stoddard began to form an answer, swallowed it, and nodded. "Can do, if you don't mind paying what it costs."

"I have money," Moriarty said. "My own if necessary."

8

"WHAT *IS* wrong?"

Natalia Thurlow's question cut—or probed, like a sword early in an engagement. Hanno realized that she would no longer be denied. Nonetheless he stood for a while yet,

staring out of Robert Cauldwell's living room window. The late summer dark had fallen. Where his body staved off reflections he saw lights in their thousands, down the hill and through the lower city to the peace that lay mightily upon the waters. Thus had Syracuse basked in wealth and happiness, with the greatest mechanicians of the age to perfect her defenses; and meanwhile the austere Romans prepared themselves.

"You came home yesterday like a man in a dream," Natalia went on at his back. "Then today you left practically at dawn, and haven't returned till now, still locked up inside yourself."

"I told you why," he said. "Business accumulated while I was gone."

"What do you mean? Except for your interest in the Rufus Lab, what do you do any longer, locally?"

The challenge made him turn around. She stood rigid, fists at her sides. The pain that he saw hurt him too; the rising anger that he heard was a kind of balm.

"You know I have things going elsewhere," he reminded her. She had seen the modest downtown office he maintained. He had never described just what it was for.

"Indeed. Whenever I tried to call you, your machine answered."

"I had to get around. What did you want? I phoned the machine here to say you shouldn't wait dinner for me."

In point of fact, throughout the day he had mostly been Joe Levine, briefing a couple of other attorney-accountants on Charles Tomek's tax audit so that they could take over while he was gone for some unpredictable time on some unspecified matter. They already knew the general situation and many details, of course. No single agent could cope with Uncle Sam. (And what did those hordes of paper shufflers produce that was of any value to any living soul?) However, there were certain tricky points they needed to understand.

At that, it could prove costly, leaving them to their own devices. Not that they might reveal illegalities. None existed. Hanno knew better than to allow such a crack in his defenses against the state. But he couldn't explain to them why Mr. Tomek must not be found on his travels and brought back to help cope.

Ephemera. Expendable. Svoboda would soon arrive, to be the fifth in the fellowship.

And beyond her— Despite himself, his pulse thuttered.

"I thought we could meet for dinner at a restaurant," Natalia was saying.

"Sorry. That wouldn't have worked. I grabbed a sandwich." Untrue. He could not have stayed calm in her company. He wasn't quite the poker player he had supposed. Maybe Svoboda had thawed something within him, or shaken it till it began to crack.

"You refuse me the reason you were so rushed, don't you?" Natalia sighed. "You're a wily one. Only now does it really dawn on me how little you've ever let slip about what you do, about anything meaningful that concerns you."

"Look, let's not fight," he urged. "You know I'm, uh, taciturn by nature."

"No, you're not. That's the trouble. You talk and talk, glib, interesting, but aside from those Neanderthal politics of yours, how much do you seriously say?" Before he could reply, she raised a hand to hush him. "In spite of that, I've discovered how to read certain clues. Whoever you met in Denmark, it wasn't the 'promising subject' you spoke of so vaguely. And then when we got home from the airport and you looked through the mail, that one letter in it that rocked you back— You couldn't completely hide your reaction. But I foresaw you wouldn't show it to me or speak a single word about it."

Assuredly not, Hanno thought. Especially since Asagao, the naive little sweetheart, had penned it in her awkwardly precise English. "It's private, confidential."

"A person in Idaho, as well as Denmark?"

Damn! She'd noticed the return address. He should have cautioned the Asian pair about communicating with him. But they knew his Cauldwell identity from the Rufus connection, and they were timid about the Tomek complex—an unfamiliar kind of thing, where perhaps strangers would intercept messages—and it had never before occurred to him that they, of all people on earth, might bumble onto a fresh scent.

As it was, Natalia had been honorable and not steamed

the envelope open. Well, he'd made sure of her character before taking up with her more than casually.

Did he indeed understand her, though? She was a bright and complicated person. That was what had attracted him. She might have had fewer surprises to spring on him if he'd been more forthcoming with her.

Too late now, he thought. The sadness that crossed him was half weariness. Even for a creature of his vitality, this had been an exhausting day.

He roughened his language: "Get off my back, will you? Neither of us owns the other."

She stiffened further. "No, you haven't wanted any commitment, have you? What am I to you, besides a sexual convenience?"

"Oh, for God's sake, stop this nonsense!" He made a step in her direction. "What we've had was, was splendid. Let's not ruin it."

She stood unstirring, save that her eyes grew very wide. "Was?" she whispered.

He had wanted to tell her in kindlier wise. Maybe this was better. "I have to take off again. Not sure when I'll be back."

Fly east. As Tannahill, engage a private detective to collect the basic information about those Unity people, take a few surreptitious photos, provide him the basis for deciding whether to approach them directly or not. Meanwhile Svoboda would have wound up her affairs in Europe, obtained her visa and ticket, boarded a plane. She'd be landing in New York. The seclusion of the Tannahill property offered a chance to get genuinely acquainted, to catch up on the past millennium.

"And you won't tell me why," Natalia said, flat-voiced.

"I am sorry, but I can't." He had long since learned to avoid elaborate fictions.

She looked past him, or through him. "Another woman? Maybe. But more to it than that. Else you'd just cast me off."

"No, listen— Look Nat, you're welcome to keep on living here, in fact I hope you do, and—"

She shook her head. "I have my pride." Her gaze sharpened. "What are you up to? Who are you conspiring with, and why?"

"I say again, this is a personal matter."

"Maybe it is. Considering the attitudes you've expressed, I can't be sure." She lifted her hand anew. "Oh, I won't go bearing tales, especially since you give me nothing to go on. But I've got to cover my ass. You understand that, don't you? If the cops ever question me, I'll tell them what little I know. Because I don't owe you any loyalty any longer."

"Hey, wait!" He reached to take hold of her. She warded him off. "Let's sit down and have a drink and talk this out."

She considered him. "How much more will you actually have to say?"

"I—well, I care about you and—"

"Never mind. You can make up the Hide-a-Bed for yourself. I'll pack my things tomorrow."

She went from him.

I would have had to depart before long in any case, he could not cry after her. It should have been easier than this. At least I'll occupy no more of the years that are left you.

He wondered if she, once alone tonight, would weep.

9

RAIN FELL slowly through windlessness, almost a mist. Its tarnished silver hid the slabs of apartment buildings and muffled every noise. There were only wet grass, dripping leaves, glimmer of marshwater along the walkway. Nobody else was about on such a midweek afternoon in northwest Copenhagen. Having left his place and gone the short distance to Utterslev Mose park, Peter Astrup and Olga Rasmussen had the world to themselves.

Beneath his cap, droplets glinted on the round young face like tears. "But you cannot leave just like this," he pleaded.

She looked straight ahead. Both her hands, after he let go, she had jammed into the pockets of her coat. "It is sudden," she admitted.

"Brutally sudden!"

"That's why I asked you to take the day off so I could meet you. Time is short, and I have much to do first."

"After I hadn't seen or heard from you since—" He

seized her arm. "What were you doing? Who have you been with?"

She edged aside. He felt the unspoken command and released her. He was always gentle, she thought, sympathetic, yes, he may be the sweetest lover I have ever had or ever will. "I don't want to hurt you more than I must, Peter," she said low. "This way seems best."

"But what of our holiday in Finland?" He gulped. "Pardon me, that was an idiotic thing to ask . . . now."

"Not really." She made herself regard him again. "I was looking forward the same as you. This opportunity, though, is too great."

"Is it?" he demanded desperately. "To go haring off to America and—and what? You haven't made that at all clear."

"It's confidential. Scientific research. I promised to say nothing about it. But you know how interested I am."

"Yes. Your mind, your reach of knowledge, I believe that drew me to you more than your beauty."

"Oh, come," she tried to laugh. "I realize I'm rather plain."

He stopped. Perforce she did likewise. They faced each other in the chilly gray. Because he was still youthful, he blurted, "You are mysterious, you hide something, I know you do, and you are, are incomparable as a woman."

And Hanno, she thought, has also passed many mortal lifetimes in learning.

"I, I love you, Olga," Peter stammered. "I've told you before. I do again. Will you marry me? With papers and, and everything."

"Oh, my dear," she murmured. "I'm old enough to be—" Abruptly she could not say, "Your mother." Instead: "I am too old for you. I may not look it, but I have told you. We've enjoyed this past couple of years."

We have, we have. And Hanno—what do I truly know of Hanno? What can I await from him? He and I have both lived too long in secret, it has surely misshaped us in ways we don't feel, but he prowled the world for thrice the time that I abided in my Russia. He has been fascinating and challenging and, yes, fun; but already I have glimpsed a ruthlessness. Or is it an inward loneliness? How much is he

able to care for anyone or for anything beyond naked survival?

Through the confusion she heard herself finish: "We knew from the first that it couldn't last. Let's end it cleanly, while it's still happy."

He stood slumped. "I don't care how old you are," he said. "I love you."

Exasperation stirred. You're being babyish, she kept from saying. Well, what could I expect from a person not yet thirty? You have nothing left for me to discover. "I'm sorry." No doubt I should have declined you at the beginning, but the flesh has its demands and liaisons here are easy come, easy go. With Hanno and those others— Is an immortal marriage possible? I don't think I'm actually in love with him yet, or he with me. Perhaps we never will be. But that's no foundation for an enduring partnership anyway. Certainly not by itself. We'll have to see what happens.

We'll *see*. What *happens*.

"Don't take it this hard," she said. "You'll get over it, and find the right girl."

And settle down to raise children who will grow up into the same comfortable narrowness and crumble into the same dust. Unless we are on the verge of fire and slaughter and a new dark age, as Hanno thinks we may well be.

Svoboda smiled at Peter. "Meanwhile," she said quietly, "we might go back to your apartment and give ourselves a grand farewell."

After all, it would only be until tomorrow.

10

CORINNE MACANDAL received her caller in the Victorian living room. "How do you do," she said, and offered her hand. His was sinewy, unexpectedly hard, the clasp light but firm. He bowed over hers with an archaic assurance. "Please be seated. Would you like a cup of coffee or tea?"

Kenneth Tannahill kept his feet. "Thank you," he replied, "but could we please talk in confidence, where nobody can overhear?"

Surprised, she looked closer at him. Her immediate

thought was: How old is he, anyway? Black hair, smooth skin, supple frame spoke of youth, but more than the leanness of the countenance suggested a man who had seen many years and much of the world. The signs were too subtle for her to name, nonetheless real. "Indeed? I thought you wanted an interview for your magazine."

His smile was somehow feline. "That isn't exactly what my note asked for, though it did give that impression, didn't it?"

Wariness laid hold of her. "What do you want, then? I must confess I'm not familiar with your, m-m, *Chart Room.*"

"It's not a big publication. Nor sensationalistic, may I add. Mostly it runs articles, or essays, on current events. We often go into history or anthropology, trying to put things in perspective."

"It sounds interesting." Macandal drew breath. "However, I'm afraid I must decline an interview or anything like that. I don't want publicity. It's distasteful to me personally, and it might harm the Unity."

"Really? I should think if the work you people are doing—evidently in many ways a unique approach—if it became widely known, you'd get more support, cooperation, everything you need. Others might be inspired to imitate you."

"I doubt they could, successfully. We *are* unique. One of the things that makes it possible for us to do what we do is precisely our smallness, our intimacy. Being stared at could destroy that."

Tannahill's large, half oblique eyes sought hers and held steady. "I suspect it's less important than you yourself, my lady," he said in almost an undertone. "And your associate, Ms. Donau."

Alarm stabbed. Macandal drew herself up and raised her voice a bit. "What are you after? Will you please come to the point?"

"My apologies. No offense intended. On the contrary. But I do believe we should talk in complete privacy."

She came to decision. "Very well. Wait a minute and I'll issue instructions about that."

Stepping into the hall, she found a maid and whispered, "The gentleman and I will be in the sanctum. Tell Boyd and Jerry to stand by, and come in at once if I ring."

The girl gaped. "You 'spec' trouble, ma'am?"

"Not really," Macandal reassured her. "But just in case." You didn't keep going immortally by omitting precautions.

She returned and led Tannahill in among the things that stood for power. He seemed to scan them thoroughly in the moment that it took her to shut the door. "Now do sit down," she told him, more curtly than she had intended.

He obeyed. She took a chair across the coffee table. "I'd appreciate your explaining your errand as quickly as possible," she said.

He couldn't quite hide the tension that was also in him. "Forgive me if I don't," he answered. "What I'm here about is tremendous. I have to be sure of you before I dare let you in on it. Let me start by promising you there will be no threats, demands, attempts to make you do anything wrong. I belong to an unusual class of people. I have reason to think you and Ms. Donau do too. If so, we'll invite you to join us, for purposes of mutual help and companionship."

Can he be—? Briefly, the dimness of the chamber hazed before her and a roaring was in her ears. Through it she heard:

"I'll be honest, and hope you won't get angry. I've had a detective agency prepare a report on you two and your organization for me. They did not pry. They simply went around for about a week, chatted with persons who were willing, took a few snapshots, otherwise looked through newspaper files and relevant public records. It was only for purposes of briefing me, so that I could come today prepared to talk intelligently and not waste your time." Tannahill smiled a bit. "You, the individual, remain as enigmatic as ever. I know practically nothing about you except that according to those files and the recollections of two or three aged Unity members, your mother founded this group which you head, and you resemble her. On the other hand, if I'm not mistaken, I have somewhat more information about Rosa Donau."

Macandal summoned composure. Her heart wouldn't stop racing, but her mind ran smoothly and every sense was whetted. If this truly was an immortal, need that be a menace, be aught but joy? Of course, if he wasn't— Yes, she too must tread with care. "Then why haven't you approached her first?" she asked.

"She might not like that. Can't you see, I'm trying not to arouse fears." Tannahill leaned forward, hands on knees. "May I tell you a story? Call it a piece of fiction if you like. Or a parable; you're obviously well-read."

She nodded.

"Once upon a time," he began slowly, "a woman lived in what is now Istanbul. In those days they called it Constantinople, and it was the capital of a great empire. The woman wasn't born there, but in Syria. She'd had a hard life, knocked around a lot in the world and taken many cruel knocks from it. Yes, she was much older than she appeared. Not as old as her profession, for which she needed that youthful-looking body. She did well in it, though at intervals she had to pull up stakes and relocate under a different name. To her, at last, came a man who was also older than he seemed. He and his partner had wandered far and wide. At present they were traders, on the Russian river route."

Always he watched her. She couldn't take it any more. "Stop!" she cried. Drawing breath: "Mr. . . . Tannahill, are you by any chance associated with . . . a gentleman named Willock?"

The fingers whitened on his knees. "Yes. That is, I know of him. He may not have heard of me. A longevity research foundation engaged him to find people who carry—the genes for long life. Extremely long life."

"I see." Strange how calm she suddenly was, how detached. It was as if somebody else spoke. "Rosa and I saw his advertisement. We found it interesting."

"But you didn't respond."

"No. We have to be careful. The Unity works among, and against, some bad types. We have our enemies, and they have no scruples."

"So I've gathered. I swear to you, uh, Miss Macandal, this group I belong to is decent. In fact, we were alerted to your existence because two among us do human rehabilitation themselves. And we are few. Oh, very few," he ended.

"Nevertheless, you must give me time to consider this. You've learned about us. What do we know about you?"

Tannahill sat silent for the better part of a minute before he nodded. "That's reasonable. Ask anything you like."

She lifted her brows. "Do you guarantee to answer every single question, truthfully and in full?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "No. Good for you!" Turning serious: "Not before we fully trust each other. Let me do whatever I can toward that."

"For the moment, nothing. I want to run an independent check on you. Read a few issues of your magazine. Find out how you live, what your neighbors think of you, that sort of thing. What you did to us. It shouldn't take long. Then Rosa and I will plan our next move."

He smiled, visibly easing. "What you're telling me is, 'Don't call us, we'll call you.' Okay. On my side we have both time and patience. We know how to wait. Nothing will happen till you want it to."

He reached in a pocket and offered his card to her. "That's my New Hampshire address. My friend and I—I'm not in town alone—we'll return there tomorrow. Phone whenever you wish, or write if you prefer. If we go away, I'll tell the staff how to get in touch with me, and should be able to come back here on a day's notice."

"Thank you."

He came near winning her over at once by promptly rising and saying, "No, my thanks to you. I look forward to hearing at your convenience." He paused. "Please tell my fable to Ms. Donau, and add the happy ending. The man in it stopped long ago being angry at the woman. He hopes she'll enjoy meeting him again."

"I'll tell her," Macandal agreed. They clasped hands afresh, a touch that clung the least bit, but neither spoke while she saw him to the door.

Her gaze followed him till he had disappeared down the mean street, walking briskly and fearlessly. Well, she thought, he can take care of himself, he's been in worse places than Harlem by daylight. . . . Damn, what a charmer!

Or am I just reading that into him? Aliyat may well be right, an immortal man is not necessarily a good man.

If he is, though—if *they* are—She still hasn't explained to me exactly what she's got against him—

What am I waiting for? Why am I hanging back? My God, he's a man. There are probably other men.

Cool it, girl!

The flood of lust receded. It left her atremble, but able to laugh at herself, and that was a cleansing. Celibacy had been the price she must pay; Mama-lo could not take a series of lovers and dared not take a husband. She thought: I was proud of my self-control, and overlooked how self-important I was getting. Down underneath, honey, you're just another raunchy, limited, woundable human being.

One who's got responsibilities, though.

She went inside again and upstairs to a room that served as a private office. Its prosaic furnishings and equipment brought her further down from dizziness. She had work to do.

Macandal settled at the desk and reached for the phone. Among the numbers keyed in were three for certain police officers and one for a middle-rank agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Unity had saved those men when they were children. Restless, they had not stayed, but by then it had equipped them to handle the world and they remembered. Not that any of them would betray his trust; nor would she ever ask him to. However, more than once they had looked into matters for her, taking for granted that her unspecified reasons were legitimate. Through them she could quickly find out a great deal about Kenneth Tannahill—perhaps even some things he himself didn't know.

11

THE CAB driver had taken on a grim expression when Aliyat gave him the address. He was plainly glad to let her out there and be gone. For a moment she felt forsaken.

Twilight lingered in the sky, but the rotting walls around her closed most of it off and night already possessed the street. What lampglow fell dully on it showed bare pavement, cracked sidewalks, scraps of paper and plastic, shards of glass, empty cans, cigarette butts, refuse less describable. A few windows, not boarded up, glowered at her. She saw nobody looking from them. It was as if she could smell the fear, one more stench among those that loaded an air still hot.

She hastened to the Unity's tenement. The façade was as dingy as the rest, refurbishing must wait its turn, but she

ought to find freshness well advanced within. The workmen had gone home hours ago. Had the neighborhood shown life while they and their cheerful clatter were on hand?

The door was locked. It hadn't been on her last visit. She glanced over her shoulder as she leaned on the buzzer, and gripped her purse tightly against her ribs.

A dark outline appeared in the safety-webbed glass. The man was studying her through a peephole. He took what felt like a long time to let her in. She recognized him but not the other standing nearby, though each wore the badge of a security volunteer. Well, she could not know every member any more. Neither man was he whom she had expected.

"Missus-lo!" the first exclaimed. "What're you doin' here, this late?"

"I need to see Randy Castle," she said fast. "I was told he's staying here now."

"Yeah, he is." A tongue clicked. "You shouldn't of come, Missus-lo. 'Speci'lly not alone."

I realized that as soon as I arrived, she kept from admitting. Instead: "Well, he works all day." —for a hauling company, which kept him on the move, unavailable to her. "I thought he'd be at Hope Flower." —the Unity complex where he had an apartment, in a safer district than this. "When he didn't answer my calls, after I'd tried for hours, I rang his parents and they told me where he was. We need him for a job and he hasn't any phone here."

"We do." The guard gestured at the instrument on a table amidst the clutter left by the carpenters. "I'd of fetched him."

"No, I'm sorry, this is a confidential matter."

"I see." His trust was instant and absolute. "Well, he's right down the hall, Number Three." As he pointed, he forced a smile. "Don't you worry none, Missus-lo. We'll get you home okay."

"One way or t'other," muttered his companion.

Beyond the lobby, the corridor had been restored, awaiting only paint and a carpet. She knocked on a new door. The big man flung it open. "What?" he growled, and then, seeing her: "Hey, what's goin' on?"

"I have to talk with you," Aliyat said.

With awkward, touching deference he ushered her in and closed the door again. The apartment was neatly finished

but barely furnished, no tenants having been expected yet. Several books rested on a table beside a hotplate, and he had been covering notepaper with scrawled exercises. Like most young folk of the Unity, he was improving his education; his dream was to become an engineer. "Make yourself to home, Missus-lo," tumbled from his lips. "Glad to see you, but wish you hadn't come, know what I mean? What can I do for you?"

Because he wanted her to, she took the single chair. He offered to make coffee. She shook her head, and he sat down on the floor at her feet. "What's wrong?" she inquired. "Why have you moved? Where's Gus?"—the former night watchman.

Starkness replied. "Laid up, Missus-lo. Bunch o' punks came in, uh, four nights ago an' beat him pretty bad."

"Has Mama-lo heard?" she asked, appalled.

"N-not yet. We figured might be best to tell you first, get your 'pinion." The disciples trying to protect the saint, Aliyat thought. And Corinne might, after all, order abandonment of the project rather than grappling with violence. Men who have learned to be proud don't easily retreat. "Only you was out of town."

"Yes, this past couple of weeks. I'm sorry, I should have left word where I could be reached, but I never thought there'd be an emergency like this."

"Sure," he said, quite sincerely. "You couldn't of known. You needed a vacation bad, you did. We noticed how tired you was gettin'."

Not really, she thought. At least, not in the flesh. Still, it's true, administration and treasury and accounting and counseling and—everything I do for us, mostly by myself because we can't afford a proper staff—it does wear me down. No matter how much the Unity means to me, I cannot make it my whole life. I don't have the spirit, the goodness, for that. From time to time I've got to get away, take what I've saved out of my little paychecks and go elsewhere under a different name, enjoy a bit of luxury, glamour, fun, have an affair if I meet somebody attractive. (And mostly, these past several years, that's been a man, not a woman; the Unity has washed away a lot of bitterness and started many sores healing.) Why am I talking to myself like this? To push away guilt, that I was absent? "How is Gus?"

"He'll be all right. Healer Jules fixed him up neat as any regular doctor could have, and they're takin' care of him at his place."

"You didn't notify the police, then?"

"What use? Just put ourselves to a lot o' trouble."

"Listen," Aliyat rapped, "how often must Mama-lo and I explain, the police are not our enemies? The criminals are." I'm only half a hypocrite, she thought. Mostly, I guess, the cops mean well. But they're saddled with laws that breed crime worse than Prohibition ever did.

"Well, if nothin' else, they're stretched too thin," Castle said defensively. "They can't post a round-the-clock watch for us, can they? And Gus told us those scumbags promised worse if we don't clear out. Maybe firebombing, even. We decided we'd strengthen night-time security. That ought to discourage 'em. It's why me and some other men are stayin' here."

Chill crept along Aliyat's backbone. The street outside was bare and quiet. So quiet. Had word gone around that something was in the works?

What could she do? Nothing, unless later. "Do be careful," she begged. "None of this is worth losing a single life." You might have fifty or sixty years left you, Randy, dear.

"Um, you too, Missus-lo. Don't you risk comin' here again after dark. Not till we got the quarter cleaned up." He sat straight, quickly eager. "What you want? How can we help you?"

That wakened the thrill that had coursed through when she spoke with Corinne upon her return today. It flamed the sordid surroundings out of her. She couldn't sit still, she sprang to her feet. "I have to take a long drive, up into New Hampshire. I'll be needing a driver and—let's hope not, but maybe a bodyguard. Someone strong and completely reliable, including able to keep his mouth shut. I thought right away of you. Are you willing?"

He likewise had risen, to loom above her and exult: "At your service, Missus-lo, an' thank you!"

"You probably needn't lose time from work. Now that I know I can count on you, I'll write ahead and tell them to expect me." She didn't really think mail would be intercepted, but she'd use a private express service to be safe, and to make sure of overnight delivery. Tannahill could reply in the same fashion. "We'll leave early Saturday morning. If everything goes well, we can return Sunday evening.

Or I might stay a while and you come back alone." If I decide I dare trust them there.

"Sure." He grew troubled. "You mentioned a bodyguard. Could it turn dangerous? I wouldn't feel right about takin' you into danger."

"No, I don't expect any physical threats." Is that absolutely true? she wondered. With a grin: "It might help my errand if you're in the background being huge. My purpose will be to convey a message and then, I think, confer."

The message being that Corinne has learned Kenneth Tannahill is under close surveillance, apparently on behalf of a United States senator. She had just about decided to mail him the warning when I arrived. I told her that if I deliver it in person, that ought to rock him back enough that I can grab the initiative and—and what? Take his measure?

Cadoc, Hanno, it can only be him, whom I robbed and tried to get killed. He told her he's forgiven me, and nine hundred years would be a long time to carry a grudge, unless it's festered that whole while. We've got to decide whether to join with him and whoever else is in his band; and how to join, on what terms, if we do. I think I can recognize a crook or a monster sooner, more certainly, than Mama-lo.

"This will be kind of peculiar, though, Randy," she said. "I need to enter the place and leave it unbeknownst to—well, whoever might be watching from outside. I'll figure out some sort of disguise. Maybe cut my hair short, make my face up dark, dress like a man, and we carry tool kits, to seem like workers sent to do some repair job. The car we'll drive is old and plain, and I'll get hold of New Hampshire plates." Though the Unity shunned crime, you were bound to learn who in town could supply what for a price. "We'll switch along the way."

An excitement she had well-nigh forgotten overrode forebodings. Shoot the dice and to hell with the authorities. Am I still an outlaw at heart?

But here stands this boy. "I'm sorry," she finished. "We can't let you sit in on our talks, and I can't tell you anything. All I can do is swear this is honest business."

"I wouldn't doubt that for one second, Missus-lo," he answered.

Her fingers closed on the brown hand before her. "You *are* a darling."

Through the door went a crash and a scream.

"Hoy! Them?" Castle plunged across the room. Racket resounded. "Stay put, Missus-lo!" he yelled. From a carton on the floor he pulled an object darkly metallic and sped for the door. "I'm comin', brothers! Hang on!"

"No, wait, drop that thing, don't, Randy—" Aliyat had no time to think. She followed the man who grasped the pistol that was forbidden to common folk.

Down the hall. Beyond the lobby Aliyat saw safety glass shattered. Smoke eddied against the night. Half a dozen men, youths, creatures were in. The guards— Two invaders held one watchman hard against the wall. Where was his companion? Others of the Unity boiled forth at Aliyat's back.

"Halt, you bastards!" Castle roared. His gun barked, a warning shot aloft.

An attacker responded, straight.

Castle lurched, reeled back, somehow fired levelly before he fell. Aliyat glimpsed the blood that spouted from his throat.

The hammer smote her.

12

MORIARTY WAS at breakfast when Stoddard called. The senator kept a phone in that room too. Even in this his summer home, in his own secure state, he must always be ready; and the number was unlisted, which gave some protection.

The voice immediately yanked his full awareness to it. Once he whistled, once he breathed, "My God." He finally snapped, "Hop the first plane you can get out of National. Take a cab at this end, never mind what that costs. Bring all the material you have to date. I need the background. Been on the trail, you know, hitting the hustings. . . . Okay. It does sound good, doesn't it? . . . Hurry. 'Bye."

He hung up. "What was that about?" asked his wife.

"Sorry, top secret," he replied. "Uh, will you see to rescheduling my appointments today?"

"Including the Garrisons' party? Remember who'll be there."

"Sorry. This is that important. You go, offer my regrets, and charm the socks off the VIPs."

"I'll do my best."

"Which is mighty fine, my love." What a First Lady she'd make—someday, someday, when his destiny blossomed. She wouldn't mind the other women much, then. "Excuse me if I eat and run. I've a lot to clear away in less time than I was counting on."

He did, in truth. Congress had adjourned, but constituents never set their problems aside and he couldn't offend the key interests. And the convention had left him with several cans of worms to get rid of before the election. And meanwhile his speech day after tomorrow needed more work. It was merely at the dedication of a high school, but if he said the right things in striking new phrases, the media might pick one up. He *must* find an identifying motto, like FDR's "—the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Or JFK's "Ask not what your country—"

He received Stoddard a few hours later in his study. It was an airy room with a view over salt water that danced and glittered and upbore white wings of sailboats. Autographed photos of himself in the company of famous persons did not cover the walls as they did those of his Washington office. Instead there were a few family portraits, a landscape painted by his daughter, a horsemanship trophy from prep school days, a case of books for reference and recreation rather than display. He looked up from the desk, greeted, "Hello. Sit down," realized how brusque he had been. "Excuse me. I guess I'm more on edge than I knew."

Stoddard took a swivel chair, leaned back, laid his briefcase across his lap. "Me too, Senator. Mind if I smoke?"

"No." Moriarty sketched a rueful smile. "Wish I dared."

"We're alone." Stoddard held the pack toward him.

Moriarty shook his head. "No, thanks. Quitting was too hard. I wonder what Churchill would have made of a society where you can't take a puff any longer if you hope for national office."

"Unless you're from a tobacco state." A match scritted. "Otherwise, yes, what one does is vote price supports, sub-

sidies, and export assistance for the tobacco industry, while calling for a war on dangerous addictive drugs."

Damn the son of a bitch! Too bad he was so useful. Well, that jape had cost him the offer of a drink. "Let's get cracking. How much detail do you have on this affair?"

"How much do you, sir?"

"I read the piece in the *Times* after you called. It wasn't very informative."

"No, I suppose not. Because on the surface, it isn't much of a story. Another little shootout among the socially deprived of New York City."

Glee exploded. "But it has a connection to Tannahill!"

"Maybe," Stoddard cautioned. "All we're sure of is that members of the Unity were involved, and Tannahill visited its head last month, and it's a rather strange outfit. Not underground, but . . . reclusive? We'd have to spend quite a while digging for information, and it might well prove to be a wild goose chase. Tannahill could have seen the headwoman for some completely unrelated reason, like wanting to write an article. He was definitely at home during the incident. Still is, last I heard."

Moriarty quelled the interior seething. Is this actually ridiculous? he wondered. Why am I turning the heavy artillery on a gadfly?

Because an instinct that my calling has honed tells me there is something big behind this, big, big. Uncovering it could do more than silence a noisy reactionary. It could lift me into orbit. Four years hence, eight at most, I could be bringing that new dawn which Tannahill and his nightspooks dread.

He sat back into well-worn, accepting, creaky leather, and set a part of his mind to telling one muscle after the next that it should slack off. "Look," he said, "you know I haven't had time to stay abreast of your efforts. Brief me. Begin at the beginning. Never mind if you repeat this or that I've heard before. I want the facts arranged orderly for inspection."

"Yes, sir." Stoddard opened the case and took out a manila folder. "Suppose I give you a quick summary, from the start, before we go into particulars."

"Fine."

Stoddard checked his notes. "I did tell you when Tan-

nahill reappeared in New Hampshire, you remember. We've had a tail on him since then. As per your instructions, I notified the FBI of that. The agent I talked to was a little annoyed."

"He considered me officious, no doubt." Moriarty laughed. "Better that than seem furtive. And it has planted a bee in their bonnet. Go on."

"Shortly after his return—do you want dates? Not yet?—shortly afterward, Tannahill went down to New York, took a hotel room, and met a plane from Copenhagen at Kennedy airport. A young woman, uh, flew to his arms when she'd cleared customs, and they were shacked up in that hotel for several days. It looked like a honeymoon situation, sightseeing, fancy restaurants, you know the bit. We checked back, of course. Her name is Olga Rasmussen, Danish citizen but actually from Russia, a refugee. Some puzzling things about her, but it's hard to do detail work internationally, and expensive. You decide whether we should.

"Meanwhile Tannahill dropped in at Unity headquarters. He didn't stay long and hasn't been in touch again, unless he's got a secret line." Stoddard said nothing about the legality of any wire taps and Moriarty didn't inquire. "He and Rasmussen went north to his place. They've been there since, not going out much nor doing anything unusual in public. Except . . . lately they drove to the nearest airport and brought home a man who's now their house guest or whatever. We haven't been able to trace him, apart from indications that he's from the West Coast. Native American, to judge by his appearance."

"What sort?" Moriarty asked. "They don't all look alike."

"Huh? Well, he's tall and hawk-faced. Tannahill introduced him to shopkeepers and such in the village as John Wanderer."

"Hm. West Coast. . . . Well, what about the violence last night?"

"Apparently the local drug baron in that section of New York had his goons make a raid on a tenement that Unity is fixing for its members. He seems to have been trying to force it out before it gets established on his turf. It's too apt to choke off businesses like his."

Moriarty searched his memory. "I may have heard a little about Unity before the story today, but I'm not sure. Tell me."

"They're obscure," Stoddard said. "I gather that's by choice. Stay compact, controllable; keep a low profile. It's a kind of self-help organization in the poverty classes, but not like any other. Not a church, though it has a religious element—ceremonies, anyhow. Not a militant group, though the members stick together, including on patrols that are more than simple neighborhood watches. However, hitherto they've avoided breaking any laws where anybody could see. The president, high priestess, whatever her title is, she's quite the mystery woman. Black, name of Corinne Macandal. She has a white associate, Rosa Donau, who's the one involved in the shooting. And that's about all we've turned up so far on Unity."

"Tell me about the affair," Moriarty urged. "The account in the paper was so sketchy."

"I'm afraid mine will be, too. Donau was at this restoration project when the gang broke in. One of the Unity men had a firearm. Shots were exchanged. He was killed, but not before he'd done for an enemy. Donau was seriously wounded."

Moriarty nodded. "Saturday night specials. Bullets spraying around. And nevertheless the rednecks quack about the Second Amendment. . . . Continue. Any more casualties?"

"Two unarmed night watchmen had been roughed up. Several other men from Unity were staying at the place, but they had only clubs—well, a couple of permissible-type knives."

"Bad enough. None of them were hurt?"

"No, nor engaged. After those few shots, the attackers fled. Obviously they hadn't expected that kind of resistance. My guess is that they intended vandalism, destruction. The Unity people called the police. The dead men went to the morgue, Donau to the hospital. Shot through the chest. Condition serious but stable."

"M-m-m." Moriarty tugged his chin and squinted out across the sunlit waters. "I daresay the head honcho—Macandal, is that her name?—she'll issue a statement expressing shock and disavowing those vigilantes."

"My impression is they'll swear it was strictly their own idea."

"Which might be true. Donau should know more, if she survives. A material witness, at the very least. . . . Yes, I think this was not simply another brawl in the slums." Triumph trumpeted. "I believe we can find grounds for me to demand a federal investigation of Unity and everybody who's ever touched it."

13

"ACTUALLY, BY and large, Indian men worked as hard as their women," Wanderer said. "It was just that the division of labor was sharper than among whites, and the women's share was what a visitor in camp saw."

"But wasn't the men's part more fun?" Svoboda asked. "Hunting, for instance." Her expression was rapt. Here she sat in the presence of a man who had been of those fabulous tribes, had experienced the Wild West.

Hanno considered lighting his pipe. Better not. Svoboda disliked it and he'd cut back on that account. Probably soon she'd make him quit altogether. Meanwhile, he thought grumpily, why doesn't she aim a few of her questions my way? I saw a bit of the American frontier too. I knew this land we're on when it was wilderness.

His gaze went out the nearer window of the living room. Afternoon sunlight glowed across the lawn. At the edge of grass a flowerbed flaunted red, violet, gold below the burglar-alarmed chain link fence that surrounded the property. From here he couldn't see the driveway sweep in from the county road, through an electrically controlled gate and between stately beech trees to the mansion. Visible instead behind the fence were second-growth woods whose leafage billowed and twinkled under the wind.

A lovely place, this, the ideal retreat after New York, peacefulness in which he and Svoboda could explore each other more deeply and she could get to know Wanderer. But he must return to Seattle and affairs neglected. She'd come along, she'd enjoy the city and adore its hinterland. Wanderer ought to stay behind a while, in case of a message from Macandal. . . . Would those two women ever stop dithering, or whatever they were at? . . . Svoboda was anx-

ious to meet Asagao and Tu Shan. . . . He, Hanno, should not think in terms of distracting her from Wanderer. He didn't own her, he had no right to be jealous, and anyway, there was nothing serious between those two, so far—

The phone rang. Wanderer stopped in mid-sentence. "Go on," Hanno invited. "It may not need any response."

The answering machine recited its instructions aloud and beeped. A female voice came, rapid, not quite steady: "Madame Aliyat must speak with Mr. Tannahill. It's urgent. Don't call straight back—"

Aliyat! Hanno was already across the room. He snatched the receiver from the antique table. "Hello, Tannahill here, is that *you*?"

No, he recognized Macandal's tones. *"Parlez-vous français?"*

What? His mind leaped. *"Oui."* He had maintained his French in serviceable if less than perfect condition, updating as the language evolved, for it was often a valuable tool. *"Désirez-vous parler comme ci? Pourquoi, s'il vous plaît?"*

She had had less practice in recent decades, talked slowly and haltingly, sometimes required his help in making clear what she meant. Fallen silent, Wanderer and Svoboda heard his speech grow steely, saw his visage stiffen.

"—Bien. Bonne chance. Au revoir, espérons-nous."

He put the receiver back and turned to his companions. For a moment only the wind outside gave utterance. Then he said, "First I'll make sure nobody overhears" and went out. The household staff didn't eavesdrop, nor interrupt unless necessary, but English was the sole common tongue today.

Returning, he stood arms akimbo before the chairs they swung around and stated into their stares: "That was Corinne Macandal—finally, and not with glad tidings. I wish now I had the *New York Times* delivered here." Harshly, he told them about the disaster of night before last.

"Oh, terrible." Svoboda got up, reaching for him. He didn't notice. Wanderer stayed where he was, lynx-alert.

"I've worse yet," Hanno said. "Macandal has friends in certain government departments, especially police." He recognized the unspoken question on the woman's lips and threw her a wintry grin. "No, you can't call them moles. They give her information or early warning, at her request,

which is seldom. Nothing for bad purposes, merely so she won't be caught off base. The sort of precaution an immortal would naturally take. I used to myself, till I got into a position where it was better to steer as clear of government as possible.

"Well, after I'd seen her, she wanted to know about me before committing herself to any course of action, or inaction—know more than I might be willing to reveal. So she inquired of those contacts and discovered that I've been under detective surveillance since shortly before our meeting. It's at the behest of Edmund J. Moriarty. Yes, Neddy, the senator, my *bête noire.* Apparently I've become his."

He sighed. "I should have left him alone. I thought I was doing a public service, badgering him; that I owed the United States this slight help, because I honestly doubt it could survive his Presidency. My mistake. I should have concentrated on our own survival. Too late."

Svoboda had whitened. "The secret police?" she whispered.

"No, no." Hanno patted her shoulder. "You should know better, after your years in the West, or have you been listening to European leftists? The Republic hasn't decayed that far yet. I daresay Moriarty has been fishing, in hopes he'll find something to discredit or incriminate Kenneth Tannahill. Macandal doesn't see it that way. I gather she admires him, because he's supposedly done things for the poor. She's been too busy to learn much history. The revelation that he was after me caused her to hang back from further contact. Might I actually be evil? She does have a hell of a lot to lose, not money but a whole lifework."

"Never mind," Wanderer said. "Plain to see, in this crisis she felt she had to tip you off regardless."

"It's more than that," Hanno replied. "We talked very circumspectly. A lot of what I tell you, I deduce logically from her indirect words, on the basis of what I knew before. But she checked again with her Washington sources and found she's now under the eye too. After that gunfight, Moriarty may very well succeed in getting the FBI on the case. That's the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Svoboda, a sort of national police. The drug connection, if nothing else. Even though Unity's fought the narcotics traffic more

effectively than any branch of government—well, could Tannahill be in it, could he have masterminded that assault? Also, the unfortunate fact is that the member who was killed had a pistol and used it. In New York that's more illegal than mugging a grandmother. Since the Goetz case, the liberals have been out for blood. Macandal should be able to prove her innocence, but she'll have a devil of a time first, and . . . anything might come out in the course of the investigation."

"Not to mention that other woman, Aliyat, being in the hospital."

"Yeah. She hasn't been interrogated, in her condition, but when they do go to work on her, the fat could be in the fire. During her whorehouse days she was repeatedly arrested. You know the drill, spasm of public morality, hustle the girls off to show your zeal for law enforcement, then let them right back out. She was fingerprinted, over and over, through the years. And the FBI has accumulated the world's largest collection of fingerprints."

Wanderer grunted as if hit in the belly. Svoboda caught her lip between her teeth.

"Well, Macandal had already decided she should stop hesitating, get in touch with me, try to find out for herself what kind of a guy I am," Hanno continued. "Aliyat was to come this weekend as her representative and, hm, scout. An acid test, considering what last happened between us two.

"First they had in mind an express message to set up the meeting, me to reply the same way. But the shooting cut that off. Now she saw she'd better put her suspicions aside and confer in earnest. An exchange of written communications would obviously be too slow and cumbersome. A personal visit would give away too much, and we can't manage a clandestine one in a hurry. Our phones are quite likely tapped—under the new circumstances, a word from Moriarty would persuade a judge of the proper political faith to allow that—but still seemed the only way. As soon as the police and the press withdrew, she left her house and called me from a member's place. Chances are, nobody listening in knows French. It should take a little time to get a recording translated, and we used every possible circumlocution. I don't think we let slip any hard-and-fast evidence that she was the person on the line. Still, she has undoubtedly com-

promised herself to a greater or lesser degree. It was a brave thing to do."

"But also necessary," Svoboda said. "Our secret is in the worst danger it ever has been, no?"

"Mainly she wanted to give me and any other immortals I know an opportunity to get out from under, make ourselves invisible, if we want to." Hanno lifted a clenched fist. "By God, she has a free heart! I wish I could be as sure about her head. At the moment, she's for ending the masquerade, making a clean breast of everything."

"Does she trust the government that much?" Svoboda wondered.

"It wouldn't be dangerous for her, I should think," Wanderer said thoughtfully. "Not at first, anyhow. Hard on us, maybe. Especially you, Hanno."

The Phoenician laughed. "I'd go hoarse, listing my crimes aloud. Just for openers, all those false identities of mine, complete with Social Security dog tags and annual tax returns, not to mention assorted licenses, birth and death certificates, passports—oh, I've been a desperate character, I have."

"You might be let off easy, even pardoned," Wanderer said. "And the rest of us, for our petty offenses. We'd be such a sensation." He grimaced. "At worst, some years in jail wouldn't matter too greatly to us." His tone belied the words. It recalled roofless heavens and boundless horizons.

"No, it would be hellishly dangerous," Hanno declared. "It might well become lethal, for us and a lot of bystanders. I couldn't explain why over the phone, what with the haste and the probable listeners and her poor French, but I did convince Macandal we must consider the possible consequences before we let our cat out of the bag—that a snap judgment would be completely irresponsible."

Wanderer's voice went dry. "From what you've told me about her, that was an argument she found hard to resist."

"She knows from Aliyat I've been around a long time. Tentatively, she'll credit me with more knowledge of the world than she has. She'll disappear and lie low till we can better assess the situation."

"How's she going to pull that off?"

"Oh, it is easy, if she has an organization loyal to her," Svoboda said. "I can imagine any number of ruses. For ex-

ample, let a woman who resembles her come to the house. Inside, they exchange clothes, and Macandal walks out. After dark that should work. Her people will hide her until she can reach a refuge she surely prepared beforehand."

"Hm, how shall we and she get in touch later, if we don't know each other's locations or aliases?" Wanderer asked.

"She must have told her comrade Aliyat what the possibilities are."

"How can Aliyat tell us? In fact, why are we wasting air on this chatter, when she's a prisoner and the cops will shortly have the clues to her nature? Didn't Macandal point that out to you, Hanno?"

"No," the other man said. "It hadn't occurred to her. She was shocked, bewildered, harassed, grieved, exhausted. I'm amazed she could think straight at all. Since I wanted her to make her exit, I refrained from bringing the question up. Besides, the Aliyat matter is not entirely hopeless."

"Chto?" Svoboda cried. "What do you mean?"

"The truth won't come out overnight," Hanno reminded them. "Possibly it never would. I'm not certain that copies of prints from those obscure police files of decades ago ever got to Washington. If they did, or if the investigators get the idea of making a search, that'll take time. And then, if an identity is found—well, Thomas Jefferson, who was as enlightened a man as ever lived, once said he could more readily believe that some Yankee professors had lied than that stones fell from the sky. It would be scientifically more respectable to assume there'd been a mixup in the records than that a human being could stay young for fifty or a hundred years."

Svoboda scowled. "Possession of her would not allow that assumption, I think. And she might decide that telling everything will be to her profit."

"She might very well," Hanno agreed, remembering. "Oh, a thousand things could go wrong, from our viewpoint. Let's see if we can't take corrective action. For that purpose, and for more obvious reasons, we'll decamp tonight."

"The gate is watched, you tell me," Svoboda said glumly. "How, I do not know. I have not noticed a parked car or men standing on that rural road."

"Why should you? A battery-powered miniature TV cam-

era in the brush opposite will serve. The road dead-ends at the lake, you may recall. Bound anywhere else, you head in the opposite direction and pass the Willows Lodge. No doubt two or three persons checked in a little while ago and spend more time in their cabin than is usual for vacationers."

"You can glorify modern technology as much as you want," Wanderer growled. "Me, more and more I feel the walls closing in."

"How shall we evade them?" Svoboda asked. Dread and despair had yielded to keenness.

Hanno grinned. "Every fox has two holes to his burrow. Let's pack what we'll need. I keep plenty of cash on hand, together with traveler's checks, credit cards, assorted ID not made out to Tannahill. I'll hand the servants a plausible story, which'll contain a red herring. Tonight— A panel at the rear of the fence swings aside without touching off the alarm, if you know what to do. It gives on the woods, and the village is three miles beyond that. There's a man there, lives alone, grumpy old bachelor type, who likes my magazine except he complains it's too leftish. I always try to cultivate somebody, whenever I maintain a base for any span of time, somebody I can rely on to do me an occasional favor and not mention it to anyone else. He'll drive us to where we can get a bus or train. We'll probably be smart to switch conveyances en route, but we'll still be in New York tomorrow."

14

THE HOSPITAL building might well be a hundred years old, brick dark with grime, windows not lately washed. The modernization inside was minimal. This was for the poor, the indigent, the victims of accident and violence. Its neighbors were as drab. The traffic that rumbled and screeched about them was mostly commercial and industrial. The air was foul with its fumes.

A taxi drew up at the curb. Hanno passed the driver a twenty-dollar bill. "Wait here," he directed. "We're fetching a friend. She'll be pretty weak, needs to get home right away."

"I'll hafta circle the block if ya take too long," the driver warned.

"Circle it fast, then, and park again whenever you see a chance. This is worth a nice tip."

The driver looked dubious, understandable considering the institution. Svoboda ostentatiously jotted down his name and number. Hanno followed her out and closed the door. He carried a parcel, she an overnight bag. "Remember, now, this will only work if we behave as though we owned the accounts receivable office," he muttered.

"*You* remember I have been a sharpshooter and slipped through the Iron Curtain," she answered haughtily.

"Uh, sorry, that was a stupid thing for me to say. I'm distracted. Ah, there he is." Hanno inclined his head in the direction of Wanderer. Shabbily clad, hat pulled low, the Indian slouched along the sidewalk like one with nothing better to do.

Hanno and Svoboda entered a gloomy lobby. A uniformed guard cast them an incurious glance. Even these patients sometimes got visitors. Reconnoitering yesterday, they had ascertained that no police guard was on Rosa Donau. She had automatically been taken here and it was deemed unsafe to transfer her to a better hospital when the word came that money was available to pay for that. Therefore this place's security ought to suffice.

Hanno sought a men's room. It was unoccupied, but he entered a stall to be cautious. Opening his parcel, he unfolded a smock coat and donned it. He'd acquired it, plus a lot of other stuff, at a medical supply firm. It wasn't quite identical with what the orderlies wore, but should get by if nobody had cause to look closely. Outfits faded or stained were more the rule than the exception. He dropped the wrapping in a trash can and rejoined Svoboda. They took an elevator upward.

They had learned yesterday that Rosa Donau was on the seventh floor. The receptionist had told them she could only have very brief visits, and remarked on how many people came, anxiously inquiring.

Two women had been on hand when Hanno and Svoboda walked into the ward. They had brought flowers, which they could probably ill afford. Hanno smiled at them, went to the bedside, bent over the victim. She lay white, hollow-cheeked,

shallowly breathing. He would not have recognized her had he not seen the pictures his detectives took for him. Indeed, without the hunch than this was she, he might well never have known her by those snapshots. It had been a long, long time.

He hoped that her Romaic Greek was no rustier than his. After all, he supposed, she'd mostly been in the Levant before coming to America. "Aliyat, my friend and I believe we can smuggle you out. Do you want that? Otherwise you'll lose your liberty forever, you know. I have money. I can give you the freedom of the world. Do you want to escape?"

She lay mute for a moment that stretched, before she barely nodded.

"Well, do you think you can walk a short distance and make it look natural? A hundred meters, perhaps. We'll help you, but if you fall, we'll have to leave you and flee."

A ghost of color tinged her skin. "Yes," she whispered, unthinkingly in English.

"Tomorrow afternoon, then. Make sure you have no callers. Tell these people you feel worse and need a few days undisturbed. Ask them to spread the word. Husband your strength."

He straightened, to meet the stares of the women from Unity. "I wasn't aware she's in this serious a condition," he told them. "Otherwise I'd have let her know beforehand my wife and I were coming."

"You from out of town?" asked one.

"Yes. We hadn't seen her for quite a while, but we read about the, uh, incident, and since we're of her nationality and had business in New York anyway—Well, I am sorry. We'd better go, Olga. We'll see you later, Rosa, when you're more recovered. Take care." He and Svoboda patted the limp hands. They left.

A walk around the seventh-floor halls, a quick peek into the ward as they went by, revealed no sign of a trap. If Aliyat didn't actually wish to leave, with the hazards and pains that meant, she could help herself by spilling the truth and ratting on Hanno. He had gambled on her distrust of authority being too ingrained, after her many centuries, or at least on her having the shrewdness to foresee that confession would close out every other choice.

This entire operation was a gamble. If it failed, and he

and Svoboda could not make a getaway— He mustn't let worry dull his wits and sap his energy.

"Damn," he said. "No wheelchair. Let's try the next floor down."

They got lucky there. Wheelchairs, gurneys, and the like commonly stood unattended in the corridors. He took what he wanted and pushed it briskly to the elevator. A nurse glanced at him, parted her lips, half shrugged and hurried onward. The staff was overworked, underpaid, and doubtless had considerable turnover on that account. Svoboda trailed him at a discreet distance, pretending to look for a room number.

Back on seven, they proceeded to Aliyat's ward. Speed was now the key to everything. Svoboda entered first. If a nurse or doctor was present, they'd have to continue prowling around, biding their chance. She stepped back to the doorway and beckoned. His heart bumped. He went in past her.

The dingy room held a double row of beds, most occupied. Some patients watched the televisions above either row, some dozed, some were vegetables, a few looked at the newcomer, but dully. None questioned him. Hanno hadn't expected they would. An environment like this was ghastly deadening. Aliyat too had fallen asleep. She blinked her eyes open when he touched her shoulder. Abruptly he did know her again, the ferret alertness that she had dissembled until too late for him, last time around.

He beamed. "All right, Ms. Donau, let's go for those lab tests, shall we?" he said. She nodded and visibly braced herself. Oh, she knew this would hurt. He kept old sailor skills, such as carrying loads carefully, and while his body wasn't that of any Hercules, its wiriness had never flagged. He bent his knees, took hold, swung her from bed to chair. Her arms crept about his neck. He felt a brief, roguish flirt of fingers in his hair. He also heard the sharply indrawn breath.

Svoboda had kept aside, and continued to do so while he wheeled Aliyat to the elevator. She took it together with them. Yesterday he and she had found what they wanted on the second floor, minimizing the distance Aliyat must go on her feet. It was another gamble that the hydrotherapy bath would be vacant, but a fairly safe bet at this time of day.

Hanno took Aliyat in, told her in a few words what came next, and left. Somebody else was walking by. Hanno went the opposite way, his expression preoccupied. Svoboda dawdled until she could slip in unobserved, carrying her overnight bag.

Again Hanno took shelter in a men's room and spent an agreed-on ten minutes by his watch, seated on a toilet and contemplating graffiti. They were uniformly vulgar and semi-literate. I should raise the tone of this joint, he decided. Anything to keep from fretting. He unclipped a pen, located a clear space, and printed carefully: "$x^n + y^n = z^n$ has no integral solution for all n greater than two. I have found a marvelous proof of this theorem, but there is not room in this stall to write it down."

Time. He left his smock behind and returned to the bath. Svoboda was just emerging; splendid girl. Aliyat leaned on her, no longer in a hospital gown but a dress, stockings, shoes, a lightweight coat that covered the bulges of bandages. Svoboda had kept the bag. Hanno joined them and lent his support. "How're you doing?" he asked in English.

Air (and blood?) rattled. "I'll make it," Aliyat gasped, "but—oh, shit—no, never mind." Her weight pulled at him. She minced along, unevenly, now and then staggering. Sweat studded her face and reeked in his nostrils. He had seen corpses less blue-pale.

Nevertheless she moved. And it was as though she gained a bit of strength thereby, until you could almost say she walked. That's the wild card in *my* hand, Hanno thought. The vitality of the immortal. No normal human could do this so soon after such a wounding.

But she won't be able to, either, unless she draws on whatever wellsprings are her own.

In the downbound elevator, she sagged. Hanno and Svoboda upheld her. "You must be firm and walk straight," the Ukrainian said. "It is only for a little way. Then you can rest. Then you will be free."

Aliyat peeled lips back from teeth. "There's . . . a dance . . . in the old dame . . . yet."

When they emerged in the lobby, she didn't exactly stride, but you'd have to look hard to notice how much help she needed. Hanno's eyes flickered back and forth. Where the hell— Yes, yonder sat the Indian, on the split and peel-

ing plastic of a settee, thumbing through a decrepit magazine.

Wanderer saw them, lurched to his feet, reeled against a man passing by. "Hey," he shouted, "why'n'chu look where ya going?" with an obscenity added for good measure.

"There's the front door," Hanno murmured in Aliyat's ear. "Hup, two, three, four."

Wanderer's altercation loudened on his right. It caught everybody's attention. A couple of guards pushed toward him. Hanno hoped he wouldn't overdo it. The idea was to provide two or three minutes' distraction without getting arrested, merely expelled— Trouble with Wanderer, he's a gentleman by instinct, he doesn't have the talent for acting a belligerent drunk. He does have brains, however, and tact.

Into the open. Dusty though it was, sunlight momentarily dazzled. The taxi stood at the curb. Hermes, god of travelers, merchants, and thieves, thanks.

Hanno helped Aliyat in. She slumped bonelessly and struggled for breath. Svoboda took her other side. Hanno gave an address. The cab started off. As it wove its way through congestion and squawks, Aliyat's weight swayed to and fro. Svoboda felt beneath her coat, nodded pinch-lipped, took a towel from the bag and held it in place, more or less concealed. To blot up blood, Hanno knew; the injury was hemorrhaging.

"Say, that lady all right?" the driver asked. "Looks to me like they shouldn't of let her go."

"Schartz-Metterklume syndrome," Hanno explained. "She does need to get home and to bed as fast as you can make it."

"Yeah," Aliyat rasped. "C'mon and see me tomorrow, big boy."

The driver widened his mouth and rolled his eyes, but pushed on. At the destination, Hanno redeemed his promise of a lavish tip. It should buy silence, did pursuit guess that a taxi had been involved. Not that the story would help the police much, by that time.

"Around the corner," Svoboda told Aliyat. "Half a block."

Red dripped onto the sidewalk. Nobody else seemed to notice, or if they did, they chose not to get involved. Hanno had counted on that.

A small moving van stood in a parking garage. Hanno had rented it yesterday, contracting to turn it in at Pocatello, Idaho. Its bulk screened from casual glances how her companions lifted Aliyat into the body of it. A foam mattress and bedding waited, together with what medical supplies one could readily buy. Hanno and Svoboda peeled her clothes off. They washed her, applied an antibiotic, dressed the wound anew, made her as comfortable as they could.

"I think she will recover," Svoboda said.

"Damn straight I will," Aliyat mumbled.

"Leave us," Svoboda ordered Hanno. "I will care for her."

The Phoenician obeyed. She'd been a soldier, who knew first aid; she'd been a veterinarian, and humans aren't vastly unlike their kindred. He closed the tail doors on them and settled himself to wait in the cab. At least he could indulge in a pipe of tobacco now, and a slight case of the shakes.

Before long, Wanderer arrived. Hanno had rarely seen him this joyful. "Whoopee ti-yi-yo," he warbled.

"Maybe I better take the first stretch at the wheel," Hanno said. The van growled to life. He paid the parking fee and set forth westward.

15

It was natural that Mr. and Mrs. Tu would arrange a picnic for their guests, the people they'd met in the cities, but the kids were disappointed that they weren't invited too. These seemed like real interesting folks, in spite of not saying much about themselves. First was convalescent Miss Adler, whom the Tus met in Pocatello and drove here; she was mending so fast that her trouble couldn't have been too bad. The rest had to stay at the hotel in town but spent their days on the ranch: Mr. and Mrs. Tazurin, Mr. Langford, who admitted he was an Indian, and black Miss Edmonds, all different from each other and from everybody else.

Well, probably they wanted to be alone and talk about plans, like maybe for enlarging the house, making room for more fosterlings. They did act pretty solemn, nice enough but not like vacationers. Mostly they, including the Tus, strolled off by twos and threes, gone for hours.

On the brow of a hill that commanded a wide and beautiful view, Tu Shan had long since assembled a redwood table and benches. The party parked their cars nearby and got out. For a while they stood silent, looking. Halfway up the eastern sky, the sun made a few clouds as brilliant as the western snowpeaks. Between stretched a thousand greens, range, cropland, trees along the lazily shining river. A pair of hawks wheeled aloft, their wings edged with gold. A breeze mildened the air. It murmured and smelled of ripeness.

"Let's talk before we unload the eats," Hanno proposed. That was unnecessary, having been understood, but it got things started. Humans were apt to put off making difficult decisions, and immortals especially so. "I hope we can finish in time to relax and enjoy ourselves, but if need be we'll wrangle till sundown. That's the deadline, agreed?"

He sat down. Svoboda joined him on his right, Wanderer on the left. Opposite them were benched Tu Shan, Asagao, Aliyat, and she whose name among them remained Corinne Macandal. Yes, Hanno thought, in spite of having tried to get well acquainted and become a fellowship, we still unnoticingly divide up according to the partnerships we had.

None would have accepted a chairman, but one person had to take the initiative and he was the senior. "Let me summarize the agenda," he said. "I can't tell you anything new or unobvious. However, maybe I can save us further repetition.

"The basic question is, shall we surrender to the government and reveal to the world what we are, or shall we continue our masquerade, using new masks?

"On the surface, there's no great hue and cry out for us. Rosa Donau was spirited from the hospital. Corinne Macandal dropped from sight. Likewise did Kenneth Tannahill and a couple of house guests, but that was elsewhere, and he often goes out of town, is away much more than he is at home. No sensation in the news, not even Rosa's disappearance. She's obscure, few people really care about the patients in that hospital, nobody has claimed she was kidnapped or otherwise met foul play, and in fact none of the persons I've named are charged with anything.

"I thought that must be too good to be true, and Corinne informs me it is. She's queried her connections—twice, was

it?—from her hiding places. Ned Moriarty is still very interested. The FBI thinks the matter is worth looking into. Could possibly involve drugs or espionage or antics less spectacular but just as unlawful. Have you any later information, Corinne?"

Macandal shook her head. "No," she replied quietly, "nor will I. Already I've put more strain on the honor of those men than I should have. I won't call them again."

"I've pipelines of my own, from Seattle," Hanno said, "but using them gets dicier for every day that passes. Tannahill is associated with Tomek Enterprises. The FBI will at least be inquiring into that. They may decide there's nothing to it, that Tomek's friends have no idea why Tannahill vamoosed. However, they certainly will not if they discover that those friends showed some awareness of the situation earlier. I'd rather not take that risk. We've a plenty as is."

He leaned forward, elbows on table. "In short," he finished, "if we want to stay concealed, we'll have to do a total job of it. Abandon everything as fast as possible, permanently. Including this ranch. Tomek brought Shan and Asagao over and installed them here. Somebody will come around to ask some questions. He'll probably hear gossip about those visitors you had, so soon after the suspicious events. Once he gets descriptions of them, that's all she wrote."

Aliyat's voice trembled a little. She could walk by now, within limits, and color was back in her face, but it would be a few weeks yet before her full recovery, in body or spirit. "Then we can't go. We have to give up. Or else . . . be poor again—homeless—no."

Hanno smiled. "Have you forgotten what I've told you, or don't you believe me?" he answered. "I've squirreled money and other reserves away, around a large part of the world, for close to a hundred years. I have places to live, excellent cover stories, all details taken care of. Yes, periodically checked and updated. We can disperse or we can go live together, as we individually choose, but we'll be comfortable for at least the next fifty years, if this civilization lasts that long, and well prepared if it doesn't. Meanwhile we can be laying the foundations of fresh careers."

"Are you sure?"

"I know considerable about this myself," Wanderer said.

"I am sure. If you're afraid, Aliyat, why did you let us boost you out of that bed?"

Her eyes flickered. "I was dazed, didn't know what to think, hardly could think. I had an idea of buying time."

"That was my notion too," Wanderer told the group. "I kept my mouth shut, like her, but today we must be honest."

Despite their comradeship, Hanno was jolted. "Huh?" he exclaimed. "You mean we should turn ourselves in? Why?"

The response was grave: "If nothing else, I've heard Sam Giannotti on the subject. Once the world knows immortality is possible, they should be able to give it to everybody inside of—ten years? Twenty? Molecular biology's already far along. Have we the right to sit on the knowledge? How many millions or billions would we condemn to unnecessary death?"

Hanno sensed the undertone and pounced. "You don't sound too convinced."

Wanderer grimaced like a man in pain. "I'm not. I had to spell the issue out, but— Could Earth survive?" He waved at the living land around them. "How long before this would be under concrete, or polluted into an open sewer? Humans are already swamping in their own numbers. I wonder if it's possible to escape the big dieback, or the extinction. We could hasten that day a lot."

"They'd practice birth control, when they didn't need children to carry on for them," Macandal said.

"How many would?" Svoboda challenged. "Nor could the, the serum reach everybody at once. I foresee riots, revolutions, terror."

"Must it be that bad?" Tu Shan asked. "People will know what to expect before it happens. They can prepare. I do not want to lose what we have here."

"Nor forsake our children," Asagao added.

"And what would become of the Unity?" Macandal put in. She turned to Aliyat. "You know what it means to you. Think of the whole membership, your brothers and sisters."

The Syrian woman bit her lip before responding, "We've lost the Unity anyway, Corinne. If we came out in public, we couldn't be the same to its people. We wouldn't have time for them, either. And the whole world watching— No, the only way for the Unity to keep going, anything like what

it was, is for us to disappear. If it's as strong as we hope, it'll find new leadership. If not, well, then it wasn't that great after all."

"So you want to hide, now you know you'll be safe?"

"I didn't say that. Uh, I don't expect we'd have much in the way of legal problems. Even Hanno can probably pay fines, and make twice as much off lectures and a book and movie rights and endorsements and . . . everything the biggest celebrities the world'll ever see, short of the Second Coming, everything we'll be offered."

"Except peace." Asagao's voice came troubled. "No, I fear— Shan, my husband, I fear we would never again have freedom of the soul. Let us make provision for the children and then let us retire, retreat, and seek for tranquility and virtue."

"I hate to lose this land," Tu Shan protested.

"Aliyat's right, you'd be hounded off it regardless," Hanno warned. "Or taken into protective custody. You've lived sheltered lives, you two. You don't know how many murderous types are out there. Lunatics, fanatics, the insanely jealous, the little snots who'll kill just to get noticed at last. Until immortality was common, I suspect we'd still need a squad of bodyguards around the clock for decades, before we got taken for granted. No, let me show you some fresh countryside."

He turned to Aliyat. "That kind of existence may look glamorous to you, my dear," he continued. "Riches, high society, fame, fun. Maybe you wouldn't mind the dangers, the need for guards—" he chuckled—"provided they're young, handsome, and virile, eh? But please think deeper. How much actual freedom would you have, how much real opportunity?"

"You spoke of finding meaning, purpose, in the Unity," Svoboda said softly, to Aliyat and Macandal both. "Can we not win to it together, we seven? Can we not work secretly for what is good, and do it better than in a glare of light and storm of noise?"

Aliyat's hand lay on the table. Macandal reached to take it in hers.

"Of course, if any of us wants to go out and reveal himself or herself, the rest of us have no way of preventing it," Hanno said. "We can only ask that you give us time to get

well hidden. For my part, I intend to; and I and whoever goes with me will not leave behind any clues to our whereabouts. For one thing, I don't want to be around and visible when this country becomes the People's Republic of America."

"I do not agree that is inevitable," Macandal said. "We may be past that stage of history."

"Maybe. I'll keep my options open."

"That would stick anybody who wanted to unmask with a problem," Wanderer observed. "You've tucked away evidence that you're an immortal, but how could we others prove we weren't lying or crazy?"

"I think we could provide enough indications that the authorities would be willing to wait and see," Macandal said meditatively.

Hanno nodded. "Also," he admitted, "Sam Giannotti whom I've told you about, he'd doubtless feel released from his vow of silence, and he's a respected man."

"Might he talk if we all disappeared?" Svoboda wondered.

"No, in that case he'll have nothing to back so wild a story, and better sense than to spread it. He'll be heartbroken, poor decent fellow, but he'll plug on with the research. I'll try to arrange continued funding for the Rufus Lab, mainly for his sake."

"Do you really mean to liquidate your companies?" Macandal asked. "You would lose . . . what? Hundreds of millions of dollars?"

"I have plenty hoarded, and I can make more," Hanno assured her. "The termination must be done as plausibly as is consistent with speed. Tomek will die and be cremated abroad, in accordance with his wishes. Robert Cauldwell—m-m, something similar had better happen to him, because unfortunately, he's left a potential trail. Joe Levine will get a job offer from an out-of-state firm. . . . Oh, I'll be busy for the rest of this year, but I do have standing preparations for a variety of emergencies, and I expect I can make things fade out in natural-looking ways. There'll be loose ends, inevitably; but then, there generally are in ordinary life, and the investigators will leave them dangling once it seems clear they wouldn't lead to anything much. Policemen don't lack for work, you know. Their lot is not a happy one."

"But you could do so much with the money," she begged. "Yes, and with the power you, we, would have, the influence of our fame, in spite of any drawbacks. So much that cries out for doing."

"Do you feel we are being selfish in wanting to stay hidden?" Svoboda queried.

"Well— Do you, then, want to?"

"Yes. And not for myself, or ourselves. I am afraid for the world."

Wanderer nodded. Svoboda smiled at him, warmly though without mirth. "You don't quite understand," she said in his direction. "You think of nature destroyed, the environment. But I think of humankind. I have seen revolutions, wars, breakdowns, ruin, for a thousand years. We Russians have learned to fear anarchy above all else. We would rather have tyranny than it. Hanno, you do wrong to look on people's republics, strong governments of every kind, as always evil. Freedom is perhaps better, but chaos is worse. If we let go our secret today, we let loose unforeseeable forces. Religion, politics, economics—yes, how shall a world of immortals order its economy?—a million contending dreams and dreads, for which men will war around the world. Can civilization itself endure that? Can the planet?"

"Muhammad came out of nowhere," Aliyat whispered.

"And many another prophet, revolutionary, conqueror," Svoboda said. "The intentions can be noble. But who foresaw that the idea of democracy in France would bring the Reign of Terror, Napoleon, and a generation of war? Who foresaw that after Marx and Lenin would come Stalin and, yes, Hitler? The world volcano already smokes and shivers. Put this new thing in it that nobody ever thought of before, and I would *hope* for a tyranny that can prevent the final explosion; but I wonder if any such rule will be possible."

"It won't be for lack of trying," Hanno said. He had turned entirely grim. "At the bare least, every corrupt politician and fat cat in the West, every totalitarian dictatorship abroad, every dirty little warlord who battens on backwardness, all will jump to screw down their power forever. Yes, death robs us of our loves and finally of ourselves. But death is also good riddance to bad rubbish. Do we dare

change that? My friends, being ageless does not make us gods, and most certainly does not make us God."

16

NEARLY FULL, the moon frosted earth with light and dappled it with shadow. Air had gone still, but hour by hour a breath of autumn flowed down from the mountains. Somewhere an owl hooted, hunting. Windows glowed yellow in houses strewn across miles. They seemed almost as remote as the stars.

Hanno and Svoboda had driven from town, out onto the range, to walk alone. The wish was hers. "Tomorrow evening what was ours begins coming to an end," she had said. "Can we steal a last few hours of peace? This country is very like the homeland I once had, wide and lonely."

Their footfalls crunched on a dirt road. He broke a lengthy silence. "You spoke of peace," he said. Voices were small in the vastness. "We'll have it again, dear. Yes, we've got a frantic time to go through first, and it'll hurt, but afterward— I believe the whole seven of us will be glad of the place we're going to."

"I am sure it is lovely," she replied, "and we will be safely away from the world for as long as we need to be."

"Not forever, remember. In fact, that wouldn't work. We're only gaining another mortal lifetime, the same as so often before. Then we'll have to start fresh under new masks."

"I know. Until someday, perhaps soon, the scientists find immortality by themselves, and we may as well come forth."

"Someday," he said, more skeptically than enthusiastically.

"That is not what I think about, though," Svoboda went on. "Now we must think about us. We seven. It will not be easy. We are so different. And . . . three men, four women."

"We'll work out our arrangements."

"For the rest of time? Nothing to change, ever?"

"Well—" She could hear the reluctance. "Of course none of us can bind the rest. We'll each be free to leave, whenever we like. I do hope we'll stay in touch and ready to give

help. Isn't freedom the whole of what we're trying to keep?"

"No, I do not feel that is enough," she told him gravely. "There must be more. I do not know what it is, not yet. But we must have something beyond survival to live for, or we shall not survive. The future will be too strange."

"The future always was," he answered from his three thousand years.

"What is coming, more strange than ever before." She raised her eyes. Stars gleamed through the moon-glow, golden-red Arcturus, blue-white Altair, Polaris of the sailors, Vega where lately men had found spoor of planets. "In Odysseus, Hamlet, Anna Karenina, we still see ourselves. But tomorrow, will they know those people, or us? Can we understand them, our children?"

She caught his left arm. He laid his right hand across hers, for whatever comfort that might give in the night.

They had talked of this already, a little. Once, while they rested for a day on their long journey from the east, she had guided him in trying to imagine what might happen. . . .

XIX

Thule

1

As IT rose out of the darknesses that had severed it from Hanno, his machine self came back to him. Abruptly he was again down in the world that filled his human vision.

Clouds towered mountain-high. Their nether caverns were full of night and lightning. Their flanks billowed and streamed, streaked with strange tawnies and ochers, where winds beyond all hurricanes roared. Their thunderhead peaks caught sunlight, to blaze white against imperial blue.

Moment by moment the robot lifted, air thinned, linkage strengthened toward fullness. Hanno felt its haste in his bones, the jet thrust like blood and muscle. It burned, brawled, shouted into the storms that grabbed at it, spurned the monstrous gravity underneath. Heaven deepened to purple, to black and stars. Now he saw with eyes open to every color of light from radio to gamma. He tasted and smelled the changing chemistries until they thinned away and radiation sharpened. Sound likewise died; when the ion drive kindled, that was barely a thrum, less in his awareness than the flows of mathematics by which the robot guided itself to rendezvous with his ship.

Throughout, he was also a man looking forth, afloat in silence. At synchronous-orbit distance, he must turn his head a little if he would look from edge to edge of Jupiter. The king planet was at present half daylit. Intricacies wove along the frontiers of belts and zones. The effect was of pallid serenity. Deceptive—how well he knew. He had been there.

After a fashion. No worthwhile transmission could be

made from the lower atmosphere. He would never experience yonder world-ocean, he would watch reconstructions and replays of what the robot had known through robotic senses, unless he ordered the data downloaded into his brain; and that would not be the exploration, but merely the borrowed memory of a machine.

People on Earth had wondered why he went to so much trouble and, yes, risk, for so small and scientifically valueless an accomplishment. He had refrained from arguing, simply replied that he wanted to do this. Having arranged suitable precautions, for a torchcraft mishandled could work more havoc than most ancient wars, the authorities let him. After all, he was the oldest man in existence. One must expect him to keep archaic urges.

They never heard him say, "Trial run."

The robot closed in. Hanno broke contact and uncoupled from the neuroinduction unit. Docking maneuvers would be both tedious and confusing to a human intellect. Masses moved readily enough, but the right phase-in was essential, lest the dance of electromagnetic fields around the ship be perturbed. Let it falter for one second, and the ambient radiation would end a life that began in the early Iron Age.

As always, for a span he felt stunned. The robot's input had been so much greater than anything unaided flesh and blood could ever perceive. Still more had been his partnership, slight though it was, with the computer. Bereft of it, he seemed witless.

The longing receded. He was again Hanno, a man with a man's unique part to play. Few on Earth understood that any longer. They thought they did, and in a way they were right, but they did not think like him.

He made his preparations. When the ship told him, "All clear" he was ready. Obedient to his orders, it calculated the vectors of an optimum course for his next goal. Well aft of him, matter met antimatter and energy flamed. Weight came back. Jupiter drifted across the viewfield until the forward screen held only stars.

Under a one-gee boost, the time between planets was measured in days. He did not have the total freedom of them. Certain regions were lethal, even within his kind of shielding, such as the neighborhood of the sun. Certain were forbidden him, and rightly so. While he could pass

near enough to the Web to admire its spidery vastness through his optical systems, a close approach could trouble some part of its functioning, garble the information it drank in from the universe. Subtlest, most enigmatic, was the scent of beings somewhere yonder in the galaxy.

Never mind. He was no passive passenger. Within the broad limits of law and its capability, the ship would do whatever he wanted. Recycling molecules in patterns tried and true or ingeniously new, it provided every necessity, most comforts, many luxuries. Almost the entire culture of the human race was in its databank, immediately available for his use or pleasure. That included minds for him to summon up when he desired to converse.

Living bodies, besides his own, he forewent. This *was* a trial run, the ship well-nigh minimal. He expected his tour of the Solar System would take a year or two, maybe three if he got really fascinated. That was hardly a blink of time.

Nevertheless, already impatience quivered in him.

2

FROM THE height where it nestled, the shop overlooked the Great Valley of the Appalachians. Forest covered the land below, multitudinously green, a-ripple with wind. Slender spearshafts rose from among the trees, hundreds of meters tall, hundreds in number, each bearing a crown. Far down and across, made hazy by remoteness, the woods gave way to an immensity of lawns. There towers and lower buildings stood widely spaced. Iridescence played over their fantastical shapes.

Tu Shan knew the elven country for an illusion. He had seen the various, always precise forms of those trees close up. They lived not to leaf, flower, and fruit, but to grow materials that no natural plant ever made. The park held—not factories—a technocomplex where another kind of growth went on, atom by atom under the control of giant molecules, tended by machines and overseen by computer, wombs of engines and vessels and other things once made by hands wielding tools. The shafts were rectennas, receiving solar energy beamed as microwaves from collector stations on the moon. He spied it overhead, a wan crescent

nearly lost in the blue, and remembered that "overhead" was also an illusion.

Once men sought enlightenment, escape from the mirage that is the world. Today they held that the phantasm was all there was.

Tu Shan trudged down the knob of rock where the aircab had found a spot to let him out. The shop was a pleasant sight before him, a house in antique style, timber walls and shake roof. Several pines reared behind it. The wind brought their sun-warmed fragrance to him.

He knew it wasn't actually a shop. Bardon usually prepared his electronic displays here because this was where he lived more than anywhere else. However, Express Service took them to his customers, who were scattered across the globe.

He had seen the cab descend and waited on his porch. "Well, howdy," he called. "Haven't heard from you in quite a spell." After a pause, "Goldurn, five years, I bet. Maybe more. Time sure flies, don't it?"

Tu Shan kept still until he reached the other man. He wanted to study him. Bardon had changed. He remained tall and lanky, but he had discarded shirt and trousers in favor of a fashionable scintillant gown; his hair was dressed into ram's-horn curves; when he smiled, his mouth glittered. Yes, he too had decided it was unattractive to regrow outworn teeth every century or so, and gotten the cells in his jaws modified to produce diamond.

His handshake was the same as before. "What've you been up to, friend?" A trace of mountaineer drawl lingered. Perhaps he cultivated it. The past kept some small glamour.

Not respect. How could anyone revere old age when everyone was perpetually young?

"I tried farming," Tu Shan said.

"What? . . . Hey, come in, come in, and we'll have a drink. Man, it is good to see you again."

Tu Shan noticed how Bardon avoided noticing the box he carried.

Most furniture he recognized, but otherwise the interior of the house had become rather stark. It held no trace of wares, nor of a woman. That made for a sense of emptiness, when Anse and June Bardon had been together for as long as he had known them, but Tu Shan felt shy of inquiring.

He took a chair. His host splashed whiskey into glasses—that, at least, was a constant—and settled down facing him.

"You farmed, you say?" Bardon asked. "What do you mean?"

"I sought . . . independence." Tu Shan groped for words. He despised self-pity. "This modern world, I am not at home here. I spent all the basic share I had, together with my savings, and pledged the rest, to buy some hectares in Yunnan that nobody else wanted very much. And animals, and—"

Bardon stared. "You went clear back to subsistence farmin'?"

Tu Shan smiled lopsidedly. "Not quite. I knew that was impossible. I meant to trade what I did not eat for things I needed and could not make myself. I thought home-grown produce would have a novelty value. But no. It became a hard and bitter existence. And the world crowded in anyhow. At last they wanted my land for a recreation lodge. I did not ask what kind. I was glad, then, to sell for a tiny profit."

Bardon shook his head. "You were lucky. You should have talked with me first. I would've warned you. If your food fad caught on, nanotech would duplicate it exactly and undersell you. But chances were, it couldn't succeed in the first place. The computers dream up novelties of every kind faster than people can consume them, or even hear about them."

"Well, I spent most of my life in a simpler world than yours," Tu Shan sighed. "I made my mistake, I have learned my lesson. Now I have made more things for you." He gestured at the box, which rested on his lap. "An elephant, a lotus pattern, and the Eight Immortals, carved in ivory." Tank-grown ivory, but formed by hand, using traditional tools.

Bardon winced, tossed off a mouthful of whiskey, braced himself. "I'm sorry. You should have stayed in touch. I closed down that business three years ago."

Tu Shan sat mute.

"I don't think anybody else is handlin' stuff like this any more, either," Bardon slogged ahead. "The value is gone. Uh, it's not because they can grow perfect copies. Of course

they can. The certification that it's an original in a historic style, that made the difference. Till people stopped carin'."

He hurried on into the silence: "They aren't oafs. We haven't turned into a race of featherheads, whatever you may be thinkin'. It's just that, well, after you've got a few such items, do you want to spend the rest of eternity acquirin' more? Especially when the computers keep generatin' whole new concepts of art."

"I see," Tu Shan said. The words fell dull. "We, the Survivors, we have told and done everything that we had in us. . . . Well, what do you do these days, Anse?"

"Different things," Bardon answered, relieved. "Like you and your friends should."

"What are yours?"

"M-m, well, I'm lookin' around. Haven't found any promisin' line of work yet, but—oh, we've got our lives to develop, don't we? Me, I think I might go into Pioneer Land for a while." Bardon brightened. "You should try somethin' like that. An Asian networkin', maybe. You'd have a lot to contribute, with your background."

Tu Shan shook his head. "Thank you, no."

"Really, you don't just lie around in an electronic dream. You give input to the network, to everybody else linked with you. You come out with memories the same as though you'd lived it in the flesh."

Illusion twice over, Tu Shan thought.

"Are you scared you won't be earnin' anything meanwhile?" persisted Bardon. "Don't worry. You told me you recovered your losses on the farm. Basic share will be plenty for you while you're in retreat. Why, you should come out refreshed, full of ideas for new enterprises."

"You may," Tu Shan mumbled. "I would not." He stared down at his hands where they lay on the box, his big useless hands.

3

FIERA, WHO had been Raphael, formed a slow smile. "Oh, yes," she purred. "I do enjoy being a woman."

"Will you always be?" asked Aliyat; and inwardly: Did he always want this, down underneath? Even when we were making love?

Half a cry: You were such a fine lover, Ray! Strong, sweet, knowing. Did you understand how it hurt when you told me you were going to get yourself remade?

The beautiful head shook. Tresses, naturally violet, rippled over shoulders. "I think not. Long enough to explore it, however long that may be. Afterward—we'll see. By then they expect to have nonhuman modifications perfected." Fiera stroked fingers down her flanks. "Half otter, or dolphin, or snake— But that's for later, much later. I imagine first I'll be some kind of man again."

"Some kind!" escaped Aliyat.

Fiera raised her brows. "You are dismayed, are you not? Poor dear, is that why I've had no word or sign of you in all this time?"

"No, I, well—" Aliyat looked away from the image that seemed wholly solid. "I was—" She forced herself to meet the golden gaze. "I thought you didn't care about me any more."

"But I told you I did. Believe me, I was sincere. I still care. Why else would I finally have taken the initiative?" Hands reached out. "Aliyat, darling, come to me. Or let me come to you."

"For what, . . . now?"

Fiera stiffened the least bit. Some warmth dropped from her tone. "We'll find out, won't we? Don't tell me you're shocked. Or was I wrong? I thought you were by far the most open-minded of the Survivors."

Aliyat swallowed. "It isn't that. I'm not inhibited. It's only— No, it isn't 'only.' You've changed everything. Nothing could be what it was."

"Certainly not. That's the whole idea." Fiera laughed. "Suppose you turn male. We should find that interesting. Not unique, but special. Piquant."

"No!"

Fiera sat a minute silent. When she spoke, she had gone earnest. "You're like the rest of your kind after all. Or perhaps worse. I gather most of them make some effort to cope. You, though, you . . . accept. Suddenly I realize that's what fooled me. You never railed against the world. You agreed it was bound to evolve onward. But under that surface, you've stayed what you were, a primitive, a leftover from the age of mortality."

Aliyat's defiance guttered out. She slumped. The sensuousness of the seat reshaping itself as she did was lost on her. "No doubt you're right."

Fiera smiled anew, this time sweetly. "You aren't condemned to that, you know. The whole organism is pliable, including the brain. You can have your psyche altered."

"Long-drawn. Expensive. Actually, I couldn't afford a simple sex change." Simple! flickered through Aliyat. I remember when they faked it with surgery and hormone shots. Today they cause organs, glands, muscles, bones, everything to grow into something else. If I became a genuine man, what would I *think* like?

"Haven't you understood modern economics yet? All goods and most services—all services a machine can give—are as abundant as the air we breathe. Or could be, if there were any reason. Share is simply the easiest means of, oh, keeping track, coordinating what people do. And, yes, allocating resources that are limited; land, for instance. If you genuinely need liberation from your misery, arrangements can be made. I'll help you make them." Again the image extended its arms. "Dearest, let me."

Aliyat straightened. The tears that she swallowed burned in her throat. "'Dearest,' you say. What do you mean by that?"

Taken aback, Fiera hesitated before replying slowly, "I'm fond of you. I want your company available to me, I want your welfare."

Aliyat nodded. "What love amounts to these days. Affection because of enjoyment."

Flora bit her lip. "There you are, mired in the past. When the family was the unit for breeding, production, defense, and its members must needs find ways not to feel trapped. You can't imagine the modern range of emotions; you refuse to try." She shrugged. "Odd, considering the life you led then. But I suppose you nursed an unconscious longing for security—what passed for security in those nightmare societies."

Aliyat recalled explaining to Raphael what a nightmare was.

"How selfish were your feelings about me?" Fiera demanded.

Anger cracked a whip. "Don't flatter yourself," Aliyat

said. "I'll admit I was infatuated, but I knew that'd end. I did hope it would turn into something that would last, not exclusive, no, but something real. All right, I've learned better."

"I had that hope too!" Fiera cried.

She sank back into her own seat. Once more she fell silent, thoughtful. Aliyat's gaze went off in search of refuge. She occupied a single room on the fourth sublevel of the Fountains; technology would never synthesize space. It seldom felt cramped, when the walls formed facilities on command and otherwise provided any scenes she wanted. Earlier today, rather than a contemporary view, she had raised medieval Constantinople. Maybe that was due a nostalgia she knew was unjustified, maybe it was an attempt at getting back self-esteem; she'd been a principal consultant to the developers of the simulacrum. Hagia Sophia soared above swarming, jostling humanity. Odors of smoke, sweat, dung, roasting food, tar, sea livened the air; it moved, a salt breeze off the Horn. When Fiera's visicall came, Aliyat had stopped the sound but kept the vision. She could virtually hear wheels, hoofs, feet, raucous voices, snatches of plangent music. Those ghosts were as alive as the ghost that confronted her.

Finally Fiera said, "I believe I know what drew you to me—what held you, after the first casual attraction. I was interested in you. I didn't take you for granted. You eight were a sensation once you came into the open, but by now most people were born later than that. You're simply here, getting along on share or on what occasional special jobs somebody happens to want done. Fewer and fewer of those, aren't there? But I—to me you were a bit intriguing. I'm not sure why."

Aliyat thought she heard her suppress whatever pain she had permitted before she went on: "I'll be honest. I used you up. I found nothing further to discover. But then, I'd used myself up. I *had* to change. It was my escape from boredom and futility. Now we can find freshness in each other again, if you wish. Only for a while, though, a short while, until I've become used to perceiving you with a female mind and senses. Unless you change too. How, I can't tell you. At best, I can offer a suggestion or two. The choice must be yours.

"If you refuse, if you stay in your narrow existence with

your fossil soul, you'll be more and more isolated, you'll find less and less meaning in anything, and at last you'll choose death because it is not that lonely."

Aliyat drew the ancient air into her lungs. "I kept going this long," she said. "I'm not about to give up."

"I'm glad to hear that. I expected it of you. But think, my dear, think. Meanwhile, best I go."

"Yes," Aliyat said. The image vanished.

After some minutes Aliyat rose. She stalked the floor. It yielded slightly, deliciously to her feet. Byzantium surged around her. "Blank that scene," she snapped. Pastel blue succeeded it. "Delivery Service." A panel came into existence, ready to open an orifice.

What do I want? A happy pill? Chemistry tailored to me, harmless, instant cheerfulness, head quite clear, probably more clear than it is at this moment. In the bad old days we got drunk or smoked dope, abused our bodies and our brains. Now science has mapped how feelings work, and everybody is sane every hour of the twenty-four.

Everybody who decides to be.

Hanno, Wanderer, Shan, Patulcius, where are you? Or—never mind sex, that's an old-fashioned consolation, isn't it?—Corinne, Asagao, Svoboda—whatever you're calling yourselves, a name's become as changeable as a garment—where are you? Which of you can come to me, or I to you? We had our fellowship after we got together, we were the only immortals and the middle of each other's universe while time blew by outside like the wind, but since we came forth we've drifted apart, we meet by accident and seldom, we say hello and try to talk and feel relieved when it ends. Where are my brothers, my sisters, my loves?

4

WHILE HE flew, communications verified that Wanderer was the person he claimed to be and had a permit to visit the control reserve. His car landed as directed, in a parking lot outside town, and he emerged suitcase in hand. Many everyday things, such as clothes, were not spot-produced here. He had reached—not exactly a hermit community, not a settlement of eccentrics trying to re-create a past that never

was—but a society that went its own way and held much of the world at arm's length.

The lot was near the water's edge. Weather Service maintained the original Pacific Northwest climate as closely as was feasible. Clouds hung heavy. Mist swirled on the bay, making vague the rocks that towered from the waves, mysterious, like a Chinese painting. The conifer forest stood mighty behind the village, its darkness hardly relieved by splashes of bracken. Yet this was all alive, in silver-gray, white, black, greens deep or bright and asparkle with remnant raindrops. Surf boomed and whispered. Seals barked hoarsely, gulls hovered and dipped and mewed. Breath went cool, moist, tangy through nostrils to blood.

A man waited. Clad in plain shirt and work pants, he was stocky and brown-skinned. Not many whites among his ancestors, Wanderer decided. What had they been, then? Makah, Quinault? No difference. Tribes were hardly even names any more.

"Hello, Mr. Wanderer." There was an anachronism for you. The man extended his hand. Wanderer took it, felt calluses and sturdiness. "Welcome. I'm Charlie Davison."

Wanderer had practiced old-time American English before he left Jalisco. "Glad to meet you. I didn't expect this. Figured I'd get acquainted on my own."

"Well, we talked it over in the Council and decided this was better. You're not just another jako." That must be local slang for the few hundred outsiders a year allowed to experience the wilderness. It sounded mildly contemptuous. "Nor a scientist or official agent, are you?"

"N-no."

"Come on, I'll see you to the hotel, and later I'll sort of introduce you around." They started off. Soon they were on an unpaved road where puddles glimmered. "Because you're a Survivor."

Wanderer's smile twitched rueful. "I didn't want to advertise that right away."

"We ran a routine check before agreeing you could come, same as we do for everybody. You eight may go pretty much unnoticed, but you sure were famous once. Your background popped right out of the scan. Word got around. I hate to say this, nothing personal, but you'll find some folks here who resent you."

That was an ugly surprise. "Really? Why?"

"You Survivors can have children whenever you like."

"I . . . see." Wanderer considered how to respond. Gravel scrunched underfoot. "Jealousy isn't reasonable, though. We're freaks of nature. A crazy combination of genes, including several unlikely mutations, that doesn't breed true. Normal human beings who don't want to age have to undergo the process. Well, we can't then let them reproduce freely. Remember your history, population explosion, the Great Death, and that was before athanatics."

"I know." Davison sounded a bit miffed. "Who doesn't?"

"Sorry, but I have met quite a few who don't. They think history's too depressing to study. I point out to them that they'll have their chance to be parents eventually. There are accidental losses to make up, and interplanetary colonies may yet be founded."

"Yeah. The waiting list for children was several centuries long, last time I looked."

"Uh-huh. But as for us Survivors, ever hear of a grandfather clause? By revealing ourselves, we opened up a treasure trove for scholars. Fair is fair. As a matter of fact, we hardly ever do become parents." We hardly ever have partners who are eligible. And any offspring we have grew too soon alien.

"I understand all that," Davison said. "I don't object, myself. I'm only telling you we'd better be, uh, tactful. That's a reason why I met you."

"I do appreciate it." Wanderer attempted to drive his point home: "You might remind those objectors to my status that they can beget kids every bit as lawfully, no limit."

"Because they're willing to shrivel and die in a hundred years or less."

"That's the bargain. They can drop out whenever they choose, get youth restored if they've lost it, join the immortals. There is simply that small, necessary price to pay."

"Sure, sure, sure," Davison snapped. "Think we've never heard?" After half a dozen strides: "My turn to say, 'Sorry.' I didn't mean to sound mad. To most of us, you'll be very welcome. What yarns you have to spin!"

"Nothing you can't play off the databank, I'm afraid," Wanderer said. "We were questioned and interviewed dry many years ago."

Generations before you were born, Charlie, if your lineage is purely mortal. How old are you? Forty, fifty? I see white sown through your hair and crow's-feet at your eyes.

"Not the same," Davison answered. "Good Lord, I'm in company with a man who knew Sitting Bull!" Actually, Wanderer had not, but he let it pass. "Hearing it from you in person means so much more. Don't you forget, our whole idea is to live naturally, like God intended."

"That's why I've come."

Davison's pace faltered. He stared. "What? We supposed you were . . . interested, like the rest of our visitors."

"I am. Of course. But more than that. I guess we'd better not mention this immediately. However, I think I might settle here, if people will have me."

"You?" asked amazement.

"I go way back, you know. To the tribes, the brotherhoods, rites and beliefs and traditions, living by our wits and hands off the land and of the land. Oh, I'm not romantic about it. I remember the drawbacks too clearly, and would certainly not want to revive, say, the horse barbarians. But still, damn it, we had a, a oneness with our world such as doesn't exist now, except maybe among you."

They were entering the village. Boats rocked at the wharf; men fished for the local market. Kitchen gardens and apple trees burgeoned behind neatly made wooden houses. Mere supplements, Wanderer must remind himself, like their handicrafts. The dwellers spend share and order stuff delivered, same as the rest of us. For added earnings, some of them take care of these woods and waters; or they attend to the tourists; or they do brainwork out of their homes, over the computer net. They haven't disowned the modern world.

He thrust away memories of what he had witnessed elsewhere around the planet, the deaths slow or swift, always anguished, that overtook obsolete communities and ways of life, the ghost towns, empty campsites, forsaken graves. Instead, he searched about him for the secret of this folk's endurance.

Those on the street were a mingled lot, every race of mankind, together in their faith, wish, and fear. A church, tallest of their buildings, lifted its steeple cloudward; the cross on top declared that life eternal was not of the flesh

but of the soul. Children were the desire, the reward. When and where else had Wanderer last seen a small hand clutching mother's, a round face turned his way to marvel? Calm gray heads bore the sense of having staved off dehumanization.

They recognized the newcomer; word had indeed gotten about. None crowded close. Their greetings to Davison were self-conscious, and Wanderer felt the looks, heard the buzz at his back. Not that the atmosphere was hostile. Doubtless only a minority begrudged him his privilege, as nearly meaningless as it was. Most seemed as if they looked forward to knowing him, and were simply too polite to introduce themselves at once. (Or else, since they were few and close-knit, it had been agreed they wouldn't.) Adolescents instantly lost the sullenness that hung on them.

That last struck Wanderer first as peculiar, then as disturbing. He paid closer attention. The elderly were a bare handful. Drawn shades and neglected yards showed what houses stood vacant.

"Well, you begin by relaxing and enjoying yourself," Davison advised. "Take the tours. Meet the jakos. They're okay, we screen 'em pretty carefully. How about dinner at my place tomorrow? My wife's anxious to meet you too, the kids are starry-eyed, and we'll invite two-three other couples that I think you'll like."

"You're awfully kind."

"Oh, I'll benefit, and Martha, and—" The hotel was ahead, a rambling structure whose antiquarian verandah looked over the bay and the sea beyond. Davison slowed his gait and lowered his voice. "Listen, we don't just want to hear stories from you. We want to ask about . . . details, the kind that don't get in the news or the databank, the kind we don't notice ourselves when we go outside, because we don't know what to watch for."

The chill deepened in Wanderer. "You mean you wish I'd explain how life there feels to me—to a person who didn't grow up in those ways?"

"Yes, that's it, if you please. I realize I'm asking a lot, but, well—"

"I'll try," Wanderer said.

Unspoken: You're giving serious thought to moving away,

Charlie, to renouncing this whole existence and creed and purpose.

I knew the enclave is shrinking, that its children usually leave soon after they reach legal adulthood, that recruits have become vanishingly scarce. I knew it's as doomed as the Shakers were in their day. But your middle-aged are also quitting, so quietly that the fact wasn't in what I studied about you. I'd hoped for a mortal lifetime or two of peace, of belonging. Set that aside, Wanderer.

Guests were clustered on the porch. They pointed and jabbered. He stopped and turned to see. Barely visible through the haze, three giant shapes slipped past the mouth of the bay.

"Whales," Davison told him. "They're multiplying fine. We spot more every year."

"I know," said Wanderer. "Right whales, those. I remember when they were declared extinct." I wept.

They were recreated in the laboratories, reintroduced to a nature that is completely managed. This is no wilderness other than in name. It's a control reserve, a standard of comparison for Ecological Service to use. No true wilderness is left, anywhere on Earth, unless in the human heart, and there too the intellect knows how to govern.

I shouldn't have come here. Now I'll have stay a week or so, for courtesy's sake, for the sake of this man and his kin; but I should have known better than to come.

I should be stronger than to let this hurt me so.

5

NOWHERE WAS Yukiko ever alone with the stars.

Solitude she could have, yes. The powers and, mostly, the people were gracious to Survivors. She often thought that graciousness had become the common and principal virtue of humanity. It led to an impersonal kindliness. Unhindered room was the sole good in which the world was impoverished. Nevertheless, when she expressed her longing, this atoll became hers. Minuscule though it be, that was an Aladdin's gift.

Yet the stars were denied her.

A few blinked wan after dark, Sirius, Canopus, Alpha

Centauri, sometimes others, together with Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. Their constellations lost in the nacreous luminance, she was rarely sure which she saw. Satellites twinkled swift across heaven. The moon shone mistily, and on its dark part she made out steady sparks, the light of technocomplexes and the Triple City. Aircraft went in firefly swarms. Occasionally a spacecraft passed, majestic meteor, and thunders rolled from horizon to horizon; but that was seldom, most operations being off Earth and robotic.

She had resigned herself to the loss. Weather control, atmosphere maintenance, massive energy transfers were necessary; they caused fluorescence; that was that. She could fill the walls and ceiling of her house with a starscape as grand as if she stood in an Arizona desert before Columbus, or she could visit a sensorium and know naked space. Still, ungratefully, when she was outdoors in this her refuge, she wished she didn't have to conjure the night sky out of memories.

The ocean murmured. Reflection sheened off much of it, where aquaculture did not blanket the waves. Brightnesses bobbed yonder, boats, ships, a bargetown plodding along. Surf made white unrest beyond the lagoon, which was a well of sky-glow. The noise felt hushed, less loud than coral gritting beneath her feet. Her lungs drank cool purity. Each day she wordlessly thanked untold gigabillions of microorganisms for keeping the planet clean. That humans—computers—had designed and produced them to do it made no difference; theirs was a wonderful karma.

She passed by her garden, dwarf trees, bamboo, stones, twining paths. A machine was noiselessly busy there. Newly returned from Australia, where she had found herself involved in one more fleeting affair, she hadn't thus far taken over that work again.

Well, she wasn't very gifted for it. If only Tu Shan—but he didn't like these surroundings.

Her house lay shadowy, a small and subtle blending of curves. Her worldlet, she was apt to think. It provided or had brought to her everything she needed and more. Self-repairing, it could do so for as long as the energy arrived. Now and then she wished it would make sense for her to take a dusting cloth in her hand.

And I was once a lady of the court, she thought. Wryness tugged her lips upward.

Dismiss those feelings. She had gone to sit by the sea and empty her mind, open her soul, until she felt ready to use her intelligence. Whatever harmony she had won to was fragile.

A wall opened for her. Light bloomed within. The room was furnished in ascetic ancient style. She knelt on a straw mat before the computer terminal and raised the electronic spirit.

A portion of that immense rationality identified her and spoke in suitable, musical language and phrases. "What is your desire, my lady?"

No, not really suitable. Desire was the snare. She had even forsaken her old, old name of Morning Glory and become—once again, after a thousand years—Small Snow, as a sign to herself of renunciation. But that too had failed. "I have meditated on what you told me about life and intelligence among the stars, and decided to learn as much of this as I am able. Teach me."

"It is a matter complex and chaotic, my lady. As far as the exploratory robots have taken our knowledge, life is rare, and only three unmistakably sentient species are known, all technologically in an equivalent of the human paleolithic era. Three others are controversial. Their behavior may be elaborately instinctive, or it may arise in minds too unlike the Terrestrial to be recognizable as such. Whatever they are, these creatures too possess only simple implements. On the other hand, the Web has detected anomalous radiation sources at greater distances, which may mean high-energy civilizations analogous to ours. Depending on how the data are interpreted, they may number as many as seven hundred fifty-two. The nearest is at an estimated remove of four hundred seventy-five parsecs. Additionally, the Web is receiving signals that are almost certainly informational from twenty-three different sources, identified with bodies or regions that are astrophysically unusual. We doubt that these signals are directed at us especially. We do not know whether any transmitters are in direct contact with each other. There are indications that they use distinct codes. Data thus far are insufficient for more than the most tentative and fragmentary suggestions of possible meaning."

"I know! Everybody does. You've told me already, and it was unnecessary then."

Yukiko fought down irritation. The machine was godlike in its power, it could do a million years' worth of human reasoning in a day, but it had no right to patronize her. . . . It didn't intend to. It habitually repeated itself to humans because many of them needed that. She eased, let the emotion surge and die like a wave. Calm, she said, "As I understand it, the messages are not about mathematics or physics."

"They do not appear to be, and it seems implausible that civilizations would spend time and bandwidth exchanging knowledge that all must certainly possess. Perhaps they concern other sciences, such as biology. However, that implies that our understanding of physics is incomplete, that we have not by now delineated every possible kind of biochemistry in the universe. We have no evidence for such an assumption."

"I know," Yukiko repeated, but patiently. "And I've heard the argument that it can't be politics or anything like that, when transmission times are in centuries. Do they compare histories, arts, philosophies?"

"Conceivably."

"I believe that. It would make sense." Unless organic life withers away. But won't machine minds also wonder about the ultimate? "I want to master your . . . analysis. I'm aware I can't make any contribution, nothing original. Let me follow along, though. Give me the means to think about what you have learned and are learning."

"That could be done, within limits," said the gentle voice. "It would require much time and effort on your part. Do you care to explain your reasons?"

Yukiko couldn't help it, her words trembled. "They, those beings, they must be advanced far beyond us—"

"Not likely, my lady. To the best of present-day knowledge, and it appears seamless, nature sets bounds on technological possibilities; and we have determined what those bounds are."

"I don't mean in engineering, I mean in, in understanding, enlightenment." Inner peace was gone. Her pulse stammered. "You don't see what I'm talking about. Would anybody nowadays, any human being?" Except Tu Shan and perhaps, if they tried, the rest of our fellowship. We hark back to when people felt these questions were real.

"Your purpose is clear," said the electronics mildly. "Your concept is not absurd. Quantum mechanics fails at such levels of complexity. Mathematically speaking, chaos sets in, and one must make empirical observations."

"Yes, yes! We must learn the language and listen to them!"

Did she hear regret within the inexorability? The system could optimize its reactions for her. "My lady, what information we have is totally inadequate. The mathematics leaves no doubt. Unless the character of what we receive changes in fundamental ways, we shall never be able to interpret it for any such subtleties. Be warned, if that is what interests you, studying the material will be an utter waste of your time."

She had not dared lift hopes too high, but this smashed down upon her.

"Instead, wait," counselled the system. "Remember, our robotic explorers travel at virtual light speed. They should begin arriving at the nearer sources, to observe and interact, in about a millennium. Perhaps fifteen centuries after that, we will begin to hear from them, and truly begin to learn. You are immortal, my lady. Wait."

She smothered tears. I am not a saint. I cannot endure that long while existence has no meaning.

6

SUDDENLY, WARNINGLESS, the rock gave way under Tersten's boots. For an instant he seemed frozen, arms flung wide, against an infinity of stars. Then he toppled from sight.

Svoboda, second in file, had time to thump her staff down and squeeze the firing button. Gas jetted white from vents as a piton shot into stone. The barrel locked onto the upper part of the shaft. She clung. The line slammed taut. Even under lunar gravity, that force was brutal. Her soles skidded on a treacherously thin dust layer. Gripping the staff, she kept upright.

Violence ended. Silence pressed on the faint cosmic hiss in her earplugs. She had been yanked forward about two meters. The line continued upslope and over a verge formed when the ledge they had been following went to pieces. It

should have been strained tight by Tersten's weight. She saw with horror that it drooped slack. Had it broken? No, it couldn't have.

"Tersten!" she cried. "Are you all right?" The wavelength diffracted around the edge. If he hung there, it was only about a meter below. She got no response. The seething gibed.

She turned her head more than her body toward Mswati behind her. His beltflash cast a pool of undiffused light at his feet. Through a well-nigh invisible helmet it dazzled her, made him a shadow against the starlit gray of the mountainside. "Come here," she ordered. "Carefully, carefully. Take hold of my staff."

"Yes," he acknowledged. Though she hadn't been leading the climb, she was the team captain. The expedition was her idea. Moreover, she was a Survivor. The others were in their twenties or thirties. Beneath all the informality and fellowship, they bore a certain awe of her.

"Stand by," she said when he reached her. "I'm going ahead to look. If more crumbles, I'll try to spring back, and may well fall off the ledge. Be prepared to brake me and haul me up."

"No, I will go," he protested. She dismissed that with a chopping gesture and set off on hands and knees.

It was a short crawl, but time stretched while she felt her way forward. On her right a cliff went nearly sheer into a nightful abyss. Flexible as skin, tough as armor, her spacesuit wouldn't protect her against such a fall. Vision searched and probed. Sensors in the gloves told her more through her hands than they could have learned naked. At the back of her mind, it annoyed that she should be aware of sweat-smells and dry mouth. While the suit recycled air and water, at the moment she was overloading its thermostat and capacity for breaking down wastes.

The suface held. The ledge continued beyond a three-meter gap. She made out pockmarks near the break in it. So, she thought—she must not agonize over Tersten, not yet—once in the past a shotgun meteoroid shower had struck here. Probably radiation spalling then weakened the stone further, turning that section into an unforeseeable trap.

Well, everybody had said this undertaking was crazy. The

first lunar circumambulation? To go clear around the moon on foot? *Why?* You'll endure toil and hardship and danger, for what? You won't carry out any observations a robot can't do better. You won't gain anything but a fleeting notoriety, largely for your foolishness. Nobody will ever repeat the stunt. There are gaudier thrills to be had in a sensorium, higher achievements among the computers.

"Because it is real," was the best retort she found.

She came to the edge and put her head over. On the horizon a sliver of rising sun shone above a crater. It turned desolation into a jumble of light and dark. Her helmet saved her eyesight by immediately stopping the glare down to a dull gold. Elsewhere it stayed clear. Her heart thuttered. Tersten dangled beneath her, limp. She loudened radio reception and heard snoring breath.

"He's unconscious," she reported to Mswati. Examining: "I see what the trouble is. His line caught in a crack on this verge. Impact jammed it in tight." She rose to her knees and tugged. "I can't free it. Come."

The young man joined her. She rose. "We don't know how he's injured," she said. "We must be gentle. Secure the end of my line and lower me over the side. I'll clasp him and you haul us both in, me on the bottom to absorb any shocks and scrapes."

That went well. Both were strong, and, complete with spacesuit and backpack full of intricate chemistries, a person weighed only some twenty kilos. While he was in her arms Tersten opened his eyes and moaned.

They laid him out on the ledge. Waiting till he could speak, Svoboda gazed west. The heights dropped down toward a level darkness that was Mare Crisium. Earth hung low, daylit part marbled white and blue, unutterably lovely. Memories of what it had once been struck like a knife. Damnation, why did that have to be the one solitary planet fit for humans?

Oh, the lunar cities and the inhabited satellites were pleasant, and unique diversions were available there. She was more at home in them than on Earth, actually—or, rather, was less an exile. Their people, such as these her comrades, sometimes thought and felt much as people used to think and feel. Though that too was changing. On which account you scarcely ever heard talk about terraforming

Mars and Venus any longer. Now when it could be done, hardly anybody was interested.

Well, she and her seven kin had always known change. Merchant princes and brawling warriors were strangers to petty bourgeoisie and subservient peasants under the Tsars, who in turn were foreign to twentieth-century engineers and cosmonauts. . . . Yet they had all shared most of what they were with each other, and with her. How many still did?

Tersten brought her from her memories when he gasped, "I'm awake" and struggled to sit up. She knelt, urged caution, helped and supported him. "Water," he said. The suit swung a tube to his mouth and he drank greedily. "A-a-ah, good."

Concern furrowed Mswati's chocolate countenance. "How are you?" he asked. "What happened?"

"How should I know?" Clarity and a little vigor returned to Tersten's voice as he talked. "Sore in the belly, sharp pains in my lower left chest, especially when I bend or take a deep breath. Earache, also."

"Sounds like a cracked or broken rib, maybe two," Svoboda said. Relief overwhelmed her. He could have been killed, suffered such brain damage that revivification would have been pointless. "My guess is that a falling boulder hit you with more force than your suit could withstand. Hm, yes, see." Her finger traced the semblance of a scar. The fabric had been ripped open, and promptly closed itself again. Within an hour it would be completely healed. "Everything conspired against us, didn't it? We're not going to scale this mountain. No matter. It was hardly more than a whim of ours. Let's get you back down to camp."

Tersten insisted he could walk, and managed a gait halfway between a step and a shuffle. "We'll call for a vehicle to fetch you," Mswati said. As if to confirm, a relay satellite flitted across the constellations. "The rest of us can finish. It will be easier going from here than it was on farside."

Tersten bridled. "No, you don't! I'll not be cheated out of this."

Svoboda smiled. "Have no worries," she reassured. "I'm sure you'll just need a knitpatch or two injected, and they can return you to us in fifty hours or so. We'll wait where we are. Frankly, I wouldn't mind slacking off that long." An inner glow: My kind of human is not altogether extinct.

Bleakness: How many years can you remain what you are, Tersten? You'll have no reason to.

Do I keep young in spirit, or merely immature? Has our history damned us, the Survivors, to linger retarded while our descendants evolve beyond our comprehension?

The plateau and camp came in view. Genia ran to meet the party. Someone must stay behind in case of trouble. She had gotten the shelter deployed. More a mothering organism than a tent, it spread beneath the radiation shields that curved like wings from the top of the freight carrier. "Tersten, Tersten!" she called. "I was terrified, listening in. If we'd lost you—" She reached them. All four embraced. For that moment, at least, under the stars, Svoboda was again among beloved friends.

7

"YOU SEE," Patulcius strove to explain, "what I have done is what the old Americans would have called 'worked myself out of a job.'"

The curator of Oxford, who for reasons unrevealed to him currently used the name Theta-Ennea, lifted her brows. She was comely in a gaunt fashion, but he never doubted that under the plumes growing from her otherwise bare scalp lay a formidable brain. "The record indicates that you served well," she said—or did she sing? "However, why do you suppose you might find occupation here?"

Patulcius glanced from her, through the glass window of her almost as anachronistic office. Outside, wind chased sunlight and cloud shadows along High Street. Across it dreamed the beautiful buildings of Magdalen College. Three persons wandered by, looking, occasionally touching. He suspected they were young, though of course you couldn't tell. "This isn't simply a museum," he replied after a moment. "People do live in the town. The preservation of things puts them in special relationships among themselves and to you. I imagine that makes a kind of community. My experience— They must have problems, nothing too serious but nevertheless problems, questions of conflicting rights, duties, wants. You must have mediational procedures. Procedures are my strong point."

"Can you be more specific?" Theta-Ennea asked.

Patulcius turned his gaze back to her. "I would first have to know the situation, the nature of the community, customs and expectations as well as rules and regulations," he admitted. "I can learn quickly and well." He smiled. "I did for two thousand years and more."

"Ah, yes." Theta-Ennea gave back the smile. "Naturally, when you requested an interview, I tapped the databank about you. Fascinating. From Rome of the Caesars through the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, the Turkish Republic, the Dynasts, and— Yes, a story as marvelous as it is long. That is why I invited you to come in person." Ruefully: "I too have an outmoded preference for concreteness and immediacy. Therefore I hold this position." She sighed. "It is not a sinecure. I confess I have not had time to assimilate everything about you."

Patulcius manufactured a chuckle. "Frankly, I'm glad of that. I didn't enjoy the burst of fame when we Survivors manifested ourselves. Gradually becoming obscure again was . . . pleasant."

Theta-Ennea leaned back behind her desk, which was of plain wood, possibly an antique, and bore nothing except a small omniterminal. "If I recall rightly, you joined the other seven quite late."

Patulcius nodded. "After the bureaucratic structure finally and irreversibly collapsed around me. We'd kept in touch, of course, and they made me welcome, but I've never been, m-m, intimate with them."

"Is that why you made more of an effort than they to become integrated with the modern world?"

Patulcius shrugged. "Perhaps. I'm not given to self-analysis. Or perhaps I just happened to have an opportunity none of them did. My talent, such as it is, is for—no, 'administration' claims too much. Operations maintenance; the humble but essential chores that keep the social machinery running. Or that used to."

Theta-Ennea drooped her lids and regarded him closely before she said, "You have done more than that in the past fifty or a hundred years."

"Conditions were unique. For the first time in a long time, they were such that I was qualified to take a hand in coping. No credit to me. Historical happenstance. I am being honest with you. But I did gain experience."

Again she pondered. "Would you please explain? Give me your interpretation of those conditions."

He blinked, surprised, and spoke hesitantly. "I have nothing but banalities. . . . Well, if you insist. The advanced countries—no, I should say the high-technology civilization—had gone so far, so fast. It and the societies that had not assimilated the revolution, they became like different species. It had to absorb them, the alternatives were all horrible, but the gap in ways of living, thinking, understanding, was huge. I was among the few who could . . . talk, function . . . more or less effectively on both sides of that gap. I gave what assistance I could to those poor people, developing suitable organization to get them through the transition—when *your* people no longer had an old-fashioned, paper-shuffling, purely human bureaucracy, and were not sure how to build one. That is what I did. I did not do it alone by any means," he finished. "My apologies for lecturing on the obvious."

"It is not absolutely obvious," Theta-Ennea said. "You speak from a viewpoint that has no counterpart anywhere. I would like to hear much more. It should help me come nearer empathizing with those scores of generations who made this place what it was. Because I never quite could, you see. With all the curiosity and, yes, all the love in the world, I have never quite been able to feel what they felt."

She rested her arms on the desktop and went on compassionately, "But you, Gnaeus Cornelius Patulcius, and the many other names you have borne—in spite of them, in spite of your recent engagements, you also have yet to understand. No, I have no job for you. You should have known as much. Since you did not, how can I explain?

"You assumed this must be a community in some sense, like those where you were, where the dwellers share certain interests and a certain sense of common identity. I have to tell you—this isn't simple, it isn't ever spelled out; hardly anybody realizes what is happening, just as hardly anybody in the time of Augustus or of Galileo realized what was happening—but I spend my life trying to fathom the currents of history—" Her laugh was forlorn. "Pardon me, let me back up and start over.

"Except for a few moribund enclaves, community in a general sense has dissolved. We still use the word and go

through some of the forms, but they are nearly as empty as a fertility rite or an election would be. Today we are purely individuals. Our loyalties, if 'loyalty' has any meaning left, are to various and ever-varying configurations of personalities. Has this fact wholly escaped you?"

"Well, uh, well, no," Patulcius floundered, "but—"

"I can offer you nothing in the way of work," Theta-Ennea finished. "I doubt anyone anywhere can, any longer. However, if you care to stay a while in Oxford, we can talk. I think we might learn something from each other."

For whatever help that may be to you afterward, she left unsaid.

8

THE WORLD abides. I am still I, bone, blood, and flesh, aware of the induction unit that enwraps me but also of walls and their views across the outside, silvery-hued turf, a fountain arcing in fractals, an enormous shell of diamond within which, I have heard, grows a new kind of comet-mining spacecraft, flashes in the sky as a weather control module implants energy, the allness exterior to me. So quiet is this room that I hear my breath go in and out, my pulse, the rustle of hair when my head moves on the couch. What happens to me is a waxing of interior cognizance until soon it is the outside that is the ghost.

I descend into myself. My whole past opens to my ranging. Again I am a slave, a fugitive, a servant, a leader, a companion; again I love and lose, bear and bury. I lie on a sunlit hillside with my man, the clover smell and buzz of bees are sweet to know, we watch a butterfly pass; it is gone, these five hundred years.

There are blurs, there are gaps. I am not sure whether lichen grew on yonder stone. Yes, quantum randomness gathers its tax—but slowly, and I can renew what matters, even as my body renews itself. A neuropeptide links to the receptor on a nerve cell. . . .

Come. The thought is not mine. It becomes mine. I am conducted, I conduct myself, onward and inward.

Thus far went my training. Today I am ready for oneness.

I do not go into the network. Nothing moves but those fields, mathematical functions, that the world perceives as

forces, particles, light, itself. In a sense the network enters me. Or it unfolds before me, as I before it.

My guide takes form. No shape walks beside me, no hand holds mine. Nonetheless I am conscious of the body, though it may lie halfway around the planet, in the way that I am conscious of my own. His person is tall, slender, blue-eyed. His personality is blithe and sensuous. *You were once Flora (I learn of you),* he thinks to me. *Then I will be Faunus.* He would like us to meet afterward for purposes of exploration. That is the merest ripple through an intelligence born of a brain made flawless. He has the gift of sympathy too, that he may help a neophyte such as me begin to partake.

Timidly, then warily, then ardently I mesh the flow of my identity with his. Thereby I more and more know the entire linkage. I have studied an abstraction. Today I am in and of the reality. Currents go like billows, cresting, troughing, weaving new waves. From them spring figures many-patterned and crystalline as snowflakes, brilliancies that expand outward through multiple dimensions, shift, flicker, dance in eternal change; and this is the language and the music that speak to me. Afar, immanent, core, outermost, the great computer sustains the matrices of our beings, vivifies them, sends them on their orbits and summons them home. Yet it is at our behest. We are what happens, the oneness, the god.

We. Minds reach forth, touch, join. Here is Phyllis, my human teacher, who first accompanied me along the fringes. I have her self-image, small, dark, long-haired, though in dim wise because she is not thinking about her body. I recognize the gentleness, patience, toughness. Suddenly I can share her interest in tactile harmonics and microgravity laser polo. Her warmth embraces me.

And here is Nils. Even without image or name, I would know that laughter. We are good friends, we have sometimes been lovers. *Did you truly never want to be more than that, Nils? Do immortality and invulnerability breed fear of permanence?*

You belong to an age that is dead, my dear. You must free yourself of it. We will aid you.

How is it I feel cold, here where space is a fiction and time an inconstant? *No, this is not really you, Nils. I haven't*

sensed your thoughts before, but surely they would not float free of all feeling like these.

You are right. I am not in the network. This is my double, the downloaded configuration of my mind. Whenever I rejoin it, I grow the richer by what it has known while I was away. (Increasingly I have found you dull and shallow. I had not the heart to tell you so, then, but now there is no more hiding.)

By his emotion I know that Faunus—glands, nerves, the whole animal heritage—is physically linked like me. *Be of good cheer, Flora. You have boundless choices. Evolve with us.*

Another mind comes to the forefront of me. It too is bodiless, but forever. A certain kindliness glows yet (because memories of loss and sorrow do, no longer felt yet still, in shadow fashion, understood?) to make it bid me *Behold.*

He was a physicist who dreamed of discoveries. Already the unification had been achieved, the grand equation written. Defiant, he cherished his hopes. He knew full well how unlikely it was that any law remained unknown, that any experiment would ever again give a result for which the synthesis could not account. Absolute proof of absolute knowledge is impossible, though. And if he never stumbled on some basic new phenomenon, the interplay of the quanta must keep casting forth surprises for him to quest through.

The computer system perfected itself. Nothing he had found with his subtlest and most powerful instrumentation was beyond its analysis. Everything he might find in his laboratories, it could predict beforehand, in ultimate detail. His science had reached the end of its search.

Idle hedonism repelled him. He set a device to shut down his body while it programmed the patterns that were his mind into the system.

Are you happy?

Your question is meaningless. I am occupied. I participate in operations, I am one with the accomplishments. Time is mine to do with as I will. For it may take an hour to plan Earth's weathers a year ahead, with the measures necessary to contain chaos; it may take a day to design an extension of the Web or compute the fate of a galaxy ten billion light-years hence on which it has accumulated sufficient data; but each

bit of information processed is an event, and to me those hours are as a million years or more. Afterward I may descend to the pace of human thought and learn what went on while I was transfigured. On this I meditate. It is small but interesting. Grow into augmentation, Flora, and at last you will share splendor, promises the shade.

From Phyllis I understand that few desire such a destiny. They will stay organic, however mutable. Linkage is pleasure, enlightenment, challenge. Joined, we realize what we cannot realize singly, about each other and about the cosmos. We bring our revelations back and refashion them in our separate ways. New arts, skills, philosophies, joys, newnesses for which no old name exists, spring into being. Thus do we enlarge and fulfill ourselves.

Come. Try. Surrender what you are to find what you are.

I merge into Phyllis, Faunus, phantom Nils. We are a self that never was before. I am slave who won to freedom, teacher and sportswoman, photosculptor and sybarite, dilettante mathematician and serious athlete. We will need many unions to ease the conflicts and create a single creature—

A whirl, a wheeling, a measure in the dance. Others have been with us. I withdraw and merge again. I am servant who won to a sort of queenship, gilled inhabitant of the sea, professional imaginer, artificial personality designed by the whole in conjunction with the computer—

They fly together, they lose themselves, the hive mind blazes and thunders—

No!

Let me out!—and I flee down endless echoful corridors. Fear howls at my heels. It is myself that pursues.

She was alone, save for the medical machine that watched over her. For a while she merely shuddered. The breath sawed in her throat. Her sweat stank.

Terror faded. The sense of unspeakable loss that followed went deeper and lasted longer. Only as that too drained from her did she gain the strength to weep.

I'm sorry, Phyllis, Faunus, Nils, everybody, she called into the empty room. You meant so well. I wanted to belong, I wanted to find meaning in this world of yours. I cannot. To me, becoming what I must become would be to destroy all I am, the whole of the centuries and the folk forgotten by everyone else and the comradeship in secret

that formed me. I was born too soon for you. It is now too late for me. Can you understand, and forgive?

9

THEY MET in reality. You cannot embrace an image. Fortune favored them. They were able to use a visitor house at Lake Mapourika control reserve, on the South Island of what Hanno to this day thought of as New Zealand.

The weather was as lovely as the setting. They gathered around a picnic table. He remembered another such board beneath another sky, long and long ago. Here a greensward sloped down to still waters in which forest and the white mountains behind stood mirrored. Woodland fragrances arose with the climbing of the sun. From high overhead drifted birdsong.

The eight matched the quietness of the morning. Yesterday passions had stormed and clamored. At the head of the table, Hanno said:

"I probably needn't speak. We seem to be pretty well agreed. Just the same, it's wise to talk this over calmly before making any final decision.

"We have no more home, anywhere on Earth. We've tried in our different ways to fit in, and people have tried to help us, but we finally face the fact that we can't and never shall. We're dinosaurs, left over in the age of the mammals."

Aliyat shook her head. "No, we're left-over humans," she declared bitterly. "The last alive."

"I wouldn't say that," Macandal replied. "They are changing, more and faster than we can match, but I wouldn't take it on myself to define what is human."

"Ironic," Svoboda sighed. "Should we have foreseen? A world where we could, at last, come forth would necessarily be a world altogether unlike any that ever was before."

"Self-satisfied," Wanderer said. "Turned inward."

"You're being unfair too," Macandal told him. "Tremendous things are going on. They simply aren't for us. The creativity, the discovery, has moved to—what? Inner space."

"Perhaps," Yukiko whispered. "But what does it find there? Emptiness. Meaninglessness."

"From your viewpoint," Patulcius replied. "I admit that I too am unhappy, for my own reasons. Still, when the Chinese stopped their seafaring under the Ming, they did not stop being artists."

"But they sailed no more," Tu Shan said. "The robots tell us of countless new worlds among the stars; and nobody cares."

"Earth is pretty special, as we should have expected all along," Hanno reminded him needlessly. "The nearest planet reported where humans *might* be able to live in natural surroundings is almost fifty light-years from here. Why mount an enormous effort to send a handful of colonists that far, possibly to their doom, when everybody's doing well at home?"

"So they truly could live their—our own kind of lives again, on our own land," Tu Shan said.

"A community," Patulcius chimed in.

"If we failed, we could seek elsewhere." Svoboda's voice rang. "If nothing else, we would be human beings out yonder, doing and daring for ourselves."

Her look challenged Hanno. The rest likewise turned toward him. Although until now he had barely hinted at his intentions, it was no great surprise when he spoke. Yet somehow the words came before them like a suddenly drawn sword.

"I think I can get us a ship."

10

THE CONFERENCE was not a meeting of persons, nor even their images. That is, Hanno's representation went around the globe, and faces appeared shiftingly before his eyes; but this was mere supplement, a minute additional data input. Some of yonder minds were computer-linked, or in direct touch with each other, from time to time or all the time. Others were electronic. He thought of them not by names, though names were known to him, but by function; and the same function often spoke with differing voices. What he confronted, what enveloped him, were the ruling intellects of the world.

We've come a long way from you, Richelieu, he thought. I wish we hadn't.

"Yes, it is possible to build such a spacecraft," said the Engineer. "Indeed, preliminary designs were drawn up more than a century ago. They showed what the magnitude of the undertaking must be. That is a major reason why it was never done."

"It can't be so far beyond the one I was flitting around the Solar System in," Hanno protested. "And the robotic vessels already push the speed of light."

"You should have studied the subject more thoroughly before you broached your proposal."

Hanno bit his lip. "I tried."

"It is transhumanly complex," the Psychologist conceded. "We ourselves are employing only a semitechnical summary."

"The basic principles involved ought to be obvious," the Engineer said. "Robots have no need of life support, including the comforts necessary for human sanity, and they require minimal protection. For them, an interstellar carrier can be of very low mass, with small payload. Nevertheless, each represents a substantial investment, notably in antimatter."

"'Investment' means resources diverted from other uses," observed the Economist. "Modern society is productive, rich, yes, but not infinitely so. There are projects closer to home, that an increasing body of opinion maintains should be started."

"The sheer size of the universe defeats us," sighed the Astronomer. "Consider. We have received the first beamcasts from robots that have gone about a hundred and fifty light-years. It will take longer before we hear from those few we have sent farther. The present sphere of communication contains an estimated forty thousand stars, much too many for us to have dispatched a vessel to each, the more so when the vast majority are dim red dwarfs or cold subdwarfs. The suns not too unlike Sol have generally proved disappointing. True, a flood of scientific discoveries already overwhelms the rate at which we can properly assimilate them; but the public finds little of it especially exciting, and nothing that could be considered a revolutionary revelation."

"I know all that, of course I do—" Hanno began.

The Engineer interrupted him: "You ask for a manned

ship that can reach the same speeds. We grant you, no matter how long-lived you are, anything else makes little sense. Even for a handful of people, especially if they hope to found a colony, the hull must be spacious, correspondingly massive; and the mass of their necessities will exceed that by a large factor. Those necessities include laser and magnetohydrodynamic systems able to shield against radiation as well as to draw in sufficient interstellar gas for the reaction drive. The drive in turn will consume an amount of antimatter that will deplete our reserves here in the Solar System for years to come. It is not quickly or easily produced, you know.

"Moreover, the robot craft are standardized. A scaleup such as you have in mind demands complete, basic redesign. The preliminary work stored in the database indicates how much computer capability it will take—enough to significantly curtail operations elsewhere. Production, likewise, cannot use existing parts or facilities. Whole new plants, both nanotechnological and mechanical, and a whole new organization, must come into being. The time from startup to departure may well be as long as a decade, during which various elements of society will endure noticeable inconvenience.

"In short, you wish to impose a huge cost on mankind, in order to send a few individuals to a distant planet which, it seems, *may* be habitable for them."

Yes, Hanno thought, the job will beggar the Pyramids. And after a while the Pharaohs stopped building pyramids. It was too expensive. Nobody wanted it any more.

Aloud, with a stiff smile: "I am aware of everything you've told me, at least in a general way. I'm also aware that today's world can do the job without imposing hardship on anyone. Please don't poor-mouth me. You must see some merit in my idea, or we wouldn't be having this meeting."

"You Survivors are unique," murmured the Artist. "To this day, you keep a certain appeal, and a certain special interest for those who care about whence we came."

"And where we may be going!" Hanno exclaimed. "I'm talking about the future, all humanity's. Earth and Sol won't last forever. We can make our *race* immortal."

"Humankind will deal with geological problems when

they arise," the Astronomer said. "They won't for several billion years."

Hanno refrained from saying: I think anything that might be called human will be long extinct by then, here. Death, or transfiguration? I don't know. To me, it hardly matters which.

"Any idea of large-scale interstellar colonization is ludicrous," declared the Economist.

"If it could be done," said the Astronomer, "it would have been done already, and we would know about it."

Yes, I've heard the argument, over and over, from the twentieth century onward. If the Others exist, where are They? Why have Their exploring robots, at least, never visited Earth? We ourselves, we're interested enough to send follow-ups to those primitive sapients we've found. What little we've learned thus far has touched our thinking, our arts, our spirits in subtle ways—if nothing else, as much as Africa touched Europe when the white man opened it up. If only life and awareness weren't so seldom, so incidental or accidental. I think we'd be out there today, seeking, had the loneliness not reached in to freeze us.

Nevertheless, They exist!

"We must be patient," the Astronomer went on. "It seems clear that They are. In due course, robots will get there; or we may establish direct communication earlier."

Across light-centuries. That long between question and answer.

"We don't know what They are like," Hanno said. "What the *x* many different Theys are like. You've read the written proposal I submitted. Haven't you? I went over each of the old arguments. They get down to simply this, that we do not know. What we do know is what we are capable of."

"The limits of feasibility are contained within the limits of possibility," declared the Economist.

"Yes, we have studied your report," the Sociologist said. "The reasons you give for mounting the enterprise are logically inadequate. True, some thousands of individuals believe they would like to go. They feel frustrated, bewildered, out of place, confined, or otherwise discontented. They dream of a fresh start on a fresh world. Most of them are immature and will outgrow it. Most of the rest are visionaries who would retreat, shocked, if offered the

opportunity in reality. You are left with perhaps a few score, for whose emotional convenience you want the entire society to pay a high share-cost."

"They're the ones that matter."

"Do they, when they are so selfish that they will actually subject their descendants—for they will reproduce if they live—to the hazards and deprivations?"

Hanno's grin was stark. "All parents have always made that kind of decision. It's in the nature of things. Would you deny your race the opportunities, discoveries, whole new ways of thinking and working and living, that *this* civilization forecloses?"

"Your point is not ill taken," said the Psychologist. "Still, you must agree that success is not guaranteed. On the contrary, you would take a rather wild gamble. It is not yet proven that any of the half-score planets thus far found which seem to have Earthlike environments and biochemistries, is not a long-range death trap."

"We could look farther if need be. We've got the time. What we need is something worth doing with it."

"You would indeed find marvels," said the Artist. "Perhaps you could understand them and convey them back to us in fashions that no robot is quite able to."

Hanno nodded. "I have a notion that intelligent life can only communicate fully with its own kind. Maybe I'm wrong, but how can we be certain before we've tried? We build our limitations and the limitations of our knowledge into our machines and their programs. Yes, they learn, adapt, modify themselves according to experience; the best of them think; but it's always along machine lines. What do we know about experiences they can't handle? Maybe scientific theory is complete, maybe not; but in any case it's a mighty big universe yonder. Much too big and full for us to predict. We need more than one breed of explorer."

The Engineer frowned. "So your petition maintains. Did you imagine its contentions are new? They have been brought up again and again, to be rejected as insufficient. The probability of success, and the value of any success that might be had, are too slight in relation to cost."

Hanno noticed himself lean forward. It seemed a strange act in this disembodied conversation. "I did not bring up my new argument," he told them. "I was hoping I wouldn't

have to. But . . . the situation has changed. You're dealing with us now, the Survivors. You said it, we are unique. We still have our special prestige, mystique, followings—nothing great, no, but we well know how to use such things. I in particular recall ways of raising holy hell with the powers that be. I got quite good at it, back in ancient times.

"Oh, yes, a gadfly. You can pretend to ignore us. If need be, you can destroy us. But that will cost you. We'll leave troublesome questions behind in many minds. They won't fade, because you've abolished death and databases don't forget. You've had your world running so smoothly for so long that you may think the system is stable. It isn't. Nothing human ever was. Read your history." The sweep and violence of it, the hidden reefs on which empires foundered with their pride and dreams and gods.

The Psychologist spoke in steely imperturbability: "It is true that sociodynamics is, mathematically, chaotic."

"I don't want to threaten you," Hanno urged quickly. "In fact, I'd fear the outcome too. It might be small, but it might be enormous. Instead—" he fashioned a laugh—"malcontents traditionally were a favorite export of governments. And this will be something adventurous, romantic, in an age when adventure and romance are almost gone except for electronic shadow shows. People will enjoy it, support it . . . long enough for the ship to get under way. You'll find the kudos for yourselves quite useful in whatever else you want to do. Afterward—" He spread his palms. "Who knows? Maybe a flat failure. But maybe an opening to everywhere."

Silence thrummed.

The calm of the Administrator struck Hanno harder than any physical blow. "We have anticipated this, too, from you. The factors have been weighed. The decision is positive. The ship shall be launched."

Like that? In this single instant, victory?

Well, but the computers can have given it thousands of years' worth of human thinking time while I talked.

O Columbus!

"There are conditions," tolled through his hearing. "Suspended animation or no, the mass of fifty or more colonists, with supplies and equipment, is excessive, when the odds are so poor. You eight Survivors must go alone. Of course,

you will have a complement of robots, up to and including the intelligent and versatile but subservient, personalityless type, toward which you can develop no hostility. You will have such other matériel as appears called for. If your venture prospers, larger numbers may someday follow in slower carriers. We expect you will agree that this is reasonable."

"Yes—" And the symbolism of it, uh-huh, shrewd. My God, I'll be glad to get out from under a system that calculates everything.

But I should not be ungrateful, should I? "You're very generous. You always have been, to us. Thank you, thank you."

"Thank society. You think in terms of kings, but personal power is obsolete."

True, I suppose. As obsolete as the personal soul.

"Furthermore," the Administrator continued, "you shall not go to the planet suggested in your report. It does lie less than fifty light-years hence, but distance differences on that order of magnitude are comparatively unimportant when relativistic travel speeds are available. It is the best known of the terrestroid candidates, therefore the most promising for settlement. However, other considerations enter. You spoke of exploration. Very well, you shall explore.

"The sun and planet chosen for you lie in Pegasus, near the present limit of our communication sphere. You will recall that in that direction, beyond it, about fifteen hundred light-years hence, is the nearest of those radiation sources that may be high-energy civilizations.

"We do not know whether it is in fact any such thing; the anomalies are numerous. Nor do we know whether your presence can significantly advance the date at which we make contact. Probably not, since the robots en route to there have reported nothing but natural phenomena as far as they have gone. Going to that planet means you will face more unknowns, therefore more dangers, than otherwise—although we shall be receiving additional information about it while your ship is under construction. But, assigning the most plausible weights to the various uncertainties and imponderables, we have concluded that, on the whole, it is best that your expedition be toward the nearest neighbors comparable to ourselves that we may possibly have."

It makes sense. I should have thought of it beforehand.

But I'm only one man. We're only eight, only human, woundable flesh and sheddable blood.

"Do you and your associates accept these terms?"

"Yes." Boundlessly yes.

11

BID EARTH farewell.

Something of her as once she was abides yet, an enclave, a reserve, a restoration, things small and alive in crannies, simple folk, archaisms, remembrance. Most people are gracious. They grant permission, they draw aside to create solitude or they come together in fellowship, they give whatever may be in their gift throughout these last few days.

Ocean roars, rises, rushes downward and up again. The waves are gray-green in a thousand hues and wrinkles along their backs, white-maned above the steep troughs. The boat surges to their swing and tramp, rigging sings, sails strain. Shrill and chill, the wind tastes of salt.

Wheat goldens toward harvest. It rustles whenever the air stirs, and ripples run across the leagues of it. Bees buzz in a clover meadow, from which the sun bakes sweetness. Some ways off, several cows rest, vividly red, by a chestnut tree whose crown snares light and scatters it back. A clod crumbles warm in the hand.

Candleglow turns faces as soft as the lilting music. Silver, porcelain, linen sheen with it. In tall goblets, champagne sends jewels aloft. It tickles the palate. Laughter runs around the table with the same lightness. The soup is leek-pungent, cream-rich. Fragrance from courses to come eddies about like a promise of merrymaking afterward until dawn.

The canyon wall lifts rusty red toward indigo heaven. Eons band it. Crags rear wind-whittled out of the downslope; but today is so still that a raven's "Gruk!" explodes through the heat. That blackness wings over pungency of sage and scrub juniper, which clutch at every roothold. The green is less sparse at the bottom, where a streamlet gleams and whispers.

Though pilgrims come no longer to the shrine, a latter-day kind of piety maintains it, and memories are many. Near its doorway an ancient cypress grips a ledge, limned in

gnarled and silvery austerity. Thence vision descends the mountain, past a cliff cloven by a waterfall, over groves and terraces and the curve of a roof, into dawn mists filling the valley and on to blue heights beyond. Breath is cool. Suddenly a cuckoo calls.

A rainshower has ended. The birch forest sparkles with drops, on the blades that shiver overhead, on fern and moss beneath. Trunks rise girl-slim out of dappled shadows. Ahead, their whitenesses open on reeds, a lake, a deer that looks about startled and soars away. The mould is soft and wet underfoot. The odors are green.

Things and places may be had again in future, but as illusion, a ghost dance of electrons, photons, neurons. Here is the graspable reality. This picture on the wall came from a riverside stall long ago, that one was taken back when folk employed cameras. The table is nearly as old, its wood scarred by use, twice charred where a lighted cigar fell. The rest of the furniture is as comfortably shabby. The book has weight, its brown-spotted pages crackle between fingers, a name penned on the flyleaf is faded but unforgotten.

There are no more graveyards. Death is too rare, land too precious. The burial records of the humble seldom endured anyway. It is guesswork what sites to seek—in a city turned alien, in a remnant of countryside where grass and wildflowers have taken back the plowland—and stand for a while, feeling not altogether alone, before saying very quietly, "Goodbye now, and thank you."

12

FIRE RAISED the wind on which *Pytheas* fared outward. Sol dwindled aft, slowly at first under the low acceleration, but already, as the ship approached Jupiter, scarcely more than the brightest among the stars.

They filled the encompassing night with keen and steady radiances, white, silver-blue, amber-yellow, ruby-red. The Milky Way coursed heaven like a river of frost and light. Nebulae glowed in the death and birth of suns. Southward gleamed the Clouds of Magellan. Exquisite at its distance, a spiral, a sister galaxy, beckoned.

Hanno and Svoboda stood in the command center, look-

ing at the optically enhanced sky. They often did. "What are you thinking about?" he asked at last.

"Finality," she answered low.

"What?"

"This maneuver ahead of us. Oh, yes, it's not absolutely irrevocable. We could still turn back—for quite some time to come, can't we? But what's soon going to happen, the course change, it's like—I don't know. Not birth or marriage or dying. Something as strange."

He nodded. "I believe I know what you mean, and I'm the hardheaded pragmatist. Wanderer certainly does. He mentioned to me that he and Corinne are planning a ceremony. Maybe we should all attend."

She smiled. "Rite of passage," she murmured. "I should have realized Wanderer would be the one who understands. I hope he can make a part for me."

Hanno gave her a sharp glance. They had all paired off, informally and more or less tacitly, he with her, Wanderer with Macandal, Patulcius with Aliyat, Tu Shan and Yukiko renewing their alliance. Not that each man and each woman had never shared one another. It had been inevitable that they'd swap around occasionally, during the long time of their masquerade. But since, they had been more apart than together. How much emotional risk dared they take on this voyage? Fifteen years under way, with God knew what at the end—

Separations or no, after centuries a couple gained considerable mutual sensitivity. Svoboda's hand caught Hanno's. "Not to worry," she said in the American English that was their favorite dead language. "I only have a, a solemnity in mind. We do need something to lift us out of ourselves. It's wrong to carry our pettinesses along to the stars."

"We will, though," he said. "We can't help it. How do you escape being what you are?"

13

SCREEN FIELDS warded particle radiation off as *Pytheas* slipped close by Jupiter. The planet laid its mighty gravitational hand upon the ship and swung it out of the ecliptic, northerly toward Pegasus. Inboard a drum thuttered, feet danced, a song called to the spirits.

When it was safely away, robots went outside. Flitting around the hull, they deployed the latticework of ramscoop and fire chamber. By this time, low boost under torch drive had built up a considerable speed. Interaction with the interstellar medium was becoming significant. By terrestrial standards it was a hard vacuum, averaging about one atom per cubic centimeter, overwhelmingly hydrogen. Yet a wide funnel traveling fast would gather a great deal. When the robots returned inside, *Pytheas* resembled a blunt torpedo caught in the net of a giant fisherman.

Its folk flashed their last laser beam to Earth, made their little speeches, received ceremonial good wishes. The ions and energies that were to surround them would blank out electromagnetic communications. Modulated neutrinos passed easily through, and *Pytheas* was equipped to receive them, but the beams it could cast dispersed too rapidly. That huge facility which was capable of sending an identifiable message hundreds or thousands of light-years was fixed in place, locked on remote targets that might eventually respond.

Now, through the net and beyond it, out to thousands of kilometers, the harvester fields came into being. Their forces meshed, intricate, powerful, precise, an ever-changing configuration molded by the controlling computers and what came to them through their sensors. New laser beams sprang from the ship's bows, swordlike, cleaving electron from nucleus. The fields seized on the plasma and swept it backward, well away from the hull; impact on metal would have released X-rays in swiftly lethal concentration. Aft to the fire chamber, which was itself a magnetohydrodynamic vortex, the gas went.

Another immaterial engine released a little of the antimatter it held suspended, ionized it, sped it into the maelstrom and the star gas. Particles met, annihilated, became energy, the ultimate conversion, nine times ten to the twentieth ergs per gram. That fury lit fusion reactions among other protons, and continued them. Behind the heavily shielded stern of *Pytheas*, a tiny sun blazed forth.

Powered by it, the fields hurled most of the plasma aft. Reaction drove the ship forward. Full weight came back to her crew, an Earth gravity of acceleration, nine hundred

eighty centimeters per second added every second to velocity.

At that rising pace, in just less than a year the voyagers would transit half a light-year of distance, and their speed would be close to that of light.

14

NOTHING NATURAL could have steered the ship. It did itself, a set of systems joined in a unity as complex as a living organism, maintaining its motion and existence outwardly, its livable environment inwardly. Humans became passengers, occupying their time as best they might.

Living quarters were bleakly functional, eight individual staterooms, a gymnasium, a workshop, a galley, a dining saloon, a common room, certain auxiliaries such as bathrooms and a dream chamber. Making them pleasanter gave enjoyment to those whose talents lay in that direction. Yukiko urged that they begin with the common room. "It is where we shall most be together," she said. "Not simply for ease and company. In trouble too, or communion, or awe."

Hanno nodded. "Our marketplace," he agreed. "And markets began with temples."

"Well," cautioned Tu Shan, "we'd better plan things so the decorating doesn't interfere with the use."

The three found themselves alone there one evening. The ship maintained Earth's immemorial cycle of day and night, the clock to whose beat life had arisen and evolved. It would gradually shift to the different rhythm of the destination world. Dinner was past and others had withdrawn to their rest or their recreations, none of which happened to be here. In the corridor beyond, twilight deepened toward darkness. Soon the widely spaced soft ganglights would turn on.

Tu Shan fixed a box to wall brackets he had forged in vine shapes. "I thought you were going to carve decorations on that first," Hanno remarked.

"I want to put soil in it now and begin raising flowers," Tu Shan explained. "Later I will make an ornamental railing and attach it."

Yukiko gave him a smile. "Yes, you do need flowers," she agreed. "Living things." What grew beneath her own

hands was a mural painting, a landscape of hills, village, bamboo, in the foreground a blossoming cherry bough.

"I will carve the railing in animal shapes." He sighed. "If only we could have animals aboard." Their DNA patterns reposed in the databank. Someday, if all went well, there would be synthesis, growth tanks, release.

"Yes, I miss my ship's cats," Hanno admitted. "But a sailor got used to doing without most things. It made going ashore that much the happier." His fingers plied rope, knotwork to hang at certain spots. Its Phoenician pattern would not clash with the Asian motif. He glanced at the mural. "That's becoming lovely."

Yukiko bowed in his direction. "Thank you. A poor copy, I fear, of what I can remember from a building that perished centuries ago." —before things were recorded, for presentation at will in total-sensory imaging.

"You should have done it on Earth."

"Nobody seemed interested."

"Or had you simply lost heart? Never mind. We'll beam it back from our planet. It's as special as anything we're likely to find there." Its physical self would long since have gone down into the databank, its materials into the nanotech processors, converted to whatever was needed for the next project.

Aliyat had contended that the whole idea was foolish. No one wanted to spend fifteen years staring at a changeless picture. Why make it, to destroy and replace with something else, when projection panels could instantly create any of thousands of simulacra?

"I think before then, our friends will accept that this work was worth doing," Hanno added.

"They kindly let me indulge in my pastime," Yukiko said.

"No, I mean for its own sake. More than a pastime. We could invent plenty of mere amusements. We doubtless will. If necessary, we can just wait. A year goes by fast after you've had hundreds or thousands of them."

"Unless much happens," Tu Shan observed.

Hanno nodded. "True. I don't pretend to understand what the physicists mean by time, but for people, it isn't so-and-so many measured units; it's events, experiences. A man who crowds his life and dies young has lived longer than one who got old sitting in tame sameness."

"Perhaps the old man was finding his way toward wisdom," Yukiko ventured. She lowered her brush. Her tone grew troubled. "For me, that was never possible. My years of quietness always became, at last, a burden. It is the penalty of never aging. The body does not ease its hold on the spirit."

"Nature meant us to die, get out of the way, leave whatever we gained to the new generations," Tu Shan said heavily. "Yet nature brought forth our kind. Are we monsters, freaks? Today everybody is like us. Should that be? Will it in the end cost the race its soul?"

Hanno kept busy with his ropework. "I don't know," he answered. "I don't even know if your questions mean anything. We *are* unique, we Survivors. We were born into age and death. We grew up expecting them for ourselves. Then we endured them, over and over and over, in everybody we loved, till we found each other; and that didn't end the losing. The primitive world shaped us. Look at what we're making here. Maybe that's why it's us going to the stars. We're the oldest people alive, but maybe we're also the last of the children."

15

A STATEROOM had space for little more than a seat, a dresser that doubled as a desk with terminal, and a bunk; but the bunk had width for two. Patulcius had stuck printouts of pictures onto his walls, scenes that existed no longer in their cities. The sonic playout gave a muted background of early twentieth-century jazz. That was the single kind of music on which he and Aliyat could agree. Later styles were too abstract for her, older Near Eastern tunes roused bad memories.

They lay side by side, sharing warmth and sweat. His passions were always rather quickly slaked, though; he liked to laze for a while afterward, daydreaming or talking, before he either fell asleep or went in search of refreshment.

Presently she stirred, kicked, sat up, hugged her knees, yawned. "I wonder what's happening now at home," she said.

"As I understand it, 'now' means very little to us . . .

now," he answered in his plodding fashion. "It will mean less and less, the faster and farther we go."

"Never mind. *Why* can't they stay in touch?"

"You know. Our drive screens out their beams."

She glanced at him. He lay hands behind head, look upon the ceiling. "Sure, but, uh, neutrinos."

"Those facilities are tied up."

"Yes," she said bitterly. "We weren't worth building new ones for. But aiming at some star a million light-years away—"

He smiled. "Not that far. Not quite. Although a rather daunting distance, true."

"Who cares? I mean, all they ever get is stuff they can't figure out. They don't think it's even meant for us, do they?"

"Yes and no. It's a reasonable guess that those are messages addressed 'to whom it may concern.' To anyone who may be listening. But why should the senders think enough like us that we can easily decipher their codes? Besides, they're almost certainly robots. Very possibly, what we detect are nothing but beacons, meant to attract more robots—like those we have sent toward them."

She shivered a bit. "Nothing really alive there?"

"Doubtful. Have you forgotten? Those are the strange places of the galaxy. Black holes, condensing nebulae, free matrices—is that the term I want? Modern cosmology baffles me too. But they're bound to be dangerous, generally lethal environments. At the same time, each is unique. Surely all starfaring civilizations will dispatch robots to investigate them. They are where everybody's machines will eventually meet. Therefore it makes sense that those already there will send messages they—or their builders—hope somebody new will catch. Those always were the likeliest places to find signs of intelligence, the best for us to focus our instruments on."

"I know, I do know!" she snapped.

"As for why we have received nothing unambiguous from the mother civilizations—"

"Never mind! I wanted a breath of outside air, not a lecture!"

He did turn his face toward her. The heavy features

drooped. "I'm sorry, my dear," he said. "I find the subject fascinating."

"I might, if I hadn't heard it all before, again and again. If something new could ever be said about it."

"And if somebody new said it. Right?" he asked sadly. "I bore you, don't I?"

She bit her lip. "I'm out of sorts."

He avoided remarking that she had not answered his question. However, his tone sharpened a bit. "You knew you were leaving the social whirl behind."

She jerked a nod. "Of course," she replied curtly. "Do you suppose I didn't learn how to bide my time, already in Palmyra? But I don't have to like it."

She swung her legs around, stood, reached for the robe she had hung on a hook. "I'm not sleepy, either," she said. "I'm going to a dream box and get relaxed." Unspoken was that evidently he had not eased her, though she had faked.

He sat up. "You go too often," he protested without force.

"That's my business." She pulled the garment over her head, paused for a moment, met his eyes, glanced away again. "Sorry, Gnaeus. I am being bitchy. Wish me a better mood tomorrow, will you?" She leaned down to ruffle the shag on his chest before she departed, barefoot as she had arrived. The deck surfacing was soft, springy, almost like turf.

The corridor reached empty, dimly lit at this hour. Ventilation gave a breeze and a susurrus. She rounded a corner and stopped. Wanderer did too.

"Why, hello, there," Aliyat said in American English. "Haven't seen much of you for a while." She smiled. "Where are you bound for?"

16

THE CLOSER *Pytheas* flew on the heels of light, the more alien it and the outside universe became to each other. One did not care to look long into the viewscreens any more, if at all. The interior hull became like a set of caves, warm bright huddling places. Escape from their closeness lay in whatever work could be found or made; in sports, games, skills, reading, music, shows, traditional diversions; in the

pseudo-lives of every sort that that computer engendered for those who linked with it.

The circumstances were by no means bad. Most of mankind throughout most of history would have considered them paradise. Still, as Hanno had once implied, it was as well that to immortals, a year could feel like quite a short span. And perhaps that was only true, or only true enough, of the Survivors. Had any modern human lived sufficiently long? Would any ever learn how to tough out hard times, especially the hard times of the spirit? Was a subliminal doubt of it the underlying reason why none had hitherto ventured this faring?

Be that as it may, challenges became welcome.

Phaeacia—Hanno had suggested the name—was not Earth. The robot explorers reported an extraordinary degree of similarity: sun, orbit, mass, composition, spin, tectonics, satellite; countlessly many factors seemed necessary to beget life chemistry closely resembling the terrestrial. Such worlds were few indeed (though "few," given the size of the galaxy, might add up to hundreds). Yet nothing was identical and much, perhaps most, utterly foreign. The absence of anything sentient was merely the difference plainest to humans, and probably the least important.

Moreover, Phaeacia was less known than the goal Hanno had originally had in mind. It lay almost one hundred fifty light-years from Earth, near the edge of the communication sphere. Thus far a single mission had reached it and, when *Pytheas* left, a dozen years' worth of reports had been received. It was a *world*, as various and mysterious as ever Earth herself in her prehistory.

The robots were still investigating. *Pytheas* couldn't catch their messages while en route, but they would download their entire data-hoard when it arrived. Doubtless the astonishments that waited were enormous. The travelers might spend a year or more in orbit, assimilating, before they took their first boat to the surface.

Meanwhile, why not practice? To gain familiarity with the material was elementary prudence, incomplete and often wrong though it must be; hands-on experience was best gotten in advance, illusory though it must be.

The senses no longer knew the gymnasium. Overhead arched sky, virginally blue save for clouds that were like

breaths off the snowpeaks at the horizon. The countryside round about lay verdant with blades that were not really grass; trees swayed to a lulling wind that smelled of their resin and the sun; wings swept that air, and afar a herd of beasts galloped, swift and graceful. Wanderer remembered Jackson Hole as once it had been. His heart cracked.

Mastering himself, he stooped to pluck a rock out of the spring bubbling at his feet. It glittered quartzlike. The heft of it was cold in his hand. Yes, he thought, I'd better brush up my geology.

"Cut some timber," Tu Shan ordered the robots. He pointed. "Over there. See if you can make planks."

"So," acknowledged the principal, and led its work gang off with their energy projectors, fluid reactants, and solid tools.

Wanderer swung his head toward his companion. The weight of the induction helmet reminded him that he wasn't in a dream box. He was supposedly training his entire organism; but he stood in a place that surely didn't exist as it was being presented to him. Well, he could believe that something not too unlike it did, on his new world. "What're you doing?" he demanded.

"We'll need wood suitable for construction, wherever we decide to settle," Tu Shan explained. "We don't want to depend on the wretched synthesizers, do we? Wasn't that the point of leaving Earth?" He smiled, narrowed his eyes against the brilliance, dilated his nostrils, breathed deep. "Yes, I like it here."

"You won't farm this kind of site!" Wanderer cried.

Tu Shan stared at him. "Why not?"

"There'll be plenty of others. This, it would be . . . wrong."

Tu Shan scowled. "How much of the planet do you want to keep for your private hunting preserve, forever?"

It shocked Wanderer: Have we carried the enmities of our forefathers through all these centuries and now through these light-years?

17

THE NANOPROCESSORS would take any material and transform it, atom by atom, into anything else for which they had a program. Out of their recycling came air, water, food. They could produce a complete, excellent meal, and often

did according to individual choice. However, as a rule Macandal took just the basic ingredients and, aside from drink, made dinner for everybody. She was a gifted cook, enjoyed the work, and felt it was a service, something that lent her life some meaning. No pretense; machines lacked the personal touch that this archaic crew needed.

Certainly they did at a time of celebration. The ship's calendar held many feasts, holy days and national days that Earth had mostly forgotten, private anniversaries, special occasions upon the voyage. Each fulfilled year of it was among them. That was by inboard time, of course. The faster *Pytheas* flew, the shorter a span became in relation to the galactic wheel.

"It's getting kind of drunk out," she remarked to Yukiko on the third of those evenings.

Having dined, folk had moved from the saloon to the spacious common room. Simulacrum panels had been raised, hiding the murals. They gave no scenes from home; it had been found that such were too likely to make an alcoholic party go somber. Patterns of light shifted and drifted, glowed and sparkled, through a violet-blue dusk. Nevertheless Hanno and Patulcius sat, goblets in hand, reminiscing about the twentieth century—the two widely sundered twentieth centuries that had been theirs. Wanderer and Svoboda revived the waltz, rotating embraced over the floor, earplugs giving Strauss to them alone; their eyes also excluded the world. Tu Shan and Aliyat danced, whooping and hand-clapping, to some livelier melody.

Kneeling as of old, Yukiko sipped at the bit of sake she was allowing herself. She smiled. "It is good to see cheerfulness," she said.

"Yes, I've felt tension in the air," Macandal replied. "Not that it's gone away."

"—poor old Sam Giannotti, he tried so hard to get a little modern physics into my head," Hanno related slurrily. "Hell, I could barely manage a half-notion of what classical physics had been about. Made a song, I did, at last—"

Sweat darkened Tu Shan's tunic beneath the arms and sheened on Aliyat's bare shoulders and back.

"You should go join the fun," Macandal said.

"Black bodies give off radiation," sang Hanno off-key,
"And ought to continuously.
Black bodies give off radiation,
But do it by Planck's theory.

"Bring back, bring back,
Oh, bring back that old continuity!
Bring back, bring back,
Oh, bring back Clerk Maxwell to me."

Yukiko smiled again. "I am enjoying myself," she said. "But why don't you go? You were never a passive person, like me."

"Ha, don't you kid me. In your peculiar ways, you're as active, as much a doer, as anybody I ever met."

"Though now we have Schrödinger functions,
Dividing up h *by* 2π
That damn differential equation
Still has no solution for Ψ.

"Bring back, bring back—"

Aliyat and Tu Shan laughed into each other's mouths. Wanderer and Svoboda circled as if through a dream.

"Well, Heisenberg came to the rescue,
Intending to make all secure.
What is the result of his efforts?
We are absolutely unsure.

"Bring back, bring back—"

Aliyat left her partner, approached, beckoned to Yukiko. Macandal stepped aside. The two whispered together.

"Dirac spoke of energy levels,
Both minus and plus. Oh, how droll!
And now, just because of his teaching,
We don't know our mass from a hole.

"Bring back—"

Aliyat returned to Tu Shan. They left the room arm in arm.

"She asked if you'd mind, didn't she?" Macandal inquired.

Yukiko nodded. "I don't. I truly don't. She surely remembered that. But it was good of her to ask."

Macandal sighed. "His nature too, isn't it? I've wondered—I'm a trifle in my own cups—don't be offended, please, but I've wondered how much you really love him."

"What is love? Among my people, most people, what counted was respect. Affection normally grew out of it."

"Yeah." Macandal's gaze followed the pair still on the floor.

Yukiko winced. "Are you in pain, Corinne?"

"No, no. Nothing's going to happen with those two. Though, as you say, it shouldn't matter if anything did, should it?" Macandal made a laugh. "Johnnie's a gentleman. He'll ask me for the next dance. I can wait."

"Bring back, bring back,
Oh, bring back that old continuity—"

18

STRANGER AND ever stranger grew the cosmos that the ship beheld. Aberration of light sent star images crawling aside, while Doppler shift blued those forward and reddened those aft until many no longer shone at any wavelength the eye could perceive. In the ship's measure, the mass of the atoms that its fields scooped up increased with the rising velocity; distances that it was traversing shrank, as if space were flattening under the impact; time passed more quickly, less of it between one atomic pulsebeat and the next. *Pytheas* would never reach the haste of light, but the closer it sped, the more foreign to the rest of the universe it became.

Alone among the eight, Yukiko had taken to seeking communion yonder. She would settle in the navigation chamber, otherwise unused until journey's end drew nigh, and bid the screens give her the view. It was a huge and eerie grandeur, there around her shell of humming silence—blacknesses, ringfire, streams of radiance. Before the spirit could seek into it, the mind must. She studied the tensor equations as once she studied the sutras, she meditated upon the koans of science, and at last she began to feel her oneness with all that was, and in the vision find peace.

She did not let herself go wholly into it. Had she become able to, that would have been a desertion of comrades and dereliction of duty. She hoped she might help Tu Shan, and others if they wished, toward the serenity behind the awesomeness, once she herself had gone deeply enough. Not as a Boddhisatva, no, no, nor a guru, only as a friend who had something wonderful to share. It would help them so much, in the centuries to come.

They had need of every strength. Hardships and dangers counted for little, would often be gladdening, a gift of that reality which had slipped from their hands on Earth. The loneliness, though. Three hundred years between word and reply. How much more distanced might Earth become in three hundred more years?

Never before had the eight been this isolated for this long; and it would go on. Oh, it was scarcely worse than isolation had grown at home. (And if shiploads of settlers arrived, once Phaeaçia was proven habitable—if it was; if they did—what would they really have in common with the Survivors?) But it worked on them more than they had foreseen. Forced in upon themselves, they discovered less than they perhaps had looked for.

Horizons and challenge should open them up again. Yet they might always be haunted by the understanding that they were not actually pioneers, mightily achieving what they had determined they would do. They were . . . not quite outcasts . . . failures, leftovers from a history that no longer mattered, sent on their way almost casually, as an act of indifferent kindness.

Their children, however; there was the future that Earth had lost. Yukiko ran a hand down her belly. Mother of nations! This body was not foredoomed in the way that women otherwise were, even today. The technology could keep you youthful, but it could not add one ovum to those with which you were born. (Well, doubtless it could, if people so desired, but of course they didn't.) Hers made new eggs as it made new teeth, during her entire unbounded life. (Don't scorn the machines. They'll save you from ever again having to watch your children grow old. They'll create the genetic variety that will allow four couples to people a planet.)

Yes, hope ranged yet. May it never go out of reach.

"Ship, what of the flight?" she called.

"Velocity point nine-six-four *c*," sang the voice, "mean ambient equivalent matter density one point zero four pro-

ton, all mission parameters within zero point three percent, navigating now by the Virgo cluster of galaxies and seven quasars near the limits of the observable universe."

Stars across farness,
Drift of dandelion seeds—
What, springtime again?

19

AFTER SEVEN and a half of its own years, ten times as many celestial, *Pytheas* reached the halfway point of its journey. There was a brief spell of weightlessness as the vessel went on free trajectory, lasers and force-fields withdrawn except for what was required to shield the life within. Majestically, the hull turned around. Heavily armored, robots went out to reconfigure the generator net. When they were back inside, *Pytheas* unfurled snare and kindled engine. Fire reawakened. At one gravity of deceleration, the craft backed down toward its goal. Trumpet notes rang through the air.

Surely the travelers had special cause for festival. Macandal took three days preparing the banquet. She was in the galley, chopping and mixing, when Patulcius appeared. "Hi," she greeted him in English, which remained her language of choice. "What can I do for you?"

He barely smiled. "Or I for you. I think I have remembered what went into that appetizer I mentioned."

"Hm?" She laid down her cleaver and brought finger to chin. "Oh . . . oh, yes. Tahini something. You made it sound good, but neither of us could recall what tahini was."

"How much else has faded out of us?" he mumbled. Squaring his shoulders, he spoke briskly. "I have brought the memory back, at least in part. It was a paste made from sesame meal. The dish I thought of combined it with garlic, lemon juice, cumin, and parsley."

"Splendid. The nano can certainly make sesame, and here's a grinder, but I'll have to experiment, and you tell me how wide of the mark I am. It ought to go well with some

other hors d'oeuvres I'm planning. We don't want anything too heavy before the main course."

"What will that be, or is it still a secret?"

Macandal considered Patulcius. "It is, but I'll let you in on it if you'll keep mum. Curried goose. A twenty-one-boy curry."

"Delicious, I'm sure," he said listlessly.

"Is that all you've got to say, you, our champion trencherman?"

He turned to go. She touched his arm. "Wait," she murmured. "You're feeling absolutely rotten, aren't you? Can I help?"

He looked elsewhere. "I doubt it. Unless—" He swallowed and grimaced. "Never mind."

"Come on, Gnaeus. We've been friends a long time."

"Yes, you and I, we could somehow relax with each other better than— Okay!" he spat. "Can you speak to Aliyat? No, surely not. Or if you do, what use?"

"I thought that was it," said Macandal low. "Her sleeping around. Well, I can't say I'm overjoyed when Johnnie spends a night with her, but it is something she needs. I've been thinking Hanno does wrong to ignore her passes at him."

"Nymphomania."

"No, not really. Grabbing out for love, assurance. And . . . something to do. She spends too much time in the dream box as is."

He struck fist in palm. "But I am not something for her to do, am I?"

"Not any more? I suspected that too. Poor Gnaeus." Macandal took his hand. "Listen. I know her well, better than anybody else. I don't believe she wants to be unkind. If she avoids you, why, she feels—ashamed? No, more like being afraid of hurting you worse." She paused. "I'm going to take her aside and talk like a Dutch aunt."

He flushed. "Not on my account, please. I don't want pity."

"No, but you deserve more consideration than you've gotten."

"Sex isn't that big a thing, after all."

"A sound philosophy," Macandal said, "but not too easy to put in practice when you aren't a saint and your body

never grows older. How well I know. We can't have you racking yourself apart, Gnaeus. If I—" She drew breath, then smiled. "We had some pretty good times in the past, you and I, didn't we? It was long ago, but I've not forgotten."

He stared. A minute passed before he could stammer, "You, you don't really m-mean that. It is sweet of you, but no, really, not necessary."

Calm had come upon her. "Don't think 'mercy hump.' I like you. Well, no hurry. Best we take our time and see how things develop. Lord knows we have plenty of time, and if we haven't learned a little patience by now, we might as well open the airlocks. I mean all of us aboard."

After a moment: "Too bad, isn't it, that this tremendous quest of ours hasn't made us worthy of itself. We're the same limited, foolish, mixed-up, ridiculous primitives we always were. Today's Earth people wouldn't have our problems. But it is we, not they, who've gone out here."

Pytheas flew onward. Another three and a half years passed inside the hull before the universe broke through, like a storm wave crashing over the rail of a Grecian ship.

20

IT CAME as suddenly, through the musical robotic voice: "Attention! Attention! Instruments detect anomalous neutrino input. It appears to be coded."

Hanno cried aloud, a seafaring oath not heard these past three millennia, and sprang from his bunk. "Light," he ordered. Illumination filled the room. It glowed amber in Svoboda's hair, the warmest color between the walls.

"From Earth?" she gasped, sitting straight. "Did they build a transmitter?"

He shivered. "I should think *Pytheas* would recognize—"

The answer interrupted him: "The direction of origin is becoming clear, somewhat forward of us, broadcast rather than beamcast. Modulation is of pulse, amplitude, and spin. I am still engaged in observation and analysis, to determine the velocity of the source and compensate for Doppler shift and time dilation. At present the pattern appears mathematically simple."

"Yeah, start by making us aware it's artificial." Hanno's

finger stabbed the intercom touchdisc. "Has everybody heard? Meet in the saloon. I'll report to you there as soon as possible." Needlessly—or was it?—he reached for his clothes. "Want to come, Svoboda?"

Her grin was a hunter's. "Try and stop me."

Perhaps it was equally superfluous to seek the command room. It might even be unwise, to wait there amidst the terrible glory in the viewscreens. Too easily could that daunt the spirit and numb the mind. But sitting hand in hand, watching the numbers and graphic displays the ship generated for them, was like keeping a grip on a reality that otherwise would blow away into emptiness.

"Have you learned more?" Svoboda must ask.

"Give the computer a chance," Hanno tried to laugh. "It's only had a few minutes."

"Every minute for us is—how much outside? An hour? How many millions of kilometers laid behind us?"

"I detect a similar source, much weaker but strengthening," the ship told them. "It is on the opposite side of our projected course."

Hanno stared a while into distorted heaven before he said slowly, "Yes, I think I understand. They know how we're headed, more or less, and have sent . . . messengers . . . to intercept us. However, of course they can't tell exactly—several different destinations may have looked possible to them, nor could they foresee factors like the boost we'd use—so they sent a number of messengers, pretty widely distributed, to lie radiating in the zone, or zones, we'd probably pass through."

"They?" Svoboda asked.

"The Others. The aliens. Whoever and whatever they are. We've found a starfaring civilization at last. Or it's found us."

Her own gaze went outward, gone rapt. "They will rendezvous with us?"

He shook his head. "Not quite, I think. Given all the uncertainties, and the distances, and the long, unpredictable time out here till we might arrive—they'd not dispatch living crews. Those must be low-mass, high-thrust robot craft, maybe made for this one purpose."

She was silent half a minute. When she spoke, it sounded almost annoyed. "How can you be so sure?"

"Why, it's obvious," he answered, surprised. "The radiation from our powerplant ran well ahead of us only during the first year, till we got close to light speed. That wouldn't give them nearly enough warning, if they set out to meet us when they picked it up. They can't live close by, or we'd have detected them from the Solar System."

"Obvious, or smug?" she challenged. "How much do we know? We have barely begun our first tiny venture into deep space. How long have they been exploring? Thousands of years? Millions? What have they discovered, what can they do?"

His smile twisted. "I'm sorry. This is no moment to cast a shadow on." He sighed. "But I've met a great many dreams over the centuries, and most of them turned out to be no more than that. It's been quite some time since our physicists decided they'd found all the laws of nature, all the possibilities and impossibilities." He lifted a hand. "I realize that's a proposition that can never be proven. But the likelihood has come to seem very high, hasn't it? I'd love to learn the aliens own magic carpets flitting faster than light; but I don't expect to."

Reluctantly, she nodded. "At least, we must reason on the basis of what we do know. I suspect that's far less than you think, but— What shall we *do*?"

"Respond."

"Of course! But how? I mean, we're slowing down, but we're still near light speed. By the time the, the machine, any of those machines up ahead receives our signal, won't we be past it? Won't its answer take . . . years to overtake us?"

He squeezed her hand. "Smart girl. You always were." To the ship: "We want to establish contact as soon as may be. What do you advise?"

The answer jarred them both into bolt uprightness. "That is contingent. The transmission has changed character. It has become considerably more complex."

"You, you mean they know we're here? Where are they, anyway?"

"I am refining those figures as I obtain more parallax. The nearest source is approximately a light-year off our path, approximately twice that distance vectorially."

"Baal! Then they *can* detect us instantly?"

"No. No, wait, Hanno." Svoboda's words came a little unsteadily, but fast. "That needn't be. Suppose the broadcast is automatic, a cycle. First a simple alert signal, then the message, then the alert signal again, over and over. The message alone—we might not have recognized it for what it is, supposed it was just some natural thing."

"When I first acquired it," *Pytheas* volunteered, "I assumed it was a fluctuation in the background noise, conceivably of interest to astrophysicists but irrelevant to this mission. It was Dopplered and otherwise warped out of identifiability. The low-information transmission that succeeded it made clear that here is no random flux. It also provided unambiguous data by which the warp functions could be determined. I am now compensating for them and thus reconstructing the message proper."

Hanno sagged back. "How often have they done this," he whispered, "with how many others?"

"The reconstruction is not yet perfect, but it continually improves as additional data come in," *Pytheas* went on. "Since the cycle is short, in shipboard time, I should soon have good definition. The message itself must be fairly brief, with high redundancy, although I anticipate high resolution as well. This is a visual mapping."

Darkness brimmed in a screen. Suddenly it was full of tiny light-points, uncountably numerous. Their blurriness dissipated, they sharpened, minute by minute. Colors appeared in them, and with that help eyes began to make out three-dimensional shapes, self-recurrent in infinite complexity.

"Prime numbers define a coordinate space," said the ship. "Digital impulses identify points within it, which in turn are members of fractal sets. Those functions should provide images, but the proper combinations must be found empirically. My mathematical component is running the search. When something intelligible emerges, that should give clues to obtaining further refinement and eventually extracting the entire content."

"Well," said Svoboda dazedly, "if the computers on Earth could design *you* in a single year—"

Hanno at her side, she waited. The unrolling dance of curves and surfaces flowed together. A picture grew into being. It was of stars.

21

THE SIX around the saloon table looked sharply around when the two entered. Coffee and remnants of food bespoke what hours had passed; more so did haggardness and tension. "Well," Patulcius snapped, "about time!"

"Hush," Macandal murmured. "They've come as soon as they could." Her glance added: An immortal ought to have more patience. But it has been hard, waiting.

Hanno and Svoboda benched themselves oppositely at the doorward end. "You're right," the Phoenician said. "Getting a clear, complete message and deciding what it means took this long."

"We do apologize, however," Svoboda added. "We should have given you . . . progress reports. We didn't think to, didn't realize how time was passing. There was never any, oh, revelation, any exact moment when we knew." Weariness weighted her smile. "I'm ravenous. What's available immediately?"

"You sit still, honey," Macandal said, rising. "I've got sandwiches already made. Figured this would be a long session."

Aliyat's look followed her out, as if to ask: Has she, in our shared bewilderment, gone back to her Old South, or simply to her old caring?

"She'd better bring me some too, or you'll have a fight on your hands and halfway up your arms," Hanno said to Svoboda. The jape rattled from nerves drawn wire-thin.

"All right," Wanderer demanded, "what is the news?"

"Corinne's entitled to hear from the start," Svoboda replied.

His fingers clutched the table edge. The nails whitened. "Yes. I'm sorry."

She reached to stroke a hand. "You merely forgot. We're beyond ourselves, every one of us."

"Well, Corinne isn't fond of technical details," Hanno said. "I can start with those. And, uh, with apologies to those of you who aren't either. I'm no scientist myself, you know, so this will be short."

Macandal returned while he was sketching the theory of the communication. Besides food on a tray, she bore a fresh

pot of coffee and a bottle of brandy. "Celebration," she laughed. "I hope!"

The fragrances were like blossoms in spring. "Yes, yes," Svoboda exulted. "The discovery of the ages."

"Theirs more than ours," Hanno said. "The aliens', I mean. But we have to decide what to do about it."

Tu Shan leaned forward, elbows on table, heavy shoulders hunched. "Well, what is the situation?" he asked levelly enough.

"We're receiving the same message, repeated and repeated," Hanno told them while he ate and gulped. "It's from two sources, one closer to our path than the other. Quite likely there are more that we haven't come in range of. If we continue on our present track, we may pick them up. The nearest is a couple of light-years from us. It appears to be on station relative to a line drawn between Sol and Phaeacia's sun, roughly the path we're following. *Pytheas* says that's easy to do; just keep yourself from orbiting away. As I was saying while you were out, Corinne, everything suggests that the aliens sent robots to sit broadcasting continuously. A little antimatter would provide ample power for centuries."

"The message is pictorial," Wanderer interjected.

"Well, graphic," Hanno proceeded. "You'll all see it later. Often, no doubt, trying to squeeze extra meaning out of it. I suspect you'll fail. No real images, just several . . . diagrams, maps, representations. Transmission to a ship traveling at Einsteinian speed, a changing speed at that, must be a tough problem, especially when the aliens can't know what our capabilities are for receiving and decoding—or how we think, or much of anything about us. Detailed pictures might be impossible for us to untangle. Evidently they composed the simplest, least ambiguous message that might serve. I would, in their place."

"But what is their place?" Yukiko wondered.

Hanno chose to take her literally. "I'm coming to that. What we got, first, was a lot of light-points in three-dimensional space. Then little bars appeared next to three of them. Then we got those three points in succession—it must be same ones—each by itself with the bar enlarged so we could see vertical lines on it. Then the view returned to the light-points in general, with a red line between two of those

that are marked. Finally another line appeared, from about two-thirds along the first one, offside to the third marked light-point.

"That's all. Each exposure lasts about a minute. The sequence finishes and starts over. After sixteen cycles, it becomes a plain series of flashes, that could just as well be rendered by dots and dashes in sound waves. This goes on for the same total time, after which we return to the graphics. And so on, over and over."

Hanno sat back. He grinned a bit. "What do you make of it?"

"That isn't fair," Patulcius complained.

"No, don't be a tease," Aliyat agreed.

"Hold on." Macandal's eyes shone darkly bright. "It's worthwhile making us guess. Bring more minds to bear on the problem."

"The ship's mind must already have solved it," Patulcius said.

"Nevertheless— Lord, let's have a little fun. I think those light-points stand for stars, a map of this neighborhood in the galaxy. One of the three special ones has got to be Sol, the other Phaeacia Sun, and the third—where the aliens are!"

"Right." Wanderer's tone quivered with an equal excitement. "The bars, are they spectrograms?"

"Brilliant, you two," Svoboda said happily.

Wanderer shook his head. "Naw, it's pretty obvious, though I do look forward to actually seeing it. A sending from the Others—"

Hanno nodded. "*Pytheas* ran through the astronomy database and confirmed those identifications," he related. "The third was hardest, because the three-dimensional representation is on such a small scale. But by expanding the fractals as well as searching the records— Anyhow, it turns out to be a star on our port quarter, if I may speak two-dimensionally. About thirty degrees off our course and about three hundred fifty light-years from our present position. It's type G seven, not as bright as Sol but not too unlike." He paused. "It's still less unlike that star in Pegasus, the one we believe may be the home of the nearest high-tech civilization to us, more than a thousand light-years away."

"Then they have come this far," Yukiko said in awe.

"If they are from that civilization, if it is a civilization," Svoboda reminded. "We know nothing, nothing."

"What powers have they, that they know about us?"

"We've tried to guess, we two," Hanno said. He drew breath. "Listen. Think. They—that third star—is about four hundred thirty light-years from Sol. That means it's within the radio sphere of Earth. For a while, starting in the twentieth century, Earth was the brightest radio object in the Solar System, outshining Sol in that band. That was interrupted, you remember, and afterward people developed communications that didn't clutter the spectrum so grossly; but the old wave front is still expanding. Even beyond Star Three, it's still detectable if you have instruments as good as ours, which the aliens certainly do.

"Very well. However they got to Star Three, they soon found that Sol had a brilliant radio companion. Nobody has spotted that at Pegasi, the Mother Star, assuming that is where the aliens originated. It's too distant; nothing from us will reach it for centuries. So the, uh, colonists or visitors at Three are on their own.

"Now take things from their viewpoint. In due course, Sol ought to be sending out ships too, if it hasn't already begun. It will be especially interested in contacting the nearest neighbor high-tech civilization it can identify, Mother Star's. The aliens could send robots to lie along the general path between those two. Our robots bound that way are smart and versatile. They would, at the least, beam word back to Earth. You recall they're equipped to do that from space, as we aren't, because they don't boost all the while; time touches them less than us. Unfortunately, I think, they must already have gone too far to acquire the signal—which indicates the aliens have not been at Three extremely long.

"There is another good possibility for the aliens. Sol folk should also be especially interested in stars like their own. Phaeacia Sun is that sort, and it lies in the same general, attractive direction as Mother Star. It's much the nearest to Sol that fits both requirements. So the aliens sent robots to lie along that path too. We've encountered those."

Silence closed down, eyes dropped in thought or stared at walls, until Aliyat said, "But robots went ahead of us to Phaeacia. Why haven't they reported anything about this?"

"Maybe the messenger craft hadn't gotten here when they passed by," Patulcius said. "We don't know when the messengers arrived." He pondered. "Except that it must have been less than—four hundred thirty years ago, did you say, Hanno? Otherwise the aliens could have had robots at Sol by now."

"Maybe they do." Aliyat shivered. "We've been gone a long time."

"I doubt it," said Wanderer. "That would be one hell of a coincidence."

"They might not want to, for whatever reason," Macandal pointed out. "We're completely ignorant."

"You're forgetting the nature of those robots at Phaeacia," Svoboda said. "They're not like the ones bound for Pegasi in the wake of messages beamed beforehand—great, intelligent, flexible machine minds intended to attempt conversation with other minds able to understand what they are. The Phaeacia robots were designed and programmed to go there and collect information on that specific planetary system. Almost monomaniacs. If they noticed these neutrino bursts en route, they paid no attention." She smiled sardonically. "Not their department."

Yukiko nodded. "Nobody can foresee everything," she said. "Nothing can."

"But when we're surprised, we can investigate and learn." Hanno's words rang. "*We* can."

Their looks shot to him and struck fast, all but Svoboda's. The color mounted in her cheeks.

"What do you mean?" Tu Shan rumbled after several breaths.

"You know what," Hanno replied. "We'll change course and go to Star Three."

"No!" Aliyat screamed. She half sprang to her feet, sank back down, and shuddered.

"Think," Hanno urged. "The diagram. That line between our course, this very point of our course, and Three. What is it but an invitation? They must be lonely too, and hopeful of hearing marvelous things.

"*Pytheas* calculated it. If we change direction now, we can reach them in about a dozen years, ship's time. It's three hundred light-years more than we planned, but we are still

at close to light speed and— A dozen little years, to meet the farers of the galaxy."

"But we only had four to go!"

"Four years longer to our home." Tu Shan knotted his fists on the tabletop. "How far from it would you take us?"

Hanno hesitated. Svoboda answered: "Between Three and Phaeacia Sun is about three hundred light-years. From a standing start, sixteen or seventeen ship years. We won't abandon our original purpose, only postpone it."

"The hell you say," Wanderer rapped. "Whichever star we go to, we'll need more antimatter before we can take off for anywhere else. Building the production plant and then making the stuff, that's probably ten years by itself."

"The aliens should have plenty on hand."

"Should they? And will they share it, freely, just like that? How do you know? How can you tell what they want of us, anyway?"

"Wait, wait," Macandal broke in. "Let's not get paranoid. Whatever they are, it can't be monsters or, or bandits or anything evil. At their stage of civilization, that wouldn't make sense."

"Now who's being cocksure?" Aliyat shrilled.

"What do we know about Star Three?" Yukiko asked.

Her quietness smoothed bristles down a little. Hanno shook his head. "Not much, beyond its type and inferred age," he admitted. "Being normal, it's bound to have planets, but we have no information on them. Never been visited. My God, a sphere eight or nine hundred light-years across holds something like a hundred thousand stars."

"But you say this one's not so bright as ours," Macandal reminded him. "Then the chances that it's got a planet where we could breathe are poor. Even with much better candidates—"

The table thudded beneath Tu Shan's smiting. "That is what matters," he said. "After fifteen weary years, we were promised, we shall walk free on living ground. You would keep us locked in this hull for . . . eight years longer than that, and then at journey's end we still would be, for decades or centuries or forever. No."

"But this chance, we cannot pass it by," Svoboda protested.

Wanderer spoke crisply. "We won't. Once we get to Pha-

eacia, we'll have the robots build us a proper transceiver and send a beam to Three, start conversation. Eventually we'll go there in person, those of us who care to. Or maybe the aliens will come to us."

Hanno's countenance was stark. "I told you, it's about three hundred light-years between Phaeacia and Three," he said.

Wanderer shrugged. "We have time ahead of us."

"If Phaeacia doesn't kill us first. We were never guaranteed safety there, you know."

"Earth should be getting in touch too, once we've informed them," Macandal said.

Svoboda's tone lashed. "Yes, by beam, and by robots that beam back. Who but us will ever go in person, and get to know the Others as they are?"

"It is true," Yukiko said. "Words and pictures alone, with centuries between, are good, but they are not enough. I think we here should understand that better than our fellow humans. We knew the dead of long ago as living bodies, minds, souls. To everyone else, what are they but relics and words?"

Svoboda regarded her. "Then you want to set for Star Three?"

"Yes, oh, yes."

Tu Shan's look upon her was stricken. "Do you say that, Small Snow—Morning Glory?" He straightened. "Well, it shall not be."

"Absolutely not," Patulcius vowed. "We have our community to found."

Aliyat caught his arm and leaned close against him. Her eyes defied Hanno. "Our homes to make," she said.

Macandal nodded. "It's a hard decision, but . . . we should go to Phaeacia first."

"And last?" Hanno retorted. "I tell you, if we let this chance escape us, we can very well never get it back. Do you want to change your mind, Peregrino?"

Wanderer sat expressionless for a while before he answered, "It is a hard decision after all. The greatest, most important adventure in history, which we risk losing, against—what may be New Earth, a fresh start for *our* race. Which is better, the forest or the stars?" Again he was

mute, brooding. Abruptly: "Well, I said it before. The stars can wait."

"Four against three," Tu Shan reckoned, triumphant. "We continue as we were." Softening: "I am sorry, friends."

Hanno's voice, face, bearing went altogether bleak. "I was afraid of this. Please think again."

"I have had centuries to think," Tu Shan said.

"To wish for the Earth of the past, you mean," Yukiko told him, "an Earth that never really was. No, you wouldn't deny humankind such a chance for knowledge, for coming closer to oneness with the universe. That would be nothing but selfish. You are not a selfish person, dear."

He shook his head, ox-stubborn.

"Humankind has waited a long time for contact, and on the whole has not actually shown much interest," Patulcius said. "It can wait a while longer. Our first duty is to the children we shall have, and can have only on Phaeacia."

"They can better wait than this can," Svoboda argued. "What we learn from the aliens, the help they give us, should make us the more secure when we do take our new home."

"The opportunity may well be unique," Hanno joined in. "I repeat, the aliens at Three are likely few, and pretty newly arrived. Else the Web at Sol would have picked up trace of them, or spacecraft of theirs would have arrived there. Unless— But we simply don't know. Are they necessarily settled at Three? If we don't accept their invitation— and they have no way of telling whether we've gotten it— will they stay, or will they move on? And will they necessarily move on toward Sol?"

"Will they necessarily still be at Three when we come?" countered Macandal. "If they are, will they necessarily be anything we can communicate with? No, it's a long, dangerous detour for the sake of something that may be grand but may just as well prove futile. Let's get on with our real business first."

"As the computers and overlords on Earth planned for us," Hanno gibed. He turned toward Wanderer. "Wouldn't you, Peregrino, like for once to do something that wasn't planned, that broke through the whole damned scheme of the world today?"

The other man sighed. "A tough call. Yes, I want to go to Three so bad I can taste it. And someday I hope to. But first and foremost, free life in a free nature—" Pleadingly: "And I couldn't do it to Corinne and Aliyat. I just can't."

"You're a knight," Aliyat breathed.

Yukiko smiled sadly. "Well, Hanno, Svoboda, we three are no worse off than we were yesterday, are we? Better, in fact, with a new dream before us."

"For someday," Svoboda mumbled. She lifted her head. "I am not angry with you, my friends. I too am weary of machines and hungry for land. So be it."

The tension began to ease. Smiles flickered.

"No," said Hanno.

Attention stabbed at him. He rose. "I am more sorry than you'll ever guess," he stated. "But I believe our need and our duty have changed. They are to go to Three. Till now, this venture was desperate. We pretended otherwise, but it was. Our chances looked about equal for perishing as miserably as the Norse did in Greenland, or settling into a sameness like the Polynesians in the Pacific."

"You promoted it," Patulcius virtually accused.

"Because I was desperate too. We all were. At least we'd be trying. We might, against the odds, eventually fill our planet with people who kept on looking and searching outward. What had we to lose? Well, this day we've discovered what. The universe.

"I am the captain. I am taking us to the Others."

Tu Shan was first onto his own feet. "You can't!" he bellowed.

"I can," Hanno said. "*Pytheas* obeys me. I will order the course change at once. The sooner it's made, the sooner—"

"No, not against our will," Wanderer interrupted.

"It would be wrong," Yukiko pleaded.

Svoboda regarded Hanno with something akin to horror. "You, you don't mean what you said," she stammered.

"Don't you want me to do this?" he cast back.

Her jaw clenched. "Not like that."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't. Still, I am going to issue the order. You'll thank me afterward."

"*Bozhe moi—*" She raised her voice. "*Pytheas*, you won't heed a single man, will you?"

"He is captain," replied the ship. "I must."

"No matter what?" Patulcius shouted. "Impossible!"

"Such is the programming."

"You never told us," Macandal whispered.

"I didn't expect the occasion would ever arise," Hanno said, not quite firmly. "I arranged it as a provision in case of emergency, best kept secret till then."

"Jesus Christ!" Aliyat yelled. "This is the emergency! You're making it yourself!"

"Yes," Wanderer said. Sweat studded his skin. "We didn't bargain for a dictator, and we're not going to knuckle under to any. We can't." He looked upward, as if to find another face in the air. "*Pytheas,* it's become seven against one."

"That is not a consideration," the ship answered.

"It never was, at sea or anywhere men voyaged," Hanno said. "It couldn't be, if they were to make shore alive."

"What if the captain is—is incapacitated?" Wanderer called. "Insane?"

Did the ship take a few extra microseconds to scan its biopsychological database and draw its conclusion? "Derangement is impossible for any of you without the severest trauma," it declared. "That has not occurred."

Tu Shan snarled. He started around the table. "It can. A dead captain doesn't give orders."

Svoboda moved to block him. "Now you're the crazy one," she groaned. He sought to push her aside. She resisted. "Help me! A fight, no, we can't!"

Wanderer joined her. They gripped Tu Shan by the arms. He halted. The wind sobbed in and out of him.

"See what you nearly caused, Hanno." Macandal spoke softly, though tears coursed down her cheeks. "Your command would destroy us. You can't issue it."

"Can and will." The Phoenician stepped to the doorway, turned back toward them, stood alert but unmoving. His tone mildened. "Once the decision's made, you won't go to pieces. I know you too well to believe you would. Nor will you try violence against me. You realize you can't spare one-eighth of our strength, one-fourth of the forefathers to come. And I am the one of us who's held command, not simply leadership but command, in ships and wars, trades and ventures beyond what was known, over and over for

thousands of years. Without me, your survival on Phaeacia or anywhere else is more than doubtful."

Gentler still: "Oh, I'm no superman. All of you have your own special gifts, and we need them all. I'm as open as ever to your thoughts, advice—yes, your wishes. But someone has to take the final responsibility. Someone always had to. The captain.

"We've another dozen years ahead of us, with God knows what at the end. Don't make them any harder on yourselves than they must be."

He left. The seven stood mute, half stupefied. At last Wanderer released Tu Shan, as Svoboda did, and said dully, "He's right about that. We have no choice."

"The course change process will commence in an hour," *Pytheas* announced. "In order to conserve fuel and minimize the undesired vector, it begins at that time with going free. Please make ready for a weightless period of approximately six hours."

"That . . . is . . . it," Aliyat choked.

Hanno returned. They knew he had sought the control room partly to look at its displays, as if that mattered, but mainly as a sign unto them. "We'd better get busy," he said. "Here, I have printout copies of a checklist. Done is done. We're on our way." He half smiled. "Not everybody hates this."

"Perhaps not," Svoboda replied. "*Sobaka.* You dog. You total son of a bitch." She took Wanderer by the hand.

22

AND CHRIST appeared before Aliyat where she knelt. His radiance was not what she had imagined, brilliant as desert noonday; it filled the darkened hollowness of the church with a blue dusk and the last sunset gold. Almost, she thought she heard bells from a caravan returning home. Warmth glowed into the stones beneath and around her. Nor was his visage gaunt and stern. In the West (she had heard?) they showed him like this, a man who had tramped roads, shared wine and honeycomb, taken small children onto his lap. He smiled when he bent over her and with his white sleeve dried the tears off her face.

Straightening again, he said—oh, tenderly, "Because you have kept your vigil, though the smoke of Hell blew about you, I have heard the prayer you dared not utter. For a time and a time, that which was lost shall be restored to you, and the latter end blessed more than the beginning." He lifted both scarred hands on high. "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted."

He was gone. Young Barikai sprang down from the bema and raised her into his arms. "Beloved!" he jubilated before she stopped his mouth with hers.

Together they went out. Tadmor slumbered beneath a full moon, which frosted spires and dappled paving stones. A horse waited. Mane and tail were streams of moon-silver. Barikai swung into the saddle. He reached down. She answered his clasp by soaring up to settle against him.

Briefly, hoofs rang, then the horse leaped aloft and galloped the ways of air. Wind lulled. Stars gleamed soft, everywhere around, in violet heaven. Aliyat's loosened hair blew backward to make a tent for her and Barikai. She was drunk with the odor of him, the strength that held her, the seeking lips. "Where are we bound?" she asked.

"Home." His laugh pealed. "But not at once!"

They hastened onward, around the curve of the world into morning. His castle gleamed on its mountaintop. The horse came to rest in a courtyard of mosaics and flowers where a fountain danced. Aliyat gave them scant heed. Later she noticed that she had been unaware whether the servants who met their lord and lady had bodies.

They did provide feast, music, spectacle, when such was wanted. Otherwise Aliyat and Barikai kept to themselves, tireless until they fell embraced into a half-sleep from which they roused joyous.

That happiness grew calmer, love lingered more and more, so that at last it was a new bliss when he said, "Now let us go home."

Their horse brought them there at dawn. The household was just coming awake and nobody saw the arrival. Indeed, it was as if nothing had happened and they had never been away. Manu received her hug with some surprise, then much boyish dignity. Little Hairan took it for granted.

She savored ordinariness for the rest of the day and evening, minute by minute, each presence and place, task and

talk, question and decision, everything that she owned and that owned her. When the final lamp guided her and Barikai to bed, she was ready for his words: "I think best you sleep, truly sleep, this night and beyond."

"Hold me until I do," she asked of him.

He did, with kisses. "Come not back too soon," he said once, against her cheek. "That would be unwise."

"I know—" She drifted from him.

Opening her eyes after a time outside of time, she found she was crying. Maybe this had been a bad idea. Maybe she should not go back ever.

Come on, old girl, she thought. Stop this. You promised Corinne you'd help her with that tapestry she wants to make.

Uncoupling, she left the booth where she had lain but stood for a space more in the dream chamber, busy. Good habit, carrying a makeup kit in a purse. Sessions here did sometimes touch pretty near the bone. Well, she learned long ago how to cover the traces.

Svoboda was passing by in the corridor. "Hello," said Aliyat. She was about to move on when the other woman plucked her sleeve.

"A moment, if you please," Svoboda requested.

"Uh, sure." Aliyat glanced away.

Svoboda didn't take the hint. "Don't resent this. I must say it. You should go in there less often."

Anger quivered. "Everybody else says it. Why not you? I know what I'm doing."

"Well, I can't prescribe for you, but—"

"But you're afraid I'm curling up in a ball and someday I won't be able to uncurl." Aliyat inhaled. Suddenly she felt like speaking. "Listen, dear. You've been in situations in the past where you had to go away from yourself."

Svoboda paled a bit. "Yes."

"I have a lot more than you. I know them pretty thoroughly, believe me. The dream box is a better escape than booze or dope or—" Aliyat grinned—"closing my eyes and thinking of England."

"But this isn't that kind of thing!"

"No, not exactly. Still— Listen. What happened today was that I got so furious that if I couldn't go conjure a private world, I'd've had to scream and smash things and gen-

erally throw a fit. What would that have done for crew morale?"

"What was the matter?"

"Hanno. What else? We met by chance and he buttonholed me and, oh, you can imagine. He repeated the same tired noises you just did, about me and the dream box. He tried to say, very roundabout— Never mind."

Svoboda bared a brief smile. "Let me guess. He implied you are a menace to relationships aboard ship."

"Yeah. He'd like to pair off with me. Of course he would. Hasn't gotten laid for months now, has he? I suggested what he could do instead, and walked off. But I was volcano angry."

"You were overreacting; you, of all people. Stress—"

"I s'pose." Faintly surprised at how rage and loss alike had eased within her, Aliyat said, "Look, I'm not addicted to dreams. Really I'm not. Everybody uses them once in a while. Why don't you share with me sometime? I'd like that. An interactive dream has more possibilities than letting the computer put into your head what it thinks you've demanded."

Svoboda nodded. "True. But—" She stopped.

"But you're afraid I might learn things about you you'd rather I didn't. That's it, right?" Aliyat shrugged. "I'm not offended. Only, don't preach at me, okay?"

"Why did you resent Hanno's attempt?" Svoboda asked quickly. "It was quite natural. You need not have cursed him for it."

"After what he's done to us?" Counterattack: "Do you still have a soft spot for him?"

Svoboda looked elsewhere. "I shouldn't, I know. *On se veut*—"

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing. A stray memory."

"About him."

Svoboda met the challenge. Probably, Aliyat thought, she wants to be friendly toward me; feels she has to. "Yes. Of no importance. Some lines we saw once. It was . . . the late twentieth century, a few years after we—we seven had gone under cover, while Patulcius was still keeping his own camouflage. Hanno and I were traveling about incognito in France. We stayed one night at an old inn, yes, old already then, and in the guest book we found what somebody had written, long before. I was reminded now, that's all."

"What was it?" Aliyat asked.

Again Svoboda looked past her. The wry words whispered forth as if of themselves.

"On se veut
On s'enlace
On s'en lasse
On s'en veut."

Before Aliyat could respond, she nodded adieu and hurried on down the corridor.

23

ONCE MORE Yukiko was redecorating her room. Until she finished, it would be an uninhabitable clutter. Thus she spent most of her private hours in Tu Shan's, as well as sleeping there. In due course they would share hers while she worked on his. It was her proposal. He had assented without seeming to care. The brushstroke landscape and calligraphy she earlier put on his walls had over the years been seen until they were all but invisible. However, she had a feeling that he would never especially have noticed their disappearance.

Entering, she found him cross-legged on the bed, left hand supporting a picture screen, right hand busy with a light pencil. He drew something, considered it, made an alteration, studied it further. His big body seemed relaxed and the features bore no mark of a scowl.

"Why, what are you doing?" she asked.

He glanced up. "I have an idea," he said almost eagerly. "It isn't clear to me yet, but sketching helps me think."

She went around behind him and leaned over to see. His drawings were always delicate, a contrast to much of his work in stone or wood. This showed a man in traditional peasant garb, holding a spade. On a large rock beside him squatted a monkey, while a tiger stood below. Through the foreground flowed a stream wherein swam a carp.

"So you are finally going to try pictures?" she guessed.

He shook his head. "No, no. You are far better at them than I will ever be. These are just thoughts about figures I mean to sculpture." He gazed up at her. "I think pictures

may not help us much when we get to Tritos. Even on Earth, in old days, you remember how differently people in different times and countries would draw the same things. To the Alloi, any style of line, shade, color we might use may not make sense. Photographs may not. But a three-dimensional shape—no ghost in a computer; a solid thing they can handle—that should speak to them."

Tritos, Alloi, he pronounced the names awkwardly; but one needed better words than "Star Three" and "Others," and when Patulcius suggested these, the crew soon went along. Greek still bore its aura of science, learning, civilization. To three of those in the ship, it had been common speech for centuries. "Metroaster" for "Mother Star" had, though, been voted down, and "Pegasi" was back in use. After all, nobody could say whether the Alloi at Tritos had come from there, or even whether it was sun to a sentient race.

Hanno sat mute through the discussion and merely nodded his acceptance. He spoke little these days, and others no more to him than was necessary.

"Yes, an excellent thought," Yukiko said. "What do you mean to show?"

"I am groping my way toward that," Tu Shan replied. "Your ideas will be welcome. Here, I think, might be a group—more creatures than these—arranged according to our degrees of kinship with the animals. That may lead the Alloi to show us something about their evolution, which ought to tell us things about them."

"Excellent." Yukiko trilled laughter. "But how can you, now, keep up your pretense of being a simple-minded farmer and blacksmith?" She bent low, hugged him, laid her cheek on his. "This makes me so happy. You were sullen and silent and, and I truly feared you were going back to that miserable, beastly way of living I found you in—how long ago!"

He stiffened. Harshness came into his voice. "Why not? What else had our dear captain left us, before this came to me out of the dark? It will help fill a little of the emptiness ahead."

She let go and slipped about to sit down on the bed in front of him. "I wish you could be less bitter toward Hanno," she said, troubled. "You and the rest of them."

"Have we no reason to?"

"Oh, he was high-handed, true. But has he not been punished enough for that? How dare we take for granted that what he's done is not for the best? It may prove to be what saves us."

"Easy for you. You want to seek the Alloi."

"But I don't want this hateful division between us. I dare not give him a friendly word myself, I'm afraid of making matters worse. It makes me wish we'd never received the message. Can't you see, dear, he is—like a righteous emperor of ancient times—taking on himself the heavy burden of leadership?"

Again Tu Shan shook his head, but violently. "Nonsense. You are drawn to him—don't deny—"

Her tone went calm. "To his spirit, yes. It isn't like mine, but it also seeks. And to his person, no doubt, but I've honestly not dwelt on that in my mind." She closed hands upon his knee. "You are the one I am with."

It mildened him to a degree. Sternness remained. "Well, stop imagining he's some kind of saint or sage. He's a scheming, knavish old sailor, who naturally wants to sail. This is his selfishness. He happens to have the power to force it on us." He slapped the screen down onto the blanket, as if striking with a weapon. "I am only trying to help us outlive the evil."

She leaned close. Her smile trembled. "That is enough to make me love you."

24

YET ANOTHER Christmas drew nigh, in the ship's chronology. It was meaningless to ask whether it did on Earth just then—doubly meaningless, given the physics here and the forgottenness yonder. Hanno came upon Svoboda hanging ornaments in the common room. Evergreen boughs from the nanoprocessors were fresh and fragrant, bejeweled with berries of holly. They seemed as forlorn as the Danish carols from the speakers.

She saw him and tautened. He halted, not too close to her. "Hello," he proffered.

"How do you do," she said.

He smiled. Her face stayed locked. "What sort of party are you planning this year?" he asked.

She shrugged. "No motif."

"Oh, I'll keep out of the way, never fear." Quickly: "But we can't go on much longer like this. We'll lose skills, including the skills of teamwork. We must start having simulations and practicing in them again."

"As the captain directs. I suppose, though, you're aware that Wanderer and I, at least, are doing so. We'll bring others in presently."

Hanno made himself meet the blue gaze, and made it stay upon his. "Yes, naturally I know. Good. For you two above all. A phantom wilderness is better than none, right?"

Svoboda bit her lip. "We could have had the real thing."

"You will, after we're through at Tritos. You wanted to go there first yourself. Why don't you look forward to it?"

"You know why. The cost to my comrades." She closed a fist and clipped: "Not that we can't cope. I outlived many bad husbands, dreary decades, tyrants, wars, everything men could wreak. I will outlive this too. *We* will."

"Myself among you," he said, and continued on his way.

It was to no particular goal. He often prowled, mostly at shipnight or through sections where nobody else had occasion to be. An immortal body needed little exercise to keep fit, but he worked regularly at his capabilities and developed new ones. He screened books and shows, listened to music, played with problems on the computers. Frequently, as in the past, when stimuli palled and thought flagged he disengaged his mind and let hours or days flow by, scarcely registering on him. That, however, was in its way as seductive, easily overdone as the dream chamber which he shunned. He could but hope that his crew rationed themselves on illusions.

Today impulse returned him to his stateroom. He sealed himself in, not that anyone would come calling, and settled down before his terminal. "Activate—" The command fell so flat across silence that he chopped it short. For a while he stared at the ceiling. His fingers drummed the desktop. "Historical persons," he said.

"Whom do you wish?" inquired the instrumentality.

Hanno's mouth writhed upward. "You mean, *what* do I wish?"

What three-dimensional, full-color, changeably expressive, freely moving and speaking wraith? Siddhartha, Socrates, Hillel, Christ—Aeschylus, Vergil, Tu Fu, Firdousi, Shakespeare, Goethe, Mark Twain—Lucretius, Avicenna, Maimonides, Descartes, Pascal, Hume—Pericles, Alfred, Jefferson—Hatshepsut, Sappho, Murasaki, Rabi'a, Margrete I, Jeanne d'Arc, Elizabeth I, Sacajawea, Jane Austen, Florence Nightingale, Marie Curie, Isak Dinesen—yes, or if you liked, the great monsters and she-devils— Have your machine take everything history, archaeology, psychology knew of a person and that person's world, down to the last least scrap, with probabilities assigned to each uncertainty and conjecture; let it model, with subtle and powerful abstract manipulations, the individual whom this matrix could have produced and who would have changed it in precisely those ways that were known; make it write the program, activate; and meet that human creature. The image of the body was a mere construct, as easily generated as any other; but while the program ran, the mind existed, sensed, thought, reacted, conscious of what it was but seldom troubled thereby, usually enthusiastic, interested, anxious to discourse.

"Old myths and nightmares have become real," Svoboda said once, "while old reality slips away from us. On Earth they now raise the dead, but are themselves only half alive."

"That isn't strictly true, either side of it," Hanno had replied. "Take my advice from experience and don't call up anybody you ever actually knew. They're never quite right. Often they're grotesquely wrong."

Unless memory failed after centuries. Or unless the past was as uncertain, as flickeringly quantum-variable, as everything else in the universe of physics.

Seated alone, Hanno winced, partly at recollection of a time when he sought advice from the electronic revenant of Cardinal Richelieu, partly at recalling how he and Svoboda had been together, then. "I don't want any single companion," he said to the machine. "Nor a synthetic personality. Give me . . . several ancient explorers. A meeting, a council—can you do that?"

"Certainly. It is a nonstandard interaction, requiring some creative preparation. One minute, please." Sixty billion nanoseconds.

The first of the faces looking out was strong and serene. "I don't quite know what to say," Hanno began hesitantly, well-nigh timidly. "You've been . . . told about the situation here? Well, what do I need? What do you think I should do?"

"You should have taken more thought for your folk," answered Fridtjof Nansen. The computer translated between them. "But I understand it is too late to change course again. Be patient."

"Endure," said Ernest Shackleton. Ice gleamed in his beard. "Never surrender."

"Think of the others," Nansen urged. "Yes, you lead, and so you must; but think about how it feels to them."

"Share your vision," said Marc Aurel Stein. "I died gladly because it was where I had wanted to go for sixty years. Help them want."

"Ha, why are they sniveling?" roared Peter Freuchen. "My God, what an adventure! Bring me back to see when you get there, lad!"

"Give me your guidance," Hanno entreated. "I've discovered I'm no Boethius, to console myself with philosophy. Maybe I have made a terrible mistake. Lend me your strength."

"You'll only find strength in yourself, sir," declared Henry Stanley. "Not in spooks like us."

"But you aren't! You're made out of what was real—"

"If something of what we did and were survives to this day, we should be proud, my friends," said Nansen. "Come, let us put it back into service. Let us try to find good counsel."

Willem Barents shivered. "For so strange a voyage, most likely to a lonely death? Commend your soul to God, Hanno. There is nothing else."

"No, we owe them more than that," said Nansen. "They are human. As long as men and women fare outward, they will be human."

25

MACANDAL SENT her glance slowly from one to the next of the six who sat around the table in the saloon with her. "I suppose you've guessed why I've asked you to come," she said at length.

Most of them stayed unstirring. Svoboda grimaced. Wanderer, beside her, laid a hand on her thigh.

Macandal took a bottle and poured into a glass. The claret gurgled dusky rose; its pungency sweetened the air. She passed the bottle on. Glasses had been set out for everyone. "Let's have a drink first," she proposed.

Patulcius attempted a jest. "Are you taking a leaf from the early Persians? Remember? When they had an important decision to make, they discussed it once while sober and once while drunk."

"Not the worst idea ever," Macandal said. "Better than these modern drugs and neurostims."

"If only because wine has tradition behind it," Yukiko murmured. "It means, it is more than its mere self."

"How much tradition is left in the world?" Aliyat asked bitterly.

"We carry it," Wanderer said. "We are it."

The bottle circulated. Macandal raised her goblet. "To the voyage," she toasted.

After a moment: "Yes, drink, all of you. What this meeting is about is restoring something good."

"If it has not been wholly destroyed," Tu Shan grated, but he joined the rest in the small, pregnant ceremony.

"Okay," Macandal said. "Now listen. Each of you knows I've been after him or her, arguing, wheedling, scolding, trying to wear down those walls of anger you've built around yourselves. Maybe some haven't noticed it was in fact each of you. Tonight's when we bring it out in the open."

Svoboda spoke stiffly. "What is there to talk about? Reconciliation with Hanno? We have no breach. Nobody has dreamed of mutiny. It's impossible. A change of course back to Phaeacia is impossible too; we haven't the antimatter. We're making the best of things."

"Honey, you know damn well we are not." Steel toned beneath Macandal's mildness. "Cold courtesy and mechanical obedience won't get us through whatever waits ahead. We need our fellowship back."

"So you've told me, us, over and over." Wanderer's voice was raw. "You're right, of course. But we didn't break it. He did."

Macandal regarded him for a quiet spell. "You're really hurting, aren't you?"

"He was my best friend," Wanderer said from behind his mask.

"He still is, Johnnie. It's you who've shut him out."

"Well, he—" Speech trailed off.

Yukiko nodded. "He has made approaches to you also, then," she deduced. "To everyone, I'm sure. Tactful, admitting he could be wrong—"

"He has not groveled," Tu Shan conceded, "but he has put down his pride."

"Not insisting we are the ones mistaken," Svoboda added, as if unwillingly.

"We may be, you know," Yukiko argued. "The choice had to be made, and only he could make it. At first you wanted this way yourself. Are you certain it was not just your own pride that turned you against him?"

"Why did *you* change your mind and join us?"

"For your sakes."

Tu Shan sighed. "Yukiko has worked on me," he told the others. "And Hanno, well, I have not forgotten what he did for us two in the past."

"Ah, he has begun to make himself clear to you," Patulcius observed. "Me too, me too. I still don't agree with him, but the worst rancor has bled off. Who advised him how to speak with us?"

"He's had a long time alone for thinking," Macandal said.

Aliyat shuddered. "Too long. It's been too long."

Svoboda's words fell sharp. "I don't see how we can ever again be whole-hearted about him. But you are right, Corinne, we must rebuild . . . as much faith as we can."

Heads nodded. It was no climax, it was the recognition of something foreseen, so slow and grudging in its growth that the completion of it came as a kind of surprise.

Macandal need merely say, "Grand. Oh, grand. Let's drink to that, and then relax and talk about old times. Tomorrow I'll cook a feast, and we'll throw a party and invite him and get drunk with him—" her laugh rang—"in the finest Persian style!"

—Hours afterward, when she and Patulcius were in her room making ready for bed, he said, "That was superbly handled, my dear. You should have gone into politics."

"I did, once, sort of, you recall," she answered with a slight smile.

"Hanno put you up to this, from the beginning, didn't he?"

"You're pretty shrewd yourself, Gnaeus."

"And you coached him in how to behave—carefully, patiently, month after month—with each of us."

"Well, I made suggestions. And he had help from . . . the ship. Advice. He never told me much about that. I think it was an experience too close to his heart." She paused. "He's always guarded his heart—too carefully; I guess because of the losses he suffered in all those thousands of years. But he's no fool either, where it comes to dealing with people."

Patulcius looked at her a while. She had slipped off her gown and stood dark, supple before him. Her face against the wall, which was muraled with lilies, made him remember Egypt. "You're a great woman," he said low.

"You're not a bad guy."

"Great for . . . accepting me," he slogged on. "I know it pained you when Wanderer went to Svoboda. I think it still pains you."

"It's good for them. Maybe not ideal, but good; and we do need stable relationships." Macandal flung her head back and laughed afresh. "Hey, listen to me, talking like a twentieth-century social worker!" She swung her hips. "C'mon over here, big boy."

26

CLOUDS MASSED huge, blue-black over the high place. Lightning flared, thunder crashed. The fire before the altar leaped and cast sparks like stars down the wind. The acolytes led the sacrifice to the waiting priest. His knife glimmered. In the grove below, worshippers howled. Afar, the sea ran white and monsters rose from its depths.

"No!" Aliyat wailed. "Stop! That's a child!"

"It is a beast, a lamb," Wanderer called back against the noise; but he kept his glance elsewhere.

"It is both," Hanno said to them. "Be still."

Knife flashed, limbs threshed, blood spurted and flowed dark over stone. The priest cast the body into the flames.

Flesh sizzled on coals, fell away from bones, went up in fat smoke. Through the storm, terrible in their splendor, came the gods.

Pillar-tall, bull-broad, beard spilling down over the lion skin that clad him, eyes capturing the fire-gleam, Melqart snuffed deep. He licked his lips. "It is done, it is well, it is life," he boomed.

Wind tossed the hair of Ashtoreth, rain jeweled it, lightning-light sheened on breasts and belly. Her own nostrils drank. She clasped his gigantic organ as if it were a staff and raised her left hand into heaven. "Bring forth the Resurrected!" she cried.

Baal-Adon leaned heavily on Adat, his beloved, his mourner, his avenger. He stumbled, still half blind after the murk of the underworld; he trembled, still half frozen from the grave. She guided him to the smoke of the offering. She took the bowl filled with its blood and gave him to drink. Warmth returned, beauty, wakefulness. He saw, he heard how men and women coupled in the grove and across the land in honor of his arising; and he turned to his consort.

More gods crowded about, Chushor out of the waves, Dagon out of the plowlands, Aliaan out of the springs and underground waters, Resheph out of the storm, and more and more. Clouds began to part. Distantly gleamed the twin pillars and pure lake before the home of El.

A sunbeam smote the eight who stood on the topheth near the betyl, invisible to priest and acolytes. The gods stared and stiffened. Melqart raised his club that had smitten the Sea, primordial Chaos, in the dawn of the world. "Who dares betread the holy of holies?" he bellowed.

Hanno trod forward. "Dread ones," he said calmly, with respect but not abasing himself, looking straight into those eyes, "we are eight from afar in space, time, and strangeness. We too command the powers of heaven, earth, and hell. But fain would we guest you a while and learn the wonders of your reigning. Behold, we bear gifts." He signalled, and there appeared a treasure of golden ware, gems, precious woods, incense.

Melqart lowered his weapon and stared with a greed that awoke also in the features of Ashtoreth; but her regard was on the men.

27

ONE BY one, they disengaged. That was a simple matter of removing induction helmets and feedback suits. The web of union between them and the guiding, creating computer had already vanished; the pseudo-experience was at an end. Nonetheless, after they had emerged from their booths into the commonplaceness of the dream chamber, it took them silent minutes to return altogether to themselves. Meanwhile they stood side by side, hand in hand, groping for comfort.

Eventually Patulcius mumbled, "I thought I knew something about the ancient Near East. But that was the most damnable—"

"Horror and wonder," Macandal said unevenly. "Lust and love. Death and life. Was it really like that, Hanno?"

"I can't be sure," the captain answered. "The historical Tyre we visited seemed about right to me." —in a full-sensory hallucination, where the computer drew on his memories and then let the seekers act and be acted on as they would have in a material world. "Hard to tell, after so long. Besides, you know I'd tried to put it behind me, tried to grow away from what was bad in it. This, though, the Phoenician *conceptual* universe— No, I don't believe I ever thought in just that way, even when I was young and supposed I was mortal."

"No matter authenticity," Yukiko said. "We want practice in dealing with aliens; and this was amply alien."

"Too much." Tu Shan's burly frame shivered. "Come, dear. I want a time gentle and human, don't you?" She accompanied him out.

"What society shall we draw on next?" asked Svoboda. Her attention sought Wanderer. "Those you knew must have been at least as foreign to the rest of us."

"No doubt," he replied rather grimly. "In due course, yes, we will. But first a setting more . . . rational. China, Russia?"

"We have plenty of time," Patulcius said. "Better we digest this before we think about anything else. *Kyrie eleison,* to have witnessed the gods at work!" He tugged at Macan-

dal. "I'm exhausted. A stiff drink, a long sleep, and several days' idleness."

"Right." Her smile was fainter than usual. They left.

Wanderer and Svoboda seemed aroused. Their gazes came aglow. She reddened. His breast rose and fell. They also departed.

Hanno took care not to watch. Aliyat had clasped his hand. Now she let go. He spoke dully. "Well, how was it for you?"

"Terror and ecstasy and—a kind of homecoming," she said, barely audible.

He nodded. "Yes, even though you started life as a Christian, it wouldn't be totally foreign to you. In fact, I suspect the program used some memories of yours as input where mine weren't sufficient."

"Weird enough, though."

He stared beyond her. "A dream within a dream," he murmured, as if to himself.

"What do you mean?"

"Svoboda would understand. Once she and I imagined what kind of future it might be where we dared reveal what we were." Hanno shook himself. "Never mind. Goodnight."

She caught his arm. "No, wait."

He stopped, lifted his brows, stood alert in a fashion weary and wary. Aliyat grasped his hand again. "Take me along," she said.

"Eh?"

"You're too lonely. And I am. Let's come back together, and stay."

Deliberately, he said, "Are you tired of subsisting on Svoboda's and Corinne's leavings?"

For a moment she lost color. She released him. Then she reddened and admitted, "Yes. You and me, we're neither of us the other's first pick, are we? And you've never forgiven me for Constantinople, not really."

"Why," he said, taken aback, "I've told you I have. Over and over I've told you. I hoped my actions proved—"

"Well, just don't let it make any difference that counts. What's the point of our living all these centuries if we haven't grown up even a little? Hanno, I'm offering you what nobody else in this ship will, yet. Maybe they never

will. But we are getting back something of what we had. Between us, you and I could help that healing along." She tossed her head. "If you aren't game to try, to give in your turn, okay, goodnight and to hell with you."

"No!" He seized her by the waist. "Aliyat, of course I—I'm overwhelmed—"

"You're nothing of the sort, you calculating old scoundrel, and well I know it." She came to him. The embrace went on.

Finally, flushed, disheveled, she said against his shoulder, "Sure, I'm a rogue myself. Always will be, I guess. But—I learned more about you than I'd known, Hanno. It wasn't a dream while we were there, it was as real to us as—no, more real than these damned crowding walls. You stood up to the gods, outsmarted them, made them take us in, like nobody else alive could have. You *are* the skipper."

She raised her face. Tears were on it, but a grin flashed malapert. "They didn't wear me out. That's your job. And if we can't entirely trust each other, if the thing between us won't quite die away, why, doesn't that add a pinch of spice?"

28

THROUGHOUT THE final months, as *Pytheas* backed ever more slowly down to destination, the universe again appeared familiar. Strange that a night crowded with unwinking brilliant stars, girded by the frost-road of the galaxy, where nebulae quenched forth new suns and worlds while energies raged monstrous around those that had died and light that came from neighbor fire-wheels had left them before humanity was—should feel homelike. Waxing ahead, Tritos had barely more than half the brightness of Sol, a yellow hue that stirred memories of autumns on Earth. Yet it too was a hearth.

Instruments peered across narrowing distance. Ten planets orbited, five of them gas giants. The second inmost swung at somewhat less than one astronomical unit's radius. It possessed a satellite whose eccentric path indicated the primary mass was slightly over two and a third the terrestrial. Nevertheless that globe, though warmer on the average, was at reasonable temperatures, and its atmo-

spheric spectrum revealed chemical disequilibria such as must be due to life.

Week by week, then day by day, excitement burned higher within the ship. There was no quenching it, and presently even Tu Shan and Patulcius stopped trying. They were committed; magnificent things might wait; and here was, for a while at least, an end of wayfaring.

The peace with Hanno that each had made on his or her own terms did not strengthen into the former fellowship. If anything, it thinned, stretched by a new guardedness. What might he want next, and how might someone else react? He had promised that eventually they would go on to Phaeacia; but when would that be, would it ever, could he then betray it? Nobody made accusations, or indeed brooded much on the matter. Conversation was generally free and easy, if not intimate, and he joined again in some recreations—but no more in shared dreams, once their training purpose had been served. He remained half the outsider, in whom none but Aliyat confided, and she little except for her body.

He did not attempt to change their attitudes. He knew better; and he knew, as well, how to pass lifetime after mortal lifetime among strangers to his spirit.

Tritos grew in sight.

Pytheas cast signals ahead, radio, laser, neutrino. Surely the Alloi had detected the ship from afar, roiling the dust and gas of space, braking with a flame out of the furnace engine. Receivers caught no flicker of response. "Have they gone?" Macandal fretted. "Have we come this whole way for nothing?"

"We're still many light-hours off," Wanderer reminded her. The hunter's patience was upon him. "Can't talk very readily. Not at all by electromagnetic waves, while our drive blazes in front of us. And . . . I would scan a newcomer first, before leaving my cover."

She shook her head, half angrily. "Forget the Stone Age, John. Anything like war or piracy between the stars isn't just obscene, it's absurd."

"Can you be absolutely certain? Besides, we could be dangerous to them, or they to us, in ways neither party has managed to imagine."

Tritos brightened. Without magnification, simply with the light stopped down, eyes beheld the disc, spots upon it,

flares leaping aloft. Offside stood a bluish-white steady spark that was the second planet. Now spectroscopy gave details of land and water surfaces, air mostly nitrogen and oxygen. The travelers changed course to intercept. The name they bestowed was Xenogaia.

The hour came when *Pytheas* called, "Attention! Attention! Coded signals detected."

The eight crowded into the command room. That wasn't physically necessary. They could quite well have perceived and partaken from their separate quarters. It was merely impossible for them not to be side by side, breath mingling with breath.

The message employed the same basic system as had the robots—a dozen years ago ship's time, three and a half cosmic centuries—minus relativistic adjustments no longer required. It arrived by UHF radio, from somewhat aft, to avoid ionization that was no longer enormously strong but could still interfere. "The source is a comparatively small object about a million kilometers distant," *Pytheas* reported. "It has presumably lain in orbit until we came this near. At present it is accelerating to match our vectors. Radiation is weak, indicating high efficiency."

"A boat?" Hanno wondered. "Has it a mother ship?"

Pytheas assembled the images transmitted. They sprang into vivid existence. First appeared a starscape, then an unmistakable Tritos (you could compare what was in a viewscreen), then a dizzying zoom in on . . . forms, colors, a thing that swept lopsidedly around a larger. "That must be Xenogaia," Patulcius said into a thick silence. "It must be where they stay."

"I think they are preparing us for what comes next," Yukiko said.

The representation vanished. A new form was there.

They could not, at once, properly see it. The contours, the mathematical dimensionality were too exotic, too far beyond any expectation. Thus had it been for Svoboda and Wanderer when first they glimpsed high mountains—snowclouds, heaven gone wrinkled, or what? "More art?" Tu Shan puzzled. "They do not make pictures like any that humans ever did. I think they do not sense like us."

"No," Hanno said, "this is likelier a straightforward hologram." The hair stood up on his arms. "Maybe they don't

know how we see, either, but the reality is the same for all of us . . . I hope."

The image moved, a slow and careful pirouette revealing it from every angle. It reached out of the scene and brought back a lump of something soft, which it proceeded to mold into a series of geometrical solids, sphere, cube, cone, pyramid, interlinked rings. "It's telling us it's intelligent," Aliyat whispered. Blindly, she crossed herself.

Vision began to understand. If the image was life-size, the original stood about one hundred forty centimeters tall. Central was a stalk, a green that glittered and shimmered, supported on two thin limbs that were flexible or multiply jointed, ending in several bifurcated digits. At the top sprouted two similar arms. These forked, subdivided, sub-subdivided, dendritically, till the watchers were unable to count the last, spidery-delicate "fingers." From the sides spread a pair of—wings? membranes?—to a span that equaled the height. They looked as if made of nacre and diamond dust, but rippled like silk.

After a long time, Tu Shan muttered, "If this is what they are, how shall we ever know them?"

"The way we knew the spirits, maybe," Wanderer answered as softly. "I remember kachina dances."

"For God's sake," Svoboda cried, "what are we waiting for? Let's show them us!"

Hanno nodded. "Of course."

The spacecraft moved on together toward the living world.

29

So *Pytheas* came to harbor, took orbit about Xenogaia.

That required special care. There were other bodies to give a wide berth. Foremost was the moon. Scarred and ashen as Earth's, it had only a tenth the mass, but its path brought it inward to about a third the Lunar distance from its primary, then out again to three-fifths. Some cosmic accident must have caused that, more recent than the impacts that formed the planet.

A number of artificial satellites wheeled in their own courses. None resembled any in the Solar System. Boats, as Hanno dubbed them, came and went. His folk were

unsure how many, for no two seemed alike; only slowly did they realize that form changed according to mission, and force-fields had more to do with it than crystal or fiber.

The Allosan mother ship (another human phrasing) orbited well beyond the moon. It appeared to be of fixed shape, a cylindroid almost ten kilometers in length and two in diameter, majestically rotating on its long axis, mother-of-pearl iridescent. Aft (?) was a complex of slender, curved members which might be the drive generator; it put Hanno in mind of interwoven vine patterns he had seen on Nordic runestones and in Irish Gospels. Forward (?) the hull flared and then came to a point, making Patulcius and Svoboda recall a minaret or a church spire. Yukiko wondered about its age. A million years did not seem unthinkable.

"They probably live aboard," Wanderer opined. "Uh, what weight does that spin provide?"

"Sixty-seven percent of standard terrestrial gravity," the ship responded.

"Yeah, they look as if they come from that kind of environment. It means—let's see, you told us Xenogaian pull equals one point four times Earth's, so for them—no, no, let me show off," Wanderer laughed. "It's twice what they're used to. Can they take it?"

"We could, if we had to," Macandal said. "But the Alloi do seem fragile." She hesitated. "Like crystal, or a bare tree iced over on a clear winter day. They are quite beautiful, once you learn how to look at them."

"I think we shall have to," declared Tu Shan harshly. "I mean, bear an added forty kilos on each hundred."

Their gazes followed his to that viewscreen in the common room which held an image of Xenogaia. They were passing the dayside, the planet nearly full. It was brighter than Earth, for it was more clouded. Whiteness swirled and billowed, thinly marbled with the blue of oceans, spotted with greenish-brown glimpses of land. Though the axis tilted a full thirty-one degrees, neither pole bore a cap; snow gleamed rarely on the tallest mountains.

Aliyat shivered. The motion loosened her hold on a table edge and sent her slowly off through the air. Hanno

caught her. She clung to his hand. "Go down there?" she asked. "Must we?"

"You know we can't stay healthy in weightlessness," he reminded her. "We can for longer than mortals born, and we've got medications that help, but finally our muscles and bones will shrink too, and our immune systems fail."

"Yes, yes, yes. But *yonder*?"

"We need a minimum weight. This ship isn't big enough to spin for that by itself. Too much radial variation, too much Coriolis force."

She glared through tears. "I am not an idiot. I have not forgotten. Nor have I f-f-forgotten the robots can fix that."

"Yes, separate the payload and engine sections, hitch a long cable between, then spin them. The trouble is, that immobilizes *Pytheas* till it's reassembled. I think you'll all agree we'd better hang on to its capabilities, as well as the boats', at least till we know a lot more."

"Shall we shelter on the first planet?" Tu Shan asked. "A seared hell. The third isn't this large either, but a frozen, barren waste; and likewise every outer moon or asteroid."

Svoboda looked still toward Xenogaia. "Here is life," she said. "Forty percent additional weight won't harm us," given our innate hardiness. "We will grow used to it."

"We grew used to heavier burdens in the past," Macandal observed quietly.

"But what I'm trying to say, if you'll let me," Aliyat yelled, "is, can't the Alloi do something for us?"

By this time considerable information exchange had taken place, diagrams, interior views of vessels, whatever the nonhumans chose to offer and the humans thought to. It included sounds. From the Alloi, those were notes high and coldly sweet that might be speech or might be music or might be something incomprehensible. It seemed likely that they were going about establishing communication in systematic wise; but the naive newcomers had not yet fathomed the system. They dared hope that the first, most basic message had gotten through on both sides and was mutually honest: "Our will is good, we want to be your friends."

Hanno frowned. "Do you imagine they can control gravitation? What about that, *Pytheas*?"

"They give no indication of any such technology," an-

swered the ship, "and it is incompatible with known physics."

"Uh-huh. If it did exist, if they could do it, I expect they'd have so many other powers they wouldn't bother with the kind of stuff we've met." Hanno rubbed his chin. "But they could build a spinnable orbital station to our specs."

"A nice little artificial environment, for us to sit in and turn to lard, the way we were doing here?" exploded from Wanderer. "No, by God! Not when we've got a world to walk on!"

Svoboda uttered a cheer. Tu Shan beamed. Patulcius nodded vigorously. "Right," said Macandal after a moment.

"That is provided we can survive there," Yukiko pointed out. "Chemistry, biology—it may be lethal to us."

"Or maybe not," Wanderer said. "Let's get busy and find out."

The ship and its robots commenced that task. In the beginning humans were hardly more than eager spectators. Instruments searched, sampled, analyzed; computers pondered. Boats entered atmosphere. After several sorties had provided knowledge of surface conditions, they landed. The intelligent machines that debarked transmitted back their findings. Then as the humans gained familiarity, they became increasingly a part of the team, first suggesting, later directing and deciding. They were not scientific specialists, nor need they be. The ship had ample information and logic power, the robots abundant skills. The travelers were the embodied curiosity, desire, will of the whole.

Hanno was barely peripheral. His concern was with the Alloi. Likewise did Yukiko's become. He longed most for what they might tell him about themselves and their farings among the stars; she thought of arts, philosophies, transcendence. Both had a gift for dealing with the foreign, an intuition that often overleaped jumbled, fragmentary data to reach a scheme that gave meaning. Thus had Newton, Planck, Einstein gone straight to insights that, inexplicably, proved to explain and predict. So had Darwin, de Vries, Oparin. And so, perhaps, had Gautama Buddha.

When explorers on Earth encountered peoples totally foreign to them—Europeans in America, for instance—the

parties soon groped their way to understanding each other's languages. Nothing like that happened at Tritos. Here the sundering was not of culture and history, nor of species, phylum, kingdom. Two entire evolutions stood confronted. The beings not only did not think alike, they *could* not.

Compare just the human hand and its Allosan equivalent. The latter had less strength, although the grip was not negligible when all digits laid hold on something. It had vastly more sensitivity, especially in the fine outer branchlets: a lower threshold of perception and a wider, better coordinated field of it. The hairlike ultimate ends clung by molecular wringing, and the organism felt how they did. Thus the subjective world was tactilely richer than ours by orders of magnitude.

Was it optically poorer? Impossible to say, quite likely meaningless to ask. The Allosan "wings" were partly regulators of body temperature, partly excretors of vaporous waste, mainly networks (?) of sensors. These included organs responsive to light, simpler than eyes but, in their numbers and diversity, perhaps capable of equal precision. Whether this was so or not depended on how the brain processed their input; and there did not seem to be any single structure corresponding to a brain.

Enough. It would probably take Hanno and Yukiko years to learn the anatomy; it would certainly take them longer to interpret it. For the moment, they understood—borrowing terrestrial concepts, grotesquely inappropriate—they were dealing not only with software unlike their own, but hardware. It was not to be expected that they would readily master its kind of language. Perhaps, beyond some kind of rudiments, they never would.

Presumably the Alloi had had earlier practice among aliens, and had developed various paradigms. The pair found themselves acquiring facility as they worked, not simply struggling to comprehend but making contributions to the effort. More and more, intent clarified. A primitive code took shape. Material contacts began, cautious to start with, bolder as confidence grew.

The fear was not of violence, or, for that matter— "under these circumstances," said Hanno, grinning—chicanery. It was of surprises that might lurk in a universe where life seemed to be incidental and intelligence accidental. What condition taken for granted by one race might harm the

other? What innocuous or necessary microbes might elsewhere brew death?

Robots met in space. They traded samples that they took to shielded laboratories for study. (At any rate, it happened aboard *Pytheas*.) Nanotech and biotech gave quick responses. While the chemistries were similar, even to most amino acids, the deviations were such as to bar cross-infection. Yes, the specimens sent by the Alloi had things in them that probably corresponded somewhat to viruses; but the fundamental life-stuff resembled DNA no more than a file does a saw.

After repeated experiments of that general sort, robots paid visits to ships. The Allosan machines were graceful, multi-tentacular, a pleasure to watch swooping about. Within the Allosan vessel, the air was thin, dry, but humanly breathable. Temperatures went through cycles, as they did in *Pytheas*, the range being from cool to chilly. Light was tinged like that from Tritos, less bright than outside but adequate. Centrifugal weight was as predicted, two-thirds of a gee, also sufficient.

As for what else the great hull bore—

Work on Xenogaia proceeded more straightforwardly. Planetology was a mature discipline, a set of techniques, formulas, and computer models. This globe fitted the pattern. Meteorology and climatology were less exact; some predictions could never be made with certainty, for chaos inhered in the equations. However, the overall picture soon emerged.

A strong greenhouse effect overcompensated a high albedo; other things being equal, every clime was hotter than at the same latitude on Earth. Of course, things seldom were equal. Thus the tropics had their pleasant islands as well as their steaming continental swamps or blistering deserts. Axial tilt and rotation rate, once around in slightly more than twenty-one hours, made for powerful cyclonic wind patterns, but the heavy atmosphere and warm polar regions moderated weather almost everywhere. Though conditions were unstable compared to the terrestrial, subject to swifter and often unforeseeable change, dangerous storms were no commoner than on Earth before control. In composition the air was familiar: higher humidity, rather more carbon dioxide, several percent less oxygen. For hu-

mans, the latter was more than made up by the sea-level pressure, twice their standard. It was air they could safely inhale, and uncorrupted.

Life covered, filled, drenched the planet. Its chemistry was akin to the terrestrial and Allosan, with its own uniquenesses. Given considerations of energy, followed by the scores of cases robots had reported to Earth, that was expected. As always, the astonishments sprang from the details, the infinite versatility of protein and inventiveness of nature.

On the prosaic side, humans could eat most things, though probably few would taste very good, some would be poisonous, and none would provide complete nutrition. Probably they would be safe from every predator microbe and virus; mutation might eventually change that, but modern biomedicine should handily cope. For the Survivors, with their peculiar immune and regenerative systems, the hazard would almost be nonexistent. They could grow terrestrial crops if they chose, and then animals to feed on the grass and grain.

This was not virgin Earth given back to them. It was not Phaeacia of their dreams. Yet here they could make a home.

Here they would have neighbors.

"—and he's been so lonely," Macandal said to Patulcius. "She and Hanno—no, no monkey business between them. Might be better if there were. It's just that they're both wrapped up in their research till it's as if nothing and nobody else quite exists for them. Aliyat's complained to me. I can't do much for her, but I've gotten an idea about Tu Shan."

She singled out others and gave them the same thought, privately, in words she deemed suited to each. Nobody objected. On the chosen evening, after she had done the poor best that could be done to produce a feast in weightlessness, she called for a vote, and Tu Shan received his surprise.

A spaceboat descended. Assisted by two robots, because initial problems with gravity were unavoidable after this long in orbit, he stepped forth, the first human being on Xenogaia. He had left off his shoes. The soil lay warm and moist. Its odors enriched his breath. He wept.

Shortly afterward, Hanno and Yukiko returned from the

Allosan ship. The visit had been their first. The six aboard *Pytheas* gathered around them in the common room. All floated watchful as pikes in a lake. A mural, enlarged from *"Falaise à Varengeville"*—sea, sky, cliff, its shadow on the water, brush golden with sunlight—seemed more remote in time and space than Monet himself.

"No, I cannot tell you what we saw," Yukiko said, almost like one who speaks in sleep. "We haven't the words, not even for the images they've sent here. But . . . somehow, that interior is alive."

"Not just dead metal and electronic trickery," Hanno added. He was altogether awake, ablaze. "Oh, they've much to teach us! And I do believe we'll have news for them, once we've found how to tell it. But it seems they can't come to us in person. We don't know why, what's wrong with our environment, but I think that if they were able to, they would."

"Then they doubtless have the same handicap on the planet," Wanderer said slowly. "We can do what their machines never can. They must be glad we came."

"They are, they are," Yukiko exulted. "They sang to us—"

"They want us to come live with them!" Hanno cried.

A kind of gasp went around the room. "Are you sure?" Svoboda's question was half demand.

"Yes, I am. We've achieved some communication, and it's a simple message, after all." The words tumbled from Hanno. "How better can we get to really know each other and work together? They showed us the section we can have. It's plenty big and we're free to bring over whatever we want, make whatever we like. The weight's enough to keep us fit. The air, the general conditions are no worse than in mountains we remember. We'll get used to that; and we can set up cozy retreats. Besides, we'll spend a lot of time in space, exploring, discovering, maybe building—"

"No," said Wanderer.

The single sound was a hammerfall. Silence echoed behind it. Eyes sought eyes. One by one, faces stiffened.

"I'm sorry," Wanderer went on. "This is marvelous. I'm tempted. But we've sailed too many years with the Flying Dutchman. Now there's a world for us, and we're going to take it."

"Wait, wait," Yukiko protested. "Of course we mean to study Xenogaia. Mainly it, in fact. It, the sapients, they must be why the Alloi have lingered. We'll establish bases, work out of them—"

Tu Shan shook his heavy head. "We will build homes," he answered.

"It is decided," Patulcius said. "We will cooperate with the Alloi when we have seen to our needs. I daresay we can investigate the planet better, living on it, than in a series of . . . of junkets. Be that as it may—" he smiled coldly—*"je suis, je reste."*

"Hold on," Hanno argued. "You talk as though you mean to stay on permanently. You know that was never the idea. Xenogaia may be habitable, but it's far from what we had in mind. Eventually we'll take on fresh antimatter. I think the Alloi have a production facility near the sun, but in any case, they'll help us. We'll go to Phaeacia as we intended."

"When?" challenged Macandal.

"When we're finished here."

"How long will that take? Decades, at least. Centuries, possibly. You two will enjoy them. And the rest of us, sure, we'll be fascinated, we'll help whenever we can. But meanwhile and mainly, we have our own lives and rights. And our children's."

"If in the end we leave," Svoboda said low, "it will not be the first home any of us forsook; and first we will have had a home."

Hanno captured her gaze. "You wanted to explore," he recalled.

"And I shall, in a living land. Also . . . we need every pair of hands. I cannot desert my comrades."

"You're outvoted," Aliyat said, "and this time you can't do anything about it." She reached to stroke fingers over Hanno's cheek. Her smile quivered. "There are seas down there for you to sail on."

"Since when were you a bold pioneer?" he taunted.

She flushed. "Yes, I'm a city girl, but I can learn. Do you suppose I liked lolling useless? I thought better of you. Well, in the past I crossed deserts, mountains, oceans, I survived in alleys, through wars and plagues and famines. Go to hell."

"No, please, we must not quarrel," Yukiko pleaded.

"Right," Wanderer agreed. "We'll take our time, think, talk this over like friends."

Hanno straightened, so that he floated upright before the cliff and the sky. "If you want," he said bleakly. "But I can tell you now, in the teeth of your old tribal hope for a consensus, we won't reach any. You're bound and determined to strike roots on the planet. And I, I will not throw away this opportunity the Alloi have offered. I cannot. Instead of fighting, let's plan how we can make the best of what's to be."

Tu Shan's countenance twisted. "Yukiko?" he croaked.

She flew to his arms. He held her close. What she gulped forth was, "Forgive me."

30

"I THINK you should go," Macandal said. "It seems to be something you'd understand best among us."

"No, really," Aliyat began, "you've always—"

Macandal smiled. "You've gotten too shy, honey. Think back. Way back, like to New York."

Still Aliyat hesitated. She wasn't simply unsure whether she could deal with the Ithagenē in what was clearly a critical situation. As a matter of fact, she had gotten more grasp of their language and ways—in some aspects, at least—than anybody else. (Had her earlier life made her quick to catch nuances?) But Tu Shan could ill spare her help, nursing the fields through this season of a drought year; and in spare moments, she was collating the mass of data and writing up the significant experiences that Wanderer and Svoboda sent back from their exploration of the northern woodlands. "I'd have to stay in touch with you anyway," she said.

"Well, that's wise," the other woman replied, "but you'll be on the spot and the only one really qualified to make decisions. I'll support you. We all will."

She was not the boss at Hestia, nobody was, yet it had tacitly come to pass that her word carried the most weight in the councils of the six. More lay behind that than finding the advice was sound. Wanderer had remarked once, "I think we, with our science and high technology, four and a third

light-centuries from Earth, are discovering old truths again: spirit, mana, call it what you will. Maybe, even, God."

"Besides," Macandal continued, "I've got my hands full." She always did, her own work, what she shared with Patulcius, what belonged to the community; and at three years, Joseph was several handsful by himself. Her laugh rolled. "Also my belly." Their second. Pregnancy was not disabling, bodies had hardened to Xenogaian weight, but you had better be careful. "Don't worry, we'll pitch in to see your man through; and maybe you won't be gone long." Soberly: "Take what time you need, though. This means a great deal to them. It might mean everything to us."

Therefore Aliyat packed her gear and rations, and departed.

Coming out of her house in the morning, she stopped for a minute and looked. Not yet was the scene too familiar to see. The sky reached milky, an overcast riven in places to reveal the wan blue beyond. Nowhere beneath were the clouds that should have brought rain. Air hung still and hot, full of sulfury smells. The stream that ran from the eastern hills through the settlement had become little more than a trickle; she barely heard it fall over the verge nearby and tumble to the river. Down in the estuary, banks and bars shone wider than erstwhile at low tide.

Regardless, Hestia abided. The three homes and several auxiliary buildings stood foursquare, solidly timbered. Russet native turf between them had withered, but watering preserved the shade trees and the beds of roses, hollyhocks, violets along walls. A kilometer northward, robots were busy around the farmstead and in the fields; the meadow and its cows made a fantastic vividness of green and red. Farther off, the spaceboat reared above the aircraft hangar, into heaven, like a watchtower over the whole small realm. From this height Aliyat spied a brighter gleam on the eastern horizon, the Amethyst Sea.

We'll survive, she knew. At worst, the synthesizers will have to feed us and our livestock till the drought breaks, and next year we'll have to start over. Oh, I hope not. We've worked so hard—machines too few—and hoped so much. An enlarged base, surplus, the future, the children—All right, I have been selfish, not wanting to be bothered

with any of my own, but isn't Hestia glad that I'm free today?

Elsewhere Minoa reached as of old. South, across the river, forest crowns bore a thousand hues, ocher, brown, greenish bronze, dulled by dryness. The same growth bordered the cleared land on the north; then, westerly on this side, hills climbed. Above their ridges lifted a white blur, Mount Pytheas wrapped in its mists.

Human names. Throat and tongue could form the language of the dwellers after a fashion, understandably if they paid close attention, but soon grew hoarse. The concepts behind that speech were more difficult.

Aliyat turned to kiss Tu Shan goodbye. His body was hard, his arms strong. Already at this hour he smelled of sweat, soil, maleness. "Be careful," he said anxiously.

"You be," she retorted. Xenogaia surely harbored more surprises and treacheries than had struck thus far. He'd been injured oftenest. He was a darling, but drove himself overly hard.

He shook his head. "I fear for you. From what I have heard, this is a sacred matter. Can we tell how they will act?"

"They're not stupid. They won't expect me to know their mysteries. Remember, they *asked* if somebody would come and—" And what? It wasn't clear. Help, counsel, judge? "They haven't lost their awe of us."

Had they not? What did a creature not of Earth, no kin whatsoever, feel? The natives had certainly been hospitable. They readily gave this piece of ground, had indeed offered a site closer to their city; but the humans feared possible ecological problems. There had been abundant exchange of objects as well as ideas, useful as well as interesting or beautiful. But did this prove more than that the Ithagenē—another Greek word—had their share of common sense and, one supposed, curiosity?

"I've got to go. Keep well." Aliyat walked off, as fast as was safe under a backpack. She'd developed muscles like a judo black belter's, which gave a terrifically sexy figure and gait, but bones remained all too breakable.

Someday we'll leave. Phaeacia waits, promising us to be

like Earth. Does she lie? How much will we miss this world of toils and triumphs?

Four Ithagenē waited at the head of the path. They wore mesh mail and their hook-halberds gleamed sharp. They were an honor guard; or so she thought of them. Deferential, they divided to precede and follow her down the switchbacks across the fjord wall to the river. At the floating dock, the envoy was already in the vessel that brought them. Long, gracefully curved at prow and stern, it little resembled the two human-made boats tied nearby. No more did it have rowers, though, and the yards were bare of sails. A motor, such as the fabricator robots had lately accumulated the resources to make, was an imperial gift. Supplies of fuel renewed it ongoingly.

The humans often wondered what they were doing to this civilization, for good or ill—ultimately, to this world.

Aliyat recognized S'saa. That was as closely as she could render the name. She did her best with a phrase that they guessed, in Hestia, was half formal greeting, half prayer. Lo responded in kind. ("Lo, le, la." What else could you say when sexes were three, none corresponding quite to male or female or neuter, and the language lacked genders?) She and her escort boarded, a crew member cast off, another took the rudder, the motor purred, they bore upstream.

"May you now tell me what you want?" Aliyat asked.

"The matter is too grave for uttering elsewhere than in the Halidom," S'saa answered. "We shall sing of it."

The notes keened forth to set an emotional tone, prepare both body and mind. Aliyat heard distress, anger, fear, bewilderment, resolution. Surely much escaped her, but in the past year or two she had finally begun to comprehend, yes, feel such music, as she had failed to do with many kinds on Earth. Wanderer and Macandal were experimenting with adaptations of it, composing songs of quiet, eerie power.

You wouldn't have thought of these beings as artists. Barrel torsos, some one hundred fifty centimeters tall on four stumpy limbs, covered with big scales or flaps, brown and leathery, that could individually lift to show a soft pink undersurface for fluid intake, excretion, sensing; no head to speak of, a bulge on top where a mouth underlay one scale and four retractable eyestalks protruded; four tentacles below, each terminating in four digits, that could be stiffened

at will by turgor. But how repulsive did a body look that was scaleless as a flayed corpse? The humans took care always to be fully clothed among Xenogaians.

Rapidly driven, the boat passed several galleys bound the same way, then numbers of lesser craft "fishing" or freighting. None were going downstream; the tide had begun to flow, and although the moon was fairly distant today, the bore up the river would be considerable. At ebb the argosies would set forth. This was a seafaring nation (?) whose folk hunted great aquatic beasts and harvested great weed fields, traded around the coasts and among the islands, occasionally fought pirates or barbarians or whatever their enemies were. As tactfully as possible, the six at Hestia refused to give any military aid. They didn't know the rights or wrongs, they only knew that this appeared to be the most advanced civilization on the planet but someday they'd want to start getting acquainted with more. Of course, doubtless their local friends had found uses both warlike and peaceful for what they acquired from them.

A pair of hours slipped by. On the south side, forest gave way to orchards and croplands. Foliage drooped sere. On the north, while hills heightened in the background, bluffs declined to gentle slopes. Towers came into hazy view, grew clearer, loomed sheer above masts crowded along the wharfs; and Aliyat went ashore into Xenoknossos.

Warded by stream and fleet, the city had no need of outer walls. Along wide, clean streets, colonnades and façades rose intricately sculptured. Glass flashed in color patterns of contrasting simplicity. The effect was not busy but harmonious, airy, like trees and vines in wind or kelp in currents undersea, strange to behold on a world that dragged so heavily. The raucous turbulence of human crowds was absent. Dwellers moved deliberately; even the looks and remarks that followed Aliyat were decorous. It was their voices that danced, twittered, strove, joined together—their voices and the sounds of instruments from places where they took their pleasure.

Not all was thus. Climbing a hill, she saw down to a camp outside the city, a wretched huddle of makeshift shelters. The beings within stood ominously bunched. Armed guards were posted about. Chill touched her. This must, somehow, be the reason she was called.

On the hilltop fountained the building she knew as the Halidom. Its stone had weathered pale amber. Nothing like its interwoven, many-branched vaults and arches, spiral windows and calyx eaves, was ever on Earth. Imagination yonder had never ranged in those directions. When the images arrived, architecture, together with music and poesy and much else, might well have a rebirth, if anybody still cared about such things.

S'saa accompanied her inside. A chamber vast and dim opened before them. The mighty of Xenoknossos had gathered, expectant, in a half circle before a dais. Thereon were those three, one of each sex, who reigned or presided or led. Hearing tell of them, Hanno had from space proposed dubbing them the Triad, but later those at Hestia thought a better word might be the Triune.

She approached.

—That night she radioed back from the apartment lent her. She camped in it, really, as ill suited as the furnishings were; but it served. A window was unshuttered to warm darkness, the booming of a breeze. The small horned moon tinted clouds and cast ghostly shimmers on the river. Fires burned sullen among the squatters in the field.

Exhaustion flattened her voice, though her mind had seldom felt more awake. "We've been at it all day," she said. "Not that the trouble is complicated in itself, but it involves beliefs, traditions, prejudices, everything that's so knitted into a person— Think of a pagan Celt and a pious Muslim trying to explain, to justify, the status and rights of women to each other."

"The Ithagenē did have the wisdom to ask for an outside opinion," Patulcius remarked. "How many human societies ever did?"

"Well, this is unprecedented," Wanderer answered from the outback. "We never had any real aliens among us on Earth. Maybe in future we'll benefit— Go on, Aliyat."

"It's how they breed," copulating in fresh water, which must be still if conception was to result; a certain concentration of certain dissolved organic materials was essential. That set no more of a handicap, on a world where most regions were normally wet, than loss of the ability to synthesize vitamin C in the body had done for her species. "You remember, the city people use that lake in the hills behind

town." Holy Lake became the human name, for it seemed lovemaking was a religious rite in this society. "Well, throughout the hinterlands, most others have dried up to the point where they're useless. The habitants have gotten together and demand access to Holy Lake till the drought's over. It's badly shrunken too, but enough is left for everybody if triples ration their turns." Aliyat's laugh clanked. "How that would go over with our race! But of course the Ithagenē don't think of it the way we do. What has the Xenoknossians up in arms is the thought of . . . outsiders profaning their particular mystery, the presence of their, their tutelary spirit or god or whatever it is. The Triune told the countryfolk to go home and wait out the bad times. They shouldn't breed anyway till the rains come again. But you know about the sacred Year-Births—"

"Yes," Tu Shan said. "Besides, they live primitively, infant mortality is always high, they feel they must be fecund whatever happens."

"The realm, this whole section of Minoa, is close to civil war," Aliyat told them. "There've been killings. Now the, uh, tribes have jointly sent two or three thousand here, who insist that soon, come what may, they'll go to the lake. Nothing can stop them, short of a massacre. Nobody wants that, but to give in could tear things apart almost as terribly."

Macandal whistled low. "And we had no idea. If only they'd come to us sooner."

"I don't suppose it occurred to them before they got desperate," Patulcius guessed. "If we don't find a solution fast, I suspect it will be too late."

"That's why you went, Aliyat." Macandal's tone wavered. "I gathered, from S'saa's hints, that it concerned this kind of thing, and you, with your experience— Don't misunderstand!"

"No offense," Aliyat said. "I did, I hope, slowly get a feel for what's going on, and a notion. It may be worthless."

"Tell us," Svoboda begged.

—If you could use human words for Ithagenean emotions and make sense, Aliyat thought, then the assembly next morning was appalled. "No!" exclaimed the le of the Triune. "This is impossible!"

"Not so, Foreseers," she maintained. "It can be quickly

and easily done. Behold." She unfolded a sheet of paper. Copied thereon, a transmission from Hestia to a machine she had carried along, was an enlarged aerial photograph of Holy Lake and its vicinity. The Ithagenē didn't object to overflights, though none had ever accepted an invitation to ride. (Did some instinct forbid, was it a prohibition, or what?) She pointed. "The lake lies as in a bowl, fed by rain and runoff. Here, a short way below, is a hollow. Let us clear it of trees and brush, then dig a channel through the hill above. Some of the life-giving water will drain out to fill it, while enough will remain for you after the channel is closed again. There, out of sight of your people, the countryfolk can engender according to their own customs. For you this would be a huge undertaking, but you know of our machines and explosives. We will do it for you."

Hissings and rustlings filled the gloom.

S'saa must explain to Aliyat, patching out the native language with what human speech lo commanded: "Although they are reluctant, they would agree, lest worse befall. However, they fear the habitants will refuse, will take the proposal as a deadly threat. Knowing Kth and Hru'ngg, the leaders, I think this is true. For a life-site is not any pond; it is hallowed by ancient use, by the life it has given in the past. To triple elsewhere would be to set the world awry. The rains might never return, or the violators might never have another birth."

Dismay struck whetted. "You don't believe that!"

"Not we who are here, no. But those are simple upcountry folk. And it is true that not all bodies of water grant the blessing. Many do not, though surely they were tried at some time."

"That is because—oh—oh, Christ, what's the use?"

"Water flows from your eyes. Do you invoke?"

"No, I— You have no word. Yes, I invoke the dead, and the loss, and— Wait! Wait!"

"You leap, you raise your arms, you utter noises."

"I, I have a new thought. Maybe this will serve. I must ask the council. Then I must . . . must doubtless go to the habitants and . . . learn if it feels right to them." Aliyat turned around to face the Triune.

—For days heaven had been almost clear, an iron-hard blue, clouds nowhere but in the west. Heat lightning sometimes flickered yonder, and thunder muttered into wind-

lessness. Now sunset reddened those reaches. Its beams struck through gaps and down valleys until they splashed the new tarn as if with human blood. Trees bulked black against it. More and more, the Ithagenē gathered in their hundreds became masses of shadow, a wall around the water. Their singing beat like a heart.

Out of them trod the Eldritch Ones, three couples, for it was known that that was their nature. On their right walked the Foreseers of the City, lanterns aloft on poles to cast many-patterned light; on their left, torches flared and smoked among the Sower Chieftains. These halted at the marge. The six went onward.

Aliyat felt drowned turf crisp beneath her feet. The water lapped around her ankles, knees, loins. Warmth from the day remained in it, but a coolness was rising from below, a pledge to years unborn. "Here's where we stop," she said. "The bottom slopes fast. Farther on, we'd soon be over our heads." She couldn't fight back a giggle. "That'd make it hard to go about this dignified, wouldn't it?"

"I am not sure what we should do," Tu Shan confessed.

"Nothing much. We have our clothes on, after all. They don't know how we make babies anyway. But we must take our time and—" A sudden odd shyness: "And get them to see we love each other."

His arms enfolded her. She pressed herself close. Their mouths met. Vague in the twilight, she glimpsed Patulcius and Macandal, Wanderer and Svoboda. The hymn from the shore reached into her.

A necking party in a pool, she thought crazily. Ridiculous. Absurd as real lovemaking, as everything human, everything alive. We've sailed from those stars blinking forth overhead, to stage a Stone Age fertility rite.

But it was working. It consecrated the mere, it kindled the magic. In peace would Minoa await the resurrection of the land.

"Tu Shan," she whispered, straining against him, "when we get home, I want your child."

31

"JOYFUL IS the word that has come to us," related the Allos whom the humans thought of as Lightfall. "Share it. From rendezvous has it fared, the closest rendezvous, 147 light-years yonder." Many-branched fingers marked off a part of

the sky, then closed on a point within. Made by a shape that looked so frail, limned against naked space as revealed in a transparency of the ship, the gesture became doubly strong.

The direction was well away from Sol, but not toward Pegasi. The Alloi had roved widely from the world that mothered their race.

"Rendezvous," said Yukiko, perforce aloud and in a language of Earth. She was understood, as she understood what was communicated to her. However, difficulties and failures of comprehension were still many. That was inevitable, when minds could not translate directly what senses perceived, but must pass it through a metalanguage worked out in the course of years. "I do not quite identify your reference."

"Starfarers have established stations, orbital about chosen suns, to which they report their discoveries and experiences," Quicksilver explained. "These pass the information on to the rest. So do nodes of knowledge grow, and the beams between them form nets that piece by piece knit together."

Hanno nodded. He had been aware of this; his explorations with Alloi companions had taken him near the vast gossamer web they had made to circle Tritos, while Yukiko was searching into their arts, philosophies, dreams. "There's a primitive version in the Solar System," he reminded her. "Or was, when we left. After they start receiving our 'casts, they can upgrade it and join the community."

"If they care to." She looked out to where stars drowned in the icy cataract of their own numbers, and away again, with a slight shudder. What she and he had learned here gave scant hope of that.

Hanno was less daunted. "What is this news?" he asked avidly.

"A ship came to the rendezvous," Lightfall told. "All do thus from time to time, that they may take in the fresh data; for the stations cannot well broadcast continuously to those who may be anywhere, at any velocity. Such of our report on this system as had arrived by then determined the crew on proceeding next to Tritos. We have encountered them before; it is clear to us that the Xenogaians hold special interest and promise for them. May we have an image?"

"Provided," agreed Star Wing, and activated a projector.

A hulking form sprang forth. Hanno's immediate thought was of a rhinoceros. Granted, the resemblance was faint and fanciful, like comparing a man to a caterpillar. The body was of minor interest in any case, except insofar as it was the matrix of mind, of spirit.

"Y-yes," he ventured, "they're from a big planet too, aren't they? I daresay they see just enough cultural similarity here to themselves that they may reap a harvest of ideas from the differences."

Yukiko's eyes shone. "When will they come?"

"Their message is that they wished to spend a few years at the rendezvous first, studying and thinking about the data," Lightfall imparted. "That is usual, to take advantage of facilities that no vessel can accommodate. Doubtless they are on their way at this moment. Since they are accustomed to high accelerations, they should arrive just a few months later than their announcement that they have set forth."

"Several years yet, then." Yukiko smiled. "Time to prepare a festive reception."

"Do they travel by the same doctrine as you?" Hanno inquired.

"Yes," Lightfall answered, "which we recommend you also adopt."

"I'm thinking about it. We'd need some basic modifications in our ship, you know."

"More in your thoughts."

"Touché!" Hanno laughed. "Conceded, we are impatient parvenus."

The Alloi did not boost continuously between stars. They got close to light speed, then went on free trajectory, using centrifugal weight. The saving in antimatter allowed huge hulls, with everything that that implied. The price was that time dilation became less. A journey that might have been accomplished in ten shipboard years would take perhaps twice as long; and the farther you went, the larger the factor grew. All voyagers were ageless, but none escaped from time.

The practice accounted for observers at Sol never having picked up sign of starcraft. Enormous though the energies were, radiation was only at beginning and end of a passage, a candle-flicker; and starcraft were very few.

"Perhaps you do yourself an injustice," suggested Volant.

"Perhaps your hastiness will fill a need we older spacegoing races did not know we had. You may go beyond this tiny segment of the galaxy that we have reached, from end to end of it, in less than a million cosmic years. You may be those who weave it together."

Yukiko's hands fluttered. "No, no. You honor us far beyond what we deserve."

"Let us abide the future," flowed from Star Wing: the patience of ancientness. These beings had left Pegasi fifteen thousand years ago; no individual lifetime of theirs was shorter than half of that. They knew of explorations that had been going on, in other directions, a hundred times as long.

"Well, this is . . . wonderful," Hanno said. Glancing at Yukiko: "Maybe you can find words, dear. I'm dumbstruck."

She caught his hand. "You brought us here. You."

They had become able to sense when Alloi turned grave. "Friends," Lightfall told them, "you must make certain decisions among yourselves. Soon after the—(?)—arrive, we will leave." Through shock and suddenly racketing pulse, they gathered: "You may remain if you desire. They will be rapturous at meeting new members of the fellowship. You can help them, and they help you, to know Xenogaia and its awarenesses, quite likely even more than you and we have helped each other. Everything that we have built in this system shall stay for your use."

"But, but you go away?" Yukiko stammered. *"Why?"*

Stalky limbs traced symbols. Membranes quivered; opalescences ran over them. The declaration was calm, inexorable, and maybe, maybe regretful. "We have spent more than four centuries at Tritos. I believe you realize that was partly because of what we had detected from Sol: our hope, which was fulfilled, that we could call travelers from there to us. Meanwhile we explored these planets and above all the diverse life-ways, histories, achievements, horrors, glories of the sentients on Xenogaia. It was effort richly rewarded, as we foreknew it would be. Another whole concept of the universe opened for us. Something of what we learned has entered our inwardness.

"And yet you humans, in your decade and a half, have gathered more than we imagined was there. It happens your

home world, your evolution, more closely resembles theirs. Nature has better prepared you to comprehend them.

"For our part, we found ourselves drawn to you as never to them. You too are the kind of beings who reach for the stars.

"We could stay here till this sun begins to die, and not discover all that there is to discover; for it is so much, and always changing. Life is a rare thing, sapience more seldom yet. Why, then, will we not linger?

"It is that we hope for more than we have gained here; and we know that if we seek long enough, we shall find it."

Hanno had nothing but merchant words. "I see. You've gone past the point of diminishing returns. Your best strategy is to start fresh."

As it seemed mother civilizations did not, could not.

"Will you go on to Sol?" Yukiko asked unsteadily.

"Someday, perhaps," Star Wing conveyed.

"Likelier not," Quicksilver asserted. "I think that what you have revealed to us will suffice—for they have been evolving onward."

"Let Sol and Pegasi communicate," Volant scoffed.

"No, you are too impetuous, and too thoughtless of our friends," Lightfall admonished. "We have years ahead of us in which to consider." To the humans: "You too, with your kindred down on the planet, you must take thought. Do you wish to commence at once?"

Hanno and Yukiko traded a look. Mutely, she nodded. After a moment, he did likewise. They bowed, one of many motions that had gradually acquired eloquence, and went from the coralline room.

A passageway took them along the great curve of the ship. Past the part of it that was alive stretched, today, a simulated vista of ruddy hills, lean crags, fronds rippling around a frozen pool, beneath a violet-blue sky where rings arched like undying rainbows—a world the Alloi had once come upon and found beautiful, for it was much as their mother world was before the machines. They had left colonists.

Beyond lay a room of exercise equipment made for the humans. It could be spun through a hollow ring around the hull to provide higher weight. Thus did they maintain a physical condition that allowed them to visit the planet with-

out being too badly handicapped in relation to those who lived there.

Farther on was their home section, Yukiko's little garden, a post upholding the model of a caravel that Hanno had once constructed, the compartment that housed them. Air inside it remained thin and dry, but it was warm and to their eyes the lighting was pure white.

The three rooms held their possessions, a few carried from Earth, more that were remembrances of their years here, but there was no clutter. He kept his sailor's tidiness, she her basic austerity. Opposite the electronic complex a calligraphic scroll hung above a low table where a bowl of water contained a single shapely stone.

They removed their outer garments. "Shall I make tea?" she proposed.

"Do, if you like." His face drew taut. "I want to call planetside now."

"Well, it is tremendous news, but we shall have to talk about it over and over—"

"In person. We're going down and stay a while, you and I."

"That will be very welcome," she sighed.

"Yes, I admit I'll enjoy some unfaked shirtsleeve outdoors, a sea, a salt wind."

"And our comrades, not images but real flesh again. How the children must have grown."

He missed the wistfulness, and not until later did he recall how ardently she entered into the life around her when they touched down. The occasions had been infrequent and brief. You must live with the Alloi, work side by side with them, share hardships and dangers as well as victories and celebrations, if you would reach an understanding of them and of what they had won on their endless voyage. To him the sacrifices were small.

"Never mind how many years we may have to make ready," he said. "We'd better begin straightaway."

She smiled. "You mean that you cannot sit still for a cup of tea."

Ignoring the gentle gibe, he settled before the complex and ordered a beam to Hestia. The ship was at present above the opposite hemisphere, but the Alloi had long since orbited relay satellites. The screen came alight. "Summon-

ing," said the artificial voice. A minute passed, and another. "Summoning."

Yukiko brought up an outside view. The planet shone blue-veined white. Lightnings threaded the darkened edge. She smote hands together. "We forgot!" she cried. "It's night where they are."

"Damn," said Hanno without remorse.

Svoboda's likeness entered the screen, three-dimensional, as if she herself stood behind a shut window. Her hair was tousled. A robe hastily thrown on gaped over milk-heavy breasts. "What's wrong?" she exclaimed.

"No emergency," Hanno replied. "News. I'll tell you, you tell whoever else got roused, and then go back to sleep if you can."

She bridled. "It couldn't wait?"

"Listen." He made his announcement in short, clanging words. "We need to begin studying what information the Alloi can give us about these other beings, as soon as they've assembled it. Before then we need to confer. Yukiko and I— Expect our boat, m-m, shortly after sunrise. . . . What's the matter?"

"What is the hurry?" Svoboda's response crackled. "Aren't you aware this is harvest season? We'll be working ourselves sweatless, people and robots both, for the next several days. We already are. I heard the summons only because I'd just fallen asleep after the baby kept me awake for hours. Now you want us to sweep and garnish quarters for you and meet in instant council."

"Don't you *care*? Why in hell's name did you sign on?"

"We're sorry," Yukiko interjected. "We were so excited, everything else dropped from our minds. Pardon us."

The other woman fleered. "Is he sorry?"

"Hold on," Hanno said. "I made a mistake. But this that's happening—"

Svoboda cut him off. "Yes, it's important. But so is your arrogance. The main thing you're forgetting is that you, sitting up there in the sky, are not God Almighty."

"Please," Yukiko begged.

Hanno spoke coldly. "I am the captain. I'll have respect from you."

Svoboda shook her head. A blond lock tossed on her temple. "That has changed. Nobody is indispensable any

longer. We'll accept whatever leader we may need, if we judge that person will serve us well." She paused. "Somebody will call tomorrow, when we've conferred, and make proper arrangements." With a smile: "Yukiko, this isn't your fault. Everybody knows that. Goodnight." The screen blanked.

Hanno sat staring into it.

Yukiko went to stand behind him, a hand on his shoulder. "Don't take this hard," she said. "She was simply short on sleep, therefore short on temper. After she has rested, she will shrug it off."

He shook his head. "No, it goes deeper than that. I hadn't realized—we've been away too much—down underneath, they carry their resentment yet."

"No. I swear not. No more. You did bring them, us to something far more wonderful and meaningful than we had dared hope for. It is true, you are not vitally necessary now. Your captaincy is not unquestioned. And you did act thoughtlessly. But the wound is nothing, it will heal by morning."

"Some things never heal." He rose. "Well, no use brooding." A crooked grin. "What about that cup of tea?"

She regarded him in silence before she said, most quietly, "You two can still hurt one another, can you not?"

His voice went brusque. "How often do you miss Tu Shan?" He drew her to him. "Regardless, these have been good years for me. Thank you."

She laid her cheek against his breast. "And for me."

He forced a chuckle. "I repeat, what became of the tea?"

32

FIRST LIGHT grayed the east, made dull silver of the stream. Heights westward hulked black and haze dimmed a sinking huge moon. The waterfall rushed loud down its cliff into the river, which clucked and purled. Coolness blew, laden with silty odors.

Hanno and Wanderer stood on the dock. Their tongues felt awkward. "Well," said Wanderer, "have fun."

"You too," Hanno replied. "Uh, how long did you say you'd be gone?"

"Don't know for sure. Three, four days. But you come home this evening, hear me?"

"Of course. We Phoenicians never spent a night at sea if we could help it."

Wanderer's shadowed countenance darkened further. "I wish you wouldn't go at all. Especially alone."

"I heard you before. You're going alone yourself, and not even taking a communicator along."

"That's different. I know those woods. But none of us really know the waters. We've just puttered around a little in our boats or taken passage with natives, and that was to study the crew, not the seamanship."

"Look, Peregrino, I know perfectly well the conditions aren't identical with Earth. I've tried them out, remember? Please remember, too, that I was sailing, in flimsier vessels than I like thinking about, two thousand years before you were born. Always the second law of the sea is 'Take care.'"

"What's the first?"

"'It's in the bilge!'"

They laughed together a bit. "Okay, okay," Wanderer said. "So we both need to go walkabout, in our different ways. I suspect the same's true for Corinne. She didn't really have to confer with the Triune at this exact time." He left unspoken: Escape, relief, slack off the tension that has built up in us through these past days of wrangling. Shall we abide here, shall we accompany the Alloi when they leave, or what? Seek within ourselves for our true desires. We have years yet in which to decide, but the divisions between us have festered longer than that, ranker than we knew.

"Thanks for your help," said Hanno.

"De nada, amigo." They shook hands. It was the heartiest clasp Hanno had ever felt, or given, in Hestia. He couldn't ask outright, but he believed Wanderer had altogether forgiven him. Well, whatever rift had occurred was not over something fundamental to the man's life, as for some others; and from Wanderer's viewpoint, events had fairly well vindicated his old friend. At these latest conclaves of the eight, they had argued side by side.

It wasn't the same with Macandal, Patulcius, Aliyat, Tu Shan, Svoboda—Svoboda— Oh, she was perfectly gracious; after all, in principle she too favored exploring. But by tacit

agreement, she and Yukiko stayed abed when their men got up to carry the gear down to the boat.

Wanderer turned. His stride whispered over the dock, his tall form strode up the path and disappeared in remnant darknesses. Hanno boarded. Quickly he uncovered and unfurled the mainsail, took the jib from its bag, raised them, cleated the sheets, cast off. The fabric stood ghost-white athwart strengthening dawn, slatted, caught wind and filled. *Ariadne* listed over and slipped downstream.

She was a sweet little craft, a six-meter sloop that on Earth would once have been an ocean racer (who there went sailing any more?), built at odd moments by Tu Shan with robot help according to plans in the database. Mainly, he had wanted to make something beautiful as well as purposeful. It turned out that nobody found time to use her much, finally not at all. The Ithagenē were intrigued, but the layout was wrong for them. Hanno patted the deck beside the cockpit. "Poor girl," he said. "Did you cry sometimes at night, lying always alone? We'll take a real run today, we will." Surprised, he noticed he had spoken in Punic. When had he last?

The estuary broadened. Unhindered, the land breeze blew harder. He had it, the current, and the tide to bear him. Ebb should end just about when he reached the sea; slack water for the transition was desirable. Waves, rips, every kind of turbulence went faster, more forcefully, less foreseeably on Xenogaia, under its gravity, than on Earth.

The sun rose ahead, blurred and reddened by overcast, not so far to starboard as it would have been on Earth at this latitude and time of year. Though the planet rotated somewhat faster, the axial tilt promised him a long, long summer day. Cloud banks towered murky in the south. He hoped they wouldn't move northward and rain on him. The wettest season had passed, but you never knew. Xenogaian meteorology was still largely guesswork. The parameters were unfamiliar; the humans and their computers had too much else, too much more interesting, to consider. Also, it seemed the weather was highly unstable. Chaos, in the physics sense of the word, took over early in any sequence.

Well, this was a sturdy, forgiving boat; he and Wanderer had carried down an outboard for her; if he got in bad trou-

ble, he could call, and an aircraft would come take him off. He scowled at the thought.

Think about pleasanter things, then. Faring out again among the stars— No, that cut too near. That was what divided the house of the Survivors against itself.

You couldn't blame those who wanted to stay. They'd toiled, suffered, wrought mightily; this had become home for them, it was the cosmos for their children. As for those who wanted to quest, why, Minoa with its multitudinous realms was only one continent on an entire world. For those who would liefest dwell near nonhumans, a whole new race of them was coming. What more dared you wish?

Dismiss it for now. Lose yourself in this day.

The sea opened before *Ariadne,* gunmetal whitecaps, surge and brawl, wind abruptly southeast and stiff. She leaped, leaned, ran happily lee rail under. It throbbed in deck and tiller. The wind sang. Spindrift blew salt kisses. Hanno closed his jacket and drew up its hood against the chill. Fingers brushed the gas cartridge that would at need inflate it. Tricky sailing, and his muscles not yet fully retrained to bear his weight. He couldn't have singlehanded were it not for the servos and computer. At that, he must pay constant heed. Good. So did he wish it to be.

A native ship was inbound, beating across the wind, a bravery of sails. She must have lain out, waiting for the tide to turn. Now she would ride the flow upstream, doubtless to Xenoknossos. Probably she would have to take shelter in one of the bays the Ithagenē had dug along the banks, while the bore went rumbling by. It would be especially dangerous today; the moon was both full and close.

Northward, some five kilometers off the mainland, water churned and jumped white, black forms reared up—the Forbidden Ground, a nasty patch of rocks and shoals. A current from the south swept strongly around it. Hanno trimmed his sails. He wanted to be well clear before the incoming tide reinforced that rush.

Tacking, he made for the nearest of three islands that lay dim in the eastern distance. He would scarcely get that far before midafternoon, when prudence dictated he turn back, but it was something to steer by.

A goal, he thought. A harbor I won't make. Odysseus, setting forth from ashy Troy for Ithaca, lured by the Lotus

Eaters, bereaved by the Cyclops, at strife with winds and wild men, seduced by an enchantress who took away humanity, descending to the dead, raiding the fields of the sun, passing through the gate of destruction, made captive by her who loved him, cast ashore at Phaeacia—but Odysseus came home at last.

How many ports had he, Hanno, failed to make in his millennia? All?

Tritos climbed to a breach in the overcast. Light flamed. He sailed on the Amethyst Sea, and it was strewn with diamond dust and the manes of the waves blew white. It was as lovely and wild as a woman.

Tanithel, her black hair garlanded with anemones, who whispered her wish that she had not had to sacrifice her virginity in the temple before she came to him; Adoniah, who read the stars from her tower above Tyre—twice he cast anchor, the lights of home glimmered through dusk, and then ebb tide bore that country off and he lay again on empty waters. Afterward—Merab, Althea, Nirouphar, Cordelia, Brangwyn, Thorgerd, Maria, Jehanne, Margaret, Natalia, O Ashtoreth, the dear ghosts were beyond counting or remembering, but had they ever been much more than ghosts, belonging as they did to death? To men he felt closer, they could not bear the same thing off with them—Baalram, Thuti, Umlele, Pytheas, Ezra, rough old Rufus, yes, that hurt, somewhere inside himself Hanno had forever mourned Rufus.

Stop sniveling!

The wind skirled louder. *Ariadne* heeled sharply. The sun disappeared behind gray, beneath which wrack began to fly. Cloud masses bulked mountainous, drawing closer. Lightning sprang about in their blue-black caverns. The islands were lost in scud-haze, the mainland aft lay low and vague. "What time is it?" Hanno asked. He whistled when the computer told him. His body had sailed for him while his mind drifted awash in the past, longer than he knew.

He'd grown hungry too without noticing, but would be rash to trust the helm to the machinery even to duck below and fix a sandwich. "Give me Hestia," he ordered the communicator.

"Summoning."

"Hello, hello, is anybody there? Hanno calling."

Wind tore Yukiko's voice from the speaker, seas trampled its tatters underfoot. He barely heard: "—frightened for you . . . satellite report . . . weather moving faster and faster . . . please—"

"Yes, certainly, I'll return. Don't worry. This boat can take a knockdown and right herself. I'll be back for supper." If I catch the tide right. Got to keep well offshore till I can run straight down the slot. Well, the motor has plenty of kilowatts. Better that to claw off with than men rowing till their hearts burst.

He didn't want to use it unless and until he must. He needed a fight, wits and nerve as well as sinews against the wolf-gods. Coming around was a long and tough maneuver. Once a wave smashed clear across the deck. *Ariadne* shuddered, but still her mast swayed on high, an uplifted lance. Gallant girl. Like Svoboda—like all of them, Yukiko, Corinne, Aliyat, all of them Survivors in ways their men had never had to be.

He did let the servos keep the tiller while he shortened sail. A sheet escaped his grasp and slashed his wrist before he captured and cleated it. Spume washed the blood off. The world had gone dark, driving gray, save for the lightning flashes southward. Water swung to and fro in the cockpit till the pump flung it overside. He remembered bailing Pytheas' ship during a Baltic storm. As he took the helm back, a song abruptly lilted through his head. "Oh, hand me down my walking cane—" Where had it come from? English language, old, old, nineteenth or early twentieth century, impudent, a pulsing, railroad kind of tune.

"—Oh, Mama, come go my bail,
Get me out of this God damn jail.
All my sins are taken away."

Railroad, the West, a world that had seemed boundless but lost its horizons and itself in a blink of centuries and was one with Troy. Then some looked starward and dreamed of New America. The upshot . . . machines, eight human beings, immensities as impassable and unanswering as death.

"Oh, hell is deep and hell is wide,
Oh, hell is deep and hell is wide,
Oh, hell is deep and hell is wide,
Ain't got no bottom, ain't got no side.
All my sins are taken away."

Hanno showed the wind his teeth. Odysseus went there and won back. If the stars held no New America, they offered what was infinitely more.

The noise rammed him. It was a monstrous rush and boom, pierced by a risen screech. To port the cloud wall had vanished behind a whiteness that overran waves and kilometers.

"Strike sail!" he bawled. That was not merely a gale, that was a line squall come from behind sight and bound for him. Weather on Xenogaia heeded no law of Grecian Aeolus. Wind speeds were commonly low, but when they did go high, they bore twice the weight of violent air. His left hand took the switch that lowered the outboard. Point bows into seas and hold them fast!

The fist smote. Rain flayed and blinded. Waves topped the rails. *Ariadne* climbed, swayed amidst cataracting foam, plunged into troughs. Hanno clung.

Something snatched him.

He was down in roaring black. He whirled and tumbled. At the middle of it rested a cold steadiness, his mind. I'm overboard, he knew. Inflate the jacket. Don't breathe water or you're done.

He broke surface, gasped air full of rain and salt foam, threshed limbs against heaviness that tore. The hood swelled into a pillowlike collar, upbearing his head as the rest of the garment floated his body. He squinted about. Where was the boat? No sign of her. He didn't think she'd gone under, not that staunch little lady, but wind and waves must have borne her from him, maybe not very far as yet—far enough, though, when he could see only the billows savaging him.

What had happened? His brain cleared, shook off shock, became a computer programmed to calculate survival. Wind might have caught the unfurled loose mainsail, swung the hull around, shoved it so low that a broaching sea swept him out. Well, if he kept alert, he'd drift free till rescue came.

That should be soon after this flaw of weather had passed. Yukiko was probably trying right now to call him. An aircraft— Those carried aboard *Pytheas* were designed for Phaeacia. They flew on Xenogaia, but it was rather precarious; given conditions at all unusual, you needed a human pilot as well as the machine. Maybe the Hestia folk should have ordered modifications, but the job was big, they had so much else on hand, they could stay aground when in doubt.

Pilots. Wanderer's the best, I think that's generally agreed. He's out of touch today. Otherwise Svoboda; and she's got her kid to think about. The colony is tiny, a beachhead on a shore not made for our kind. She has no right to risk herself needlessly. Of course, she will take off the moment it looks practical, which should be when this gust is over. High winds aren't an unacceptable hazard in themselves, if they're reasonably steady.

The trick will be to stay alive till then. Exposure is the enemy. This water isn't too cold, it's a warm current from the south. However, a few degrees below skin temperature will suck the heat out in time. I remember— But that was on another voyage, and besides, the men are dead. I also know some ancient Asian ways of controlling blood flow; at dire need, I can call up my ultimate reserves, while they last.

Swim. Save your strength, but do not let yourself be rolled about and smothered. Find the rhythms. Who was it, what goddess, who lived at the bottom of the sea and spread her nets for sailormen? Oh, yes, Ran of the Norse. Shall we dance, my lady Ran?

Wind screamed, seas crashed. How long had this gone on? No telling. A minute could amount to an hour, reverse time dilation, the cosmos flying away from a man. He'd been mistaken about the blow. It wasn't any quick squall. Though rain had thinned, the wind raved wilder. Unforeseen, unforeseeable, as ignorant as men and, yes, their smug machines still were. The universe held as many surprises as it did stars. No, more. That was its glory. But someday one of them was bound to kill you.

Thunder ahead. Hanno rose onto a crest. He saw black teeth, the rocks and skerries, the Forbidden Ground. Water seethed, geysered, exploded. The current had swept him to

this. Flashingly, he hoped *Ariadne* remained free, for her people to recover. He readied himself.

It was hard to do. A sense of warmth in hands and feet crept treacherously toward his breast. He knew that consciousness was dimming; he couldn't tell which lights had by now gone out.

A comber took him along.

He smashed into the white.

White. . . . He lay on stone. Weed wrapped him, yellow-brown ropes. Waves roiled and roared under a low, flying sky. Oftener and oftener, water rushed over the roughness beneath him. He would inhale it, choke, cough, reach for air.

He scarcely noticed. Cold, pain, struggle were of the world, the storm. Impersonal, he watched them, like a man drowsy at his hearthside watching flames. The rising tide would claim him, but he would not be here. He would be—where? What? He didn't know. It didn't matter.

So this is how it ends. Not too bad a way for an old sailorman. I do wish I could lie remembering. But memory slips from me, wishing does, being does. Farewell, farewell, you ghosts. Fare always well.

A whickering whine through wind and surf, a shadow, a shape, a jolt that awakens awareness.

You fool! he raged dimly. Go back! You could lose your life!

The aircraft bucked and rocked, fell, climbed, did battle. From its teardrop snaked a line. The cord passed half a meter above Hanno. His hand tried to reach and grab it, but couldn't. It whirled on past. Again. Again.

It withdrew. The engine overhead snarled louder. The line descended afresh. A loop was at the end, for the feet of a clinging man.

Tu Shan hit the reef. He took the impact in his muscles, got his foothold, stood while a surge ran ankle-deep around him. With his left hand he kept hold of the line; and he advanced step by gripping step.

The strongest among us, thought Hanno bewilderedly. But I've been all this time with his woman.

Tu Shan's right arm went under his shoulders, raised him, held him fast. The aircraft winched the line in. They swung

like a bell clapper. *"Proclaim Liberty throughout the world—"*

They were aboard. Svoboda gained altitude and made for shore. Tu Shan laid Hanno out in the aisle, which shivered and banged. He examined him with rough skill. "Slight concussion, I think," he growled. "Maybe a broken rib or two. Mainly a bad chill, uh, hypothermia. He'll live."

He administered initial treatment. Blood quickened. Svoboda brought the aircraft slanting down. "How did you know?" Hanno mumbled.

"Yukiko called the Alloi," Svoboda said from the controls. Rain dashed across the viewscreen before her. "They couldn't enter atmosphere themselves. Even their robots have trouble in bad weather. But they sent a spaceboat on low trajectory. Its detectors registered an infrared anomaly in the rocks. That was where you might well be."

"You shouldn't have, you shouldn't—"

She made a near-vertical descent. Contact jarred the machine. She snapped off her harness and came to kneel beside him. "Did you think we'd want to be without you?" she asked. "Did we ever?"

33

SELDOM WAS a day this brilliant. Sunlight spilled from a sky in which clouds were blue-shadowed white, like enormous snowbanks. It gleamed off wings cruising aloft; glimpses of river and sea shone molten. The eight seated around a plank table were thinly clad. From the top of their knoll vision ranged between Hestia, at its distance a toybox, westward to where Mount Pytheas rose pure beyond the hills.

Twice before have we met this way, in open air, remembered Hanno. Do we have some unknown need? Yes, the reasons are practical, be undistracted, leave the children in care of the robots for these few hours, and hope that fresh surroundings will freshen our thinking. But do our souls believe that when we most want wisdom, we must seek it from earth and heaven?

They are not ours, even now. This close-knit turf that is not grass, yonder squat trees and serpentine bushes, somber hues of everything that grows, sharp fragrances, the very

taste of spring water, none came from the womb of Gaia. Nor can any of it ever truly become hers, nor should it.

The looks upon him were expectant. He cleared his throat and sat straighter. The motion hurt, his injuries were not yet entirely healed, but he ignored that. "I won't ask for a vote today," he said. "We have years ahead before we must commit ourselves. But my news may change some minds."

Unless that had already happened. Certainly it had done so as regarded him. He didn't know whether his near death had been necessary to snuff out the last rancor. Maybe that would have faded away in time; but maybe it would have smoldered on and on, eating hearts hollow. No matter. The fellowship was whole again. Little had been spoken outright; everything had been felt. He had an intuition, moreover, that in typical irrational human fashion, this was in turn catalyzing another oneness.

We'll see, he thought. All of us.

"As you know," he went on, "Yukiko and I have been communicating a lot with the Alloi these past few days. They've reached a decision of their own."

He raised a hand against anxiety. "Nothing radical, except in what it can mean for the long haul. They will stay on till the new ship arrives, and for several years afterward. There'll be an unforeknowably great deal of information to exchange and, well, rapport to build and enjoy. In due course, though, the Alloi are going elsewhere.

"What's new is—if we, at that time, leave for Phaeacia, they will come with us."

He and his partner smiled into the amazement, savored it. "In God's name, why?" exclaimed Patulcius. "What have they to gain there?"

"Knowledge, to start with," Hanno answered. "A whole different set of planets."

"But planetary systems are common enough," Wanderer said. "I thought that what interests them most is intelligent life."

"True," Yukiko told them. "At Phaeacia, that will be us; and for us, they will be."

"They want to know us better," Hanno said. "They see tremendous potential in our race. Far more than in the Ithagenē, much though they've gotten from them in the way of scientific discovery and artistic inspiration. We are space-

farers too. The odds are, the Ithagenē never will be, none of them; at best, in the remote future."

"But the Alloi need only stay here, and they can observe both races, and interact with that other set of travelers to boot," Patulcius argued.

Yukiko shook her head. "They do not expect we can or will remain. Certainly our numbers could only grow slowly, and never become large, on Xenogaia; and therefore what we, humans in space, were able to do, or at last cared to do, would be hopelessly limited."

"You six—no, we eight have been like the English Puritans on Earth," Hanno said. "Looking for a home, they meant to settle in Virginia, but weather drove them north and they ended in New England. It wasn't what they'd hoped for, but they made the best of it, and that's how the Yankees came to be. Suppose New England had been all there ever was for them. Think of such a country, stagnant, poor, narrow and narrow-minded. Do you want that for yourselves and your children?"

"The Yankees put down strong roots," Tu Shan responded. "They did have America beyond."

"We have nothing like that," Macandal said. "Xenogaia belongs to its people. We have no right to anything but this little patch they gave us. If we took more, God ought to strike us down."

Wanderer nodded.

"So you have often said, dear," Patulcius demurred, "and I have tried to point out that as a practical matter—"

"Yes, we have our investment here," Svoboda interrupted, "sweat and tears and dreams. It will hurt to scrap that. But I always believed, myself, that someday we must." Her voice clanged. "And now we've been given this opportunity!"

"That's it," Hanno chimed in. "Phaeacia has no natives for us to harm. It seems to be almost a reborn Earth. *Seems*. Maybe it's a death trap. We can't know till we've tried. We understood the risk of failure, extinction. Well, with the Alloi at our backs, that won't happen. United, we can overcome anything. You see, they want us to live, to flourish. They want humans among the stars."

"Why us?" asked Macandal. "I realize—our psyches, our special talents, we and they doing more, becoming more,

than either could alone, like a good marriage—but if they'd like human company, why not go on to Earth?"

"Have you forgotten why?" retorted Hanno grimly.

Her eyes widened. Fingers touched lips. "How can they be sure?"

"They aren't, not absolutely; but from what we've described, they can guess with pretty high probability. Earth is going the selfsame way Pegasi did, and the rest that they know about. Oh, we'll swap messages with it, no doubt. But it's too far off"—a galactically minuscule four and a third light-centuries—"to make the voyage appear worthwhile. The Alloi would rather help us get established, come really to know us, and finally plan ventures together."

Tu Shan gazed upward. "Phaeacia," he breathed. "Like Earth. Not truly, but . . . green leaves, rich soil, clear skies." He closed his eyes against the sun and let its warmth lave his face. "Most nights we will see stars."

Patulcius shifted about on the bench. "This does put quite a different complexion on matters," he admitted. As much eagerness as his heavy features ever showed danced across them. "The survival of more than simply us. Of humanity, true humanity."

It blazed from Wanderer: "Not just a settlement or nation. A base, a frontier camp. We can be patient, we and the Alloi. We can make the planet ours, raise generations of young, till we're many and strong. But then we'll go to space again."

"Those of you who wish," said Tu Shan.

Macandal's tone shook. "To learn and grow. To keep life alive."

Aliyat spoke through sudden, brief tears. "Yes, take the universe back from the damned machines."

"Where are they?"

The story is that Enrico Fermi first raised the question in the twentieth century, when scientists first dared wonder publicly about such things. If other thinking beings than us existed—how strange and sad if none did, in the entire vastness and diversity of creation—why had we on Earth found no trace or track of them? There we were, on the verge of making our own starward leap. Had nobody gone before us?

Perhaps it was impractical or impossible for flesh and blood. It certainly was not for machines we knew in principle how to make. They could be our explorers, sending home their findings. Reaching far planets, they could build more like themselves, instilling the same imperative: Discover. (No menace to life in their proliferation; at any given sun, a few tons of raw material from some barren asteroid or moon would suffice.) Under conservative assumptions, calculation showed that such robots would spread from end to end of the galaxy in about a million years. That was the merest eyeblink of cosmic time. Why, a million years ago our ancestors were approaching full humanness. Had no race anywhere even that much of a head start? All it would take was one.

Still easier to send were signals. We tried. We listened. Silence, until we thought to try in certain new directions; then, enigma.

Guesses teemed. The Others were transmitting, but not by means that we yet knew. They had come here, but in the prehistoric past. They were here, but concealed. They destroyed themselves, as we feared we might, before they could send or go. They had no high-technological civilizations among them; ours was unique. They did not exist; we were indeed alone. . . .

Fermi went to his grave, time blew onward through its night, humankind entered upon a new path of evolution. The answer to his question was less found than it was created, by what the children of Earth themselves did; and it proved to be twofold.

Dispatch your robots. They go forth to marvels and magnificences. Every star is a sun, every planet a world, multifarious, astounding, its secrets not exhaustible in less than many decades. When it bears life, they are inexhaustible forever, because life is not only infinite in its variousness, it never remains the same, it is forever changing. When it is intelligent, this rises to a whole new dimensionality, a different order of being.

The farther your emissaries range, the faster grows the realm of the unknown. Double the radius, and you roughly octuple the number of stars to ransack. You also double the time of faring and the time for a signal to cross between ship and home.

Ten or twelve years from departure to arrival, ten years more to receive the first recounting, are reasonable. Fifty years are not unreasonable. But a hundred or two hundred or five hundred years either way? Suns and planets have fallen into classes; they no longer hold revelations. If you know the basic parameters, you can compute their properties. It is pointless to lengthen your list of them.

Life forms are something else. Yet if you desire to study these, you have a sufficiency on worlds already attained. Indeed, you have overwhelmingly much. Your information-processing capabilities, that part of them devoted to this endeavor, grow saturated.

The data include data on sapient beings. Those are rare, but they do occur and are fascinating beyond measure. Nevertheless, when the time lag grows much greater than lifetimes of theirs, and moreover your field scientists are machines, how can you truly come to know them? (Those that have been found are primitive and mortal. Science and high technology result from chains of unlikely historical accidents.) Wiser to hold your attention on those near enough that you can to some limited extent follow what the robots do and observe.

There is no precise limit. There is simply a radius, on the order of a light-century or two, beyond which it is unprofitable to search farther. Having foreseen this, you have never built self-multiplying von Neumann machines.

Exceptions exist. When your instruments detect the radiations that suggest a civilization at some star, you will send your beams and perhaps your robots; but the span until anything can come of that, if anything does, is multimillennial. At the end, will your race still care?

Other exceptions are cosmic, astrophysical—extraordinary stars, clouds where stars are coming to birth, recent supernovae, black holes in peculiar circumstances, the monstrosities at the core of the galaxy, and comparable rarities. You will dispatch your observers that far (thirty thousand light-years from Sol to galactic center) and wait.

All of the few starfaring civilizations will do likewise. Therefore all that have reached these goals will beamcast from them, in hopes of making contact. They will wait.

All have become entities that can wait.

Here is the second half of the solution to the riddle.

It is not sentient organic life that the robots seek to summon. It is other robots.

Machines do not conquer their mother worlds. They gently, gradually absorb their creators into their systems, at the wish of those beings, whose overmatching physical and intellectual superiors they have become. Then in the course of time, more and more they direct their attention from mere life, toward problems and undertakings they find worthy of themselves.

When the original thinking animals live on, as happens occasionally, it is because they too have turned their concerns elsewhere, inward, searching for joys and fulfillments or possibly imaginary enlightenments toward which no machine can aid them, realms quite outside the universe of the stars.

"No," said Svoboda, "we do wrong if we feel hostile. Postbiotic evolution is nevertheless evolution, reality finding newness in itself." She colored and laughed. "Oh, but that sounds pretentious! I only meant that the advanced, independent robots are no threat to us. We'll continue keeping robots of our own, we have to, but for purposes of our own. We'll do what the postbiotics not only don't care to do any more, they never really could. That's to deal with life of our kind, the old kind, not by peering and listening, centuries between question and answer, but by being there ourselves, sharing, yes, loving. And so we'll come to understand what we can't now imagine."

"Those of you who choose to be seekers." Patulcius' remark fell doubly dry after her torrenting enthusiasm. "Like Tu Shan, I shall cultivate my garden. I daresay most of our descendants will so prefer."

"No doubt," Hanno said. "That's fine. They'll be our reserve. Peregrino's right; some will always want more than that."

"The Phaeacians won't settle down into rustic innocence," Macandal predicted. "They can't. If they aren't to go the way of Earth—and that would make their whole effort meaningless, wouldn't it?—they'll have to find some new path for themselves. They'll have to evolve too."

"And those of us in space will, along our own lines,"

Wanderer added. "Not in body, in genes; I aim to be around for a mighty long spell. In our minds, our spirits."

Yukiko smiled. "The stars and their worlds for our teachers." Earnestly: "But let us remember what a hard school that will be. Today we count for nothing. Every crew of starfarers the Alloi have any knowledge of—and they are less than a dozen—are like us, leftovers, malcontents, atavisms, outcasts."

"I know. I don't admit we count for nothing, though. We *are*."

"Yes. And if we are wise, if we can humble ourselves enough to hear what the lowliest of living beings have to tell us, at last we will meet the postbiotics as equals. In a million years? I don't know. But when we are ready, it will be as you said, we will have become something other than what we are now."

Hanno nodded. "I wonder if, at the end, we and our allies won't be more than the equals of the machines."

His comrades regarded him, a little puzzled. "I've been playing with an idea," he explained. "It seems to have worked this way on Earth, and what we've seen here and heard from the Alloi suggests it may be a general principle. Most steps in evolution haven't been triumphal advances. No, the failures of the earlier stages made them, the desperate ones—in Yukiko's words, the atavisms and outcasts.

"Why should a fish doing well in the water struggle onto the land? It was those that couldn't compete that did it, because they had to go somewhere else or die. And the ancestors of the reptiles were forced out of the amphibians' swamps, the birds forced into the air, and mammals forced to find niches where the dinosaurs weren't, and certain apes forced out of the trees, and—and we Phoenicians held only a thin strip of territory, so we took to the sea, and hardly anybody went to America or Australia who was comfortable at home in Europe—

"Well, we'll see. We'll see. A million years, you guessed, Yukiko." He laughed. "Shall we make a date? One million years from this day, we'll all meet again and remember."

"First we must survive," said Patulcius.

"Surviving is what we're good at," replied Wanderer.

Macandal sighed. "So far. Let's not wax overconfident.

No guarantees. Never were, never will be. A million years are a lot of days and nights to get through. Can we?"

"We shall try," said Tu Shan.

"Together," vowed Svoboda.

"Then we'd better learn," said Aliyat, "better than before, how to share."

34

THE SHIPS departed, *Pytheas* and friend. For a while, some months, until speeds grew too high, word went between them, imagery, love; rites celebrated the mysteries of community and communion; for everywhere around them thronged suns.

"When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him?"

Hanno and Svoboda stood in the darkened command center, looking out. Through clasped hands they felt each other's nearness and warmth. "Is this why we were born?" she whispered.

"We'll make it be," he promised.

Chronology

EXCEPT FOR the first, all dates are Anno Domini. Each is the year in which its chapter begins. Occasionally the narrative thereafter moves forward or backward in time.

I	Thule	310 B.C.
II	The Peaches of Forever	19
III	The Comrade	359
IV	Death in Palmyra	641
V	No Man Shuns His Doom	998
VI	Encounter	1050
VII	The Same Kind	1072
VIII	Lady in Waiting	1221
IX	Ghosts	1239
X	In the Hills	1570
XI	The Kitten and the Cardinal	1640
XII	The Last Medicine	1710
XIII	Follow the Drinking Gourd	1855
XIV	Men of Peace	1872
XV	Coming Together	1931
XVI	Niche	1938
XVII	Steel	1942
XVIII	Judgment Day	1975
XIX	Thule	?

Glossary

CHINESE NAMES are transcribed according to the Wade-Giles system. This probably remains somewhat more familiar to Anglophone readers than Pinyin or Yale, and is no more inaccurate a rendition of ancient or regional pronunciations.

Armorica: Brittany.
Berytus: Beirut.
Bravellir: Probably near modern Norrköping, Sweden.
Britannia: England and Wales.
Burdigala: Bordeaux.
Ch'ang-an: Near modern Sian (Pinyin "Xian").
Constantinople: Istanbul.
Damasek: Damascus.
Dumnonia: Cornwall and Devon.
Duranius: The River Dordogne.
Emesa: Homs.
Falernia: An area in the region of Naples, anciently noted for its wines.
Gadeira: Cadiz (Latin "Gades," Semitic "Agadir").
Gallia: Gaul, France with parts of Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland.
Gardhariki: Western Russia.
Garumna: The River Garonne.
Gautland: Southern Sweden, apparently between Scania and Lake Vänern.
Heian-kyo: Kyoto.
Hleidhra: Lejre, in Denmark.
Khalep: Aleppo.
Kiyiv: Kiev.

Lakota: Dakota (Sioux).
Lugdunensis: A province in Gaul, comprising most of northern and a fair portion of central France.
Lugdunum: Lyons.
Makkah: Mecca.
Massalia: Marseilles (Latin "Massilia").
Medinat Rasul Allah: Medina.
Nidharos: Trondheim, in Norway.
Pariki: Pawnee.
Peking: Beijing.
Poitou: Former French province, now divided into the departments of La Vendée, Deux-Sèvres, and Vienne.
Pretania: Britain, including Scotland.
Sor: Tyre.
Stalingrad: Volgograd.
Syria: A province of the Roman (later the East Roman or Byzantine) Empire, approximately the same as the modern country.
Tadmor: Palmyra, in Syria.
Tartessos: Southwestern Iberia (conjectural).
Thule: Southern Norway (conjectural).
Tripolis: Tripoli, in Lebanon, also known anciently as "Tarabulus."
Wendland: A region bordering on the southern Baltic shores.
Wichita mountains: In southwestern Oklahoma.
Yathrib: Original name of Medina.

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