

PIERRE BARBET

COSMIC

CRUSADERS



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BAPHOMET'S METEOR/STELLAR CRUSADE

By the dawn of the 14th Century, the Crusaders' Order of the Knights Templar was well on its way to the control of Europe—enormously wealthy, a secret society stronger than many monarchies. By the middle of that century, it was brutally suppressed on the confession of some of its members that it was a conspiracy intending to conquer the world at the orders of a demon named Baphomet.

That is history as our Earth knows it.

But the only sort of "demon" enlightened modern men would recognize would be an extra-terrestrial voyager with the tools of a higher technology than medieval men knew.

*And what if Baphomet had been just that?
Who then would have called the tune?*

PIERRE BARBET is the by-line of one of the most popular science fiction writers in France today, and it is also the *nom de plume* of a distinguished doctor of pharmacology and authority on many branches of medicine. A devoted sf enthusiast, he is particularly proud of these novels which he regards as his first and most detailed "historicals" and into which he poured a great amount of research.

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COSMIC CRUSADERS

by

Pierre Barbet

Two complete novels:

BAPHOMET'S METEOR

Translated by BERNARD KAY

STELLAR CRUSADE

Translated by C. J. CHERRYH

DAW BOOKS, INC.

Donald A. Wollheim, Publisher

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BAPHOMET'S METEOR

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STELLAR CRUSADE

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***STELLAR
CRUSADE***

Translated by C.J. Cherryh

DEDICATION

**A Donald A. Wollheim, de la part d'un
modeste faiseur d'univers qu'il a mené au
Royaume de Féerie . . .**

Chapter I



On the eighteenth of March in the year of Our Lord 1277, the morning sun touched the massive walls of Chang-Chu Castle with gold.

A human sea was rolling toward the drawbridge. The Templars, robed in their immaculate white surcoats, on which a crimson cross showed like a stain of blood, clove the howling flood, disciplined, priestlike, on their caparisoned horses. The heavily armed cavalry followed in their wake. Peasants were there in large straw hats, dusty drovers herded their flocks and camels knelt under their loads. Now and again some Mongol astride his shaggy pony streaked through this motley crowd with the flash of silver-damascened armor.

This joyous mob had come from the four corners of the Earth . . . to celebrate the anniversary of the glorious triumph of Grand Master William of Beaujeu, liberator of the fortress of St. John of Acre—but everyone was wondering just why the ceremony had been moved up two months.

Far overhead, against the sky, the Baussant flag, black and white pierced with a red cross, cracked proudly from the crest of the keep.

At the center of the hexagonal keep a group of dignitaries was proceeding into the huge vaulted Chapter Hall.

At this hour of the morning, all the faithful followers of the Grand Master were already assembled: his marshal, Peter of Sevry, thickset and ruddy; commander Thibaud Gaudin, administrator of the vast Templar domains; John of Grailly, the gallant Frank from the distant fief of Bassora; Otto of Granson, a huge Swiss, a mercenary of King Edward I of England; Kubla, the Mongol Khan who was now an ally of the Templars; learned Brother Joubert; the brave Venetian ex-

plorer Marco Polo; the Templar lord of Tyre, keeper of the chronicles of the Order;¹ and countless other officers—the Grand Hospitaller, the Draper, the Seneschal, the Turcopoler, the Chaplain, not to mention the castellan lords of fortresses.

Such was lord William's generosity that he had extended equal invitations to his most dangerous rivals—ascetic John of Villiers, Grand Master of the Hospitalers, along with his marshal Matthew Clermont; and the Grand Master of the Teutonic order, Conrad von Thierberg.

The latter kept visibly to themselves, next to their standard-bearers.

With a grand wave of his hand toward this glittering assembly, William of Beaujeu took his place on the throne under a black and white canopy. The heralds lifted their long trumpets and sounded three long fanfares, stopping the lively conversation.

The Council was in session. They all listened, compelled by the solemnity of the reunion.

The Templar drew himself up to his full height, fixed his keen eyes on each in turn, as if to assure himself that all his guests had come. Then he knelt for the opening invocation. As one man, the soldier-monks followed his example, signing themselves with the cross.

*"In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti! Non nobis Domine; non nobis, sed Nomini Tuo da gloriam!"*² May the grace of the Holy Spirit aid us, Lord Jesus, Holy Christ, Eternal Father and omnipotent God, wise creator, dispenser benevolent overseer and beloved friend, pious and humble Redeemer, kind and merciful Savior, I pray Thee humbly and beseech Thee to enlighten us, through Mary, Star of the Sea. *Amen.*"

Each of these rough soldiers felt his heart strangely touched. They remembered another Council Hall, at St. John of Acre, where most of them had sat, and whence they had set out on a great adventure, the conquest of the East.

William remained silent a brief moment, hands crossed on his breast. Then he rose. "Sirs, our Brothers of the Hospi-

¹ This document has been faithfully edited thanks to the chronicles of the Templar of Tyre, which faithfully record the crusade against the vile Baphomets.

² In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost! Not to us, Lord; not to us, but to Thy Name give the glory!

talers and Teutons, I've called you here today to share with you a piece of news that has filled my heart with grief. We have scarcely escaped one terrible disaster which might have fallen on all humankind; we destroyed a demoniac creature who had us in the power of his pernicious lies. This Baphomet, this envoy of a despicable race, fell on our sweet Earth from the unguessable depths of the universe to make us his slaves. By the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we put him beyond any hope of harming us. But I was not at all unaware that the skies are full of treacherous demons, ruling other planets, who would sooner or later threaten our existence again. Alas, that day is upon us."

The Grand Master paused for effect, while Brother Joubert uncovered several spheres studded with countless glittering points, hidden till this moment beneath a red velvet cloth.

All eyes turned to these magical objects.

"You have before your eyes a model of the universe, copied from the one our learned Brother Joubert has painstakingly recovered from the ships which fell into our hands. Know that our sphere follows an endless track around a brazier, our sun, which heats and lights it. Our astronomers have also told us we are not alone in the universe: other fiery spheres light other balls of earth bearing other living creatures. Among them, alas, the demoniacal Baphomets, who have vowed to destroy us."

John of Villiers frowned doubtfully. "Esteemed brother commander," he objected, "these are wild assumptions. These pernicious creatures might simply be demons vomited up out of hell to destroy us. To the wisest of us, there's no proof that the lights that shine in the firmament are suns like ours, and even less proof that spheres like our Earth move around them. Besides, most scholars think the Earth is flat."

Conrad von Thierberg nodded in agreement, but did not involve himself in the debate.

"'Blessed are they who have not seen and yet believe,' says Holy Writ. I've weighed my words carefully, brother Hospitaler, and I put nothing forward without proof. See this blood-red spot and the scarlet mark shining on the breast of it: this is the land of the invaders who are trying to enslave our earth. Our learned Brother Joubert, after long study, is sure of it. More than that, he has gained power over the talismans that let them speak through the subtle flows of the

ether, and—most frighteningly—he has overheard the clamor of other Baphomets who have taken ship into those unplumbable depths. They're summoning their comrades, seeking information on our civilization, our defenses! Brothers, I tell you the truth, a terrible danger is upon us. Someday a powerful fleet is going to drift down on us and complete the mission *one* of these monsters could not carry out. Then it's going to be too late to stop them."

"Now, Master William," exclaimed the Grand Master of the Teutons, "don't take us for novices. By the description of the Baphomet's refuge in the forest of the East, that great metal mass could just as well have come up out of the bowels of the Earth, or out of the Tartarus of the ancients."

"Holy Spirit, give me patience," sighed the ascetic Templar. "You maintain these ships can't navigate the subtle ethers that completely surround the Earth. Or do you reckon that our Earth is not a globe orbiting the sun in the company of other planets? Well, if you like, I'll prove my assertions to you here and now."

"Faith," the Hospitaller growled, "I don't know how you're going to convince us, but I'm quite ready to listen."

"It's not my word alone will prove your error, but the witness of your own senses. . . . My distinguished friends," William went on, turning to the audience, "we're going to leave you for a few hours and rejoin you about the hour of nones. While you wait, I pray you climb the ramparts to watch a spectacle I think is going to astonish you."

From his place on the dais the Grand Master signaled the Teuton and the Hospitaller to follow him. Brother Joubert went with them.

The four of them first passed a door concealed by a tapestry and came out again into a secret corridor lit by smoky torches, finally arrived at the base of a tower hollowed by recent construction.

Dazzled by bright sunlight reflected in vast, mirroring steel, the visitors could see nothing for a moment. Then as their eyes adjusted to that brilliant light, they saw before them, perched on a huge iron tripod, a ship in all points identical to those the Templars had lately discovered.

"Here's the ship that's going to carry us into the skies with incredible speed, passing all understanding," the Templar declared proudly. "By unceasing efforts, our learned Joubert has

deciphered the Baphomets' grimoire, and by using the apparatus still intact and by making the ruined pieces according to the instruction in the documents, he's put this metal globe into working order. If you have confidence in him, would you kindly trust your weight to this ladder and enter the bowels of this remarkable machine?"

"I suppose my noble brother has already tried it?" John of Villiers asked in a somewhat dubious tone.

"Of course! And I've seen wonders. That's what's given me the formal proof of the shape of our universe."

"In that case I am completely satisfied," John of Villiers assured him, and climbed the rungs of the ladder, followed by Conrad von Thierberg, who was frowning anxiously.

They all stood then in a rather large living space furnished with couches, armchairs bolted to the floor and equipped with heavy belts.

William of Beaujeu invited his guests to sit down and, providing them his example, buckled the leather strap of his chair.

Joubert, too, sat down, before a sort of ebony lectern inset with dials and buttons. His fingers plied them agilely; the door clicked shut with a dry sound while a screen lit in front of him.

"Noble brothers," the Templar declared then, "you are about to live moments which will mark your souls forever. I've already made several excursions aboard this vessel and I was in no wise harmed by the splendors it showed me. In a few moments we are going to lift into the winds and ride the pure waves of clouds, far above the Earth—around which we are going to revolve."

"This is a great magic," the Teuton said indignantly. "And why then shut us up in here? We won't be able to see a thing in this box."

"The air we breathe fails completely at a certain height," William answered plainly. "That's why we have to put an airtight seal on the entry. All the images of the outside world are going to be faithfully relayed to this luminous table."

"You take us for simpletons," John of Villiers objected. "Your so-named ship hasn't even wings to fly with. How can it get into the air?"

William smiled and simply gestured to Joubert.

Joubert slightly lifted a short lever.

A cry of shock passed the lips of the two passengers.

"Christ! We're skimming over the castle!"

"Holy Mother of God! The knights are no bigger than ants!"

At that moment the nobles the Templar had invited, faces uplifted, were watching the departure of the starship, which was rapidly vanishing from sight. They were all dumbfounded. They had seen the sphere rise from the dark bowels of the tower and the massive machine had taken off like a feather in the wind.

Aboard it, John Villiers and Conrad von Thierberg held their breath and said not a word, rubbing their eyes as if they could not accept the witness of their senses.

Now the palace of Cambaluc had vanished. Plains, rivers mountains passed under the ship, which was still climbing into the cloudless sky. The sea appeared, glittering under the sun. On its surface, thin bows of spray and a few tiny dots: the vessels which sailed the China Sea.

At last an isle grew distinct in the distant blue.

"Cipanghu!" the Grand Master announced. "The realm of my vassal Otto of Granson. We're going to veer off now to the north, and you'll see the eternal snows which cover both poles of our world. Look! already you can see ice mountains afloat on the water."

This time his guests made no protests. They were beginning to realize that William of Beaujeu was telling them the truth, that they were living moments which would go down in human history.

Now immense cottony spirals of unbearable whiteness spread beneath the voyagers' feet, clouds partially veiling the land. Through the clear spots the icepack, glittering under the sun, spread out over the pole, which was girt with an azure bow of atmosphere athwart the dark sky.

But the two soldier-monks gaped in admiration while a fairylike kaleidoscope continued to unfurl before them.

The ship lanced higher still into the firmament; the thin, fine strand of air became dappled with the ocher of continents, the indigo of oceans, the alabaster of clouds spun into fine threads.

At last the globe of Earth shone in all its glory, a sphere of lapis lazuli posed on the ebon black of the sky. The ship was now following a circular orbit at incredible speed.

The Grand Master of the Templars saw fit to give a few explanations. "We've flown over Cathay," he said, indicating a map of the world. "After passing over the pole, we'll go down again to the nadir, crossing the extreme end of the vast ocean which separates our beloved France from a huge continent hitherto unknown to us."

"What?" exclaimed John of Villiers. "There are unknown lands between Europe and Cathay?"

"Indeed. If a ship went west from the shores of the kingdom of France, it would meet a territory which extends for vast distances. After crossing mountains and valleys, the voyager would have to set out again to cross a vast stretch of sea, and finally arrive at Cathay."

"I'm quite overcome," said the Teuton. "Faith, learned brother, I repent me of mine unbelief. We're actually creeping round on a globe hung in the sky."

"But," asked the ever-practical Hospitaler, "is this unknown continent inhabited by creatures made in our likeness?"

"Assuredly it is. I've met there men not only like ourselves (except that their skin has an ocher tint), but they're much more like our race than the ebon black folk who live in Africa. Yet the animal species are different. I saw there cattle with massive foreheads, deer with huge racks of antlers, birds colored like the rainbow. Strangely enough, these primitive people have no horses at all."

"Then they are to be pitied," John of Villiers said sententiously. "Without that noble animal they couldn't cross those vast distances."

"So our globe has three inhabited continents?" asked Conrad von Thierberg.

"Precisely. More, there are countless isles beyond Cathay, eastward, and they're inhabited by savages too, while another very large island extends to the south in the same ocean. But that's of no import. Now we're going to fly past Luna, which is nothing but barren, arid rock."

Brother Joubert moved several dials again and the sphere angled up and shot toward the star-scattered sky.

William of Beaujeu's two guests, dumbstruck, watched the Earth shrink until it became nothing but a ball, while on another screen the pink surface of the moon grew in their view.

"Mark you," said the Templar, "the soil of this sphere

bears countless craters like the ones the explosions of our fireballs made. Djaffar and Joubert have taken long thought on the matter. They've come to the conclusion that these are not the effects of a war. Well, then, these impacts could only have been made by projectiles out of the void, centuries past. Their precise origin is still a mystery. A few of the steep-sided craters seem recent; others are more or less eroded. You will also see tall mountain ranges, dust-covered plains and a few tracks like the beds of ancient rivers."

"Here's something to think on," said the Grand Master of the Hospitalers. "The Holy Scriptures must be able to shed light on the matter. Isn't it reported that the forces of the Devil once fought against the archangels and seraphim? Lucifer himself rebelled against his Creator and met defeat; then he was thrown into hell. Maybe we see there the traces of that fierce battle."

"A very attractive hypothesis," the Templar applauded him. "But I would beware of getting into a biblical exegesis on that theory. Whatever it was, dead stars have no interest for us. Now I mean to give you a glimpse of the unbearable fires which burn at the heart of our sun, while we approach the two planets which orbit between it and our own Earth."

The pilot executed a quick turn of the ship without otherwise affecting his passengers and the machine rushed headlong toward the brilliant star, which grew in their sight and transformed itself into a furnace of unbearable power.

Special panels then slid over the outer hull and the image on the screens darkened, letting them see a spotless white image close to the ship.

"Vesper, our nearest neighbor," William declared. "Thick clouds mask its surface. We plunged into the heart of them and couldn't see the surface of the world. So we have to conclude that this star has no inhabitants. The temperature must be very high on the continents and all the water must be rendered into vapor—hence these impenetrable clouds."

The two other soldier-monks said not a word. The majesty of the great universe filled them with wonder.

Again the metal sphere rushed toward the solar fires, but a miraculous sweet coolness persisted inside the ship.

Then the screens showed the burning surface of Hermes, on which flowed rivers of molten metals that made shining lakes undisturbed by waves.

A new climb into space let the passengers admire two giant planets where gaseous spirals—purple, amaranth, rust and saffron—intertwined in an awesome ballet. One of the stars was girt with an amethyst ring like a priceless crown.

William of Beaujeu meant to go farther still, to the very frozen limits of the solar system, but his passengers declined the offer. They professed themselves satisfied with the experience and fully convinced of the possibilities of the wondrous ship taken from the Baphomet.

For the several minutes of their return trajectory, John of Villiers, who had recovered some of his self-possession, still expressed reservations on the theories his rival set forth. "Dear friend," he began in a categorical tone, "I must yield to the evidence. Our Earth is truly round and she orbits the sun in company with other planets which hardly look like her at all. That's precisely what leads me to wonder whether these other stars that spread across the heavens as far as we can see can possibly have intelligent creatures created in the image of our God. It seems to me even more untenable that within this hypothesis, you have to suppose that these hypothetical brothers, these quasi Adams and Eves, challenged God's goodness by picking the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil. Then, like us, they would be tainted with the same original sin and on that logic, they must be redeemed by Christ. Now if there do exist, as that theory suggests, billions of inhabited planets, there must have been billions of Christs, billions of Virgin Mothers, and even billions of popes. Redemption could not be reserved for humans alone since God is good. Alas, the Holy Scriptures only mention one Christ, one Mary, and one sole pope!"

The Grand Master of the Teutons cast an admiring glance at his companion. The argument was a telling one. Only the subtle Hospitaller had a quick enough wit to raise such objections. Triumphantly John of Villiers folded his wrinkled hands and with a smug smile on his lips waited on his illustrious rival's answer.

"And very well might there have been billions of Christs!" William exclaimed. "The Divine Power which created this unfathomable universe—couldn't it be sufficient for the Savior to manifest Himself on each world in the image of its inhabitants? So why *couldn't* there have been a Messiah among the Baphomets? And, my brothers, I strongly advise you med-

itate on these words, which you will grant me *are* in Holy Writ. . . . Didn't Our Lord say, 'I have other sheep which are not of this fold . . .'? So that is plain proof that there are other creatures in the universe endowed with intelligence. And don't go telling me that the sacred texts only speak of one Christ. Have you found in the Holy Bible any passages saying the Earth is round? That it spins round the sun? That there are other planets near us? No! The dogma is then in no wise opposed to the plurality of inhabited worlds."

Conrad von Thierberg assumed a worried look. This rough, brave soldier was more at home on a horse or in battle than in verbal fencing. He left John of Villiers the honor of pursuing the argument.

And John refused to own his defeat. "Your facile sophism doesn't convince me in the least. St. Thomas says in effect: 'The Earth is the center of Creation and all the stars were formed to let man know the seasons.' And St. Paul for his part declares that there is no other world but the Earth, that the stars and the heavens were made for the Earth and for man. No mention of extraterrestrials there."

"But Jesus clearly said, 'In my Father's House are many mansions,'" the Templar fired back. "What about the existence of angels, archangels, thrones and powers, dominions, seraphim, virtues, principalities and cherubim? Do the nine choirs of angels indeed live in the sky? These are by definition . . . extraterrestrial. The Christ is universal, and He affirmed it. Listen to St. Paul. 'When the time is accomplished, I will bring all things under one head, that is, Christ, the celestial beings and the terrestrial.' All creatures are mortal and only a Redeemer can give them eternal life. It's no lessening; on the contrary, it expands His love to legions of beings like or unlike us."

This time the Templar's two opponents gave no answer—not that they were convinced, but that the Earth's other surface was rushing toward them as if the machine were about to crash. Were they about to pay for this mad temerity with their lives?

The ship made a dizzying nose dive and under the bewildered eyes of the witnesses perched on the ramparts neatly came to rest on its three feet in the hollow tower.

"Well, noble brothers," said William with a smug smile, "what say you to *that*?"

"Faith," replied Conrad in his thunderous voice, "no problem for me. Our Earth is round just like a ball, and the sun holds the center of our system."

"What has me worried," John of Villiers said in turn, "is that I can't deny that this quite wingless ship sails at an insane speed. If we only took aboard enough provisions, it could surely carry us to the farthest stars. But I still have to voice one objection . . ."

"Do," the Templar replied. "I'm here to give you all the explanations you could want."

"So. Well. Before we left, you were talking about the possibility of an attack of similar vessels launched against the Earth. So you think that the Baphomets have a large fleet. Now evidently you have just the one ship. So it's impossible to expect to overcome an opposing fleet if—by some misfortune—you ran into any of them en route."

"A perceptive objection. I'll give you my answer, but before the Council of nobles which is so impatiently awaiting us."

The four passengers left the ship then and, following the route by which they had come, they reentered the vast hall, where they were assailed by a deluge of questions.

William resumed his place on the dais and, lifting his hand to restore silence; "Messires," he said in a loud voice, "brother Hospitalers and Teutons, I understand your curiosity. Patience. I am going to pick up the thread of my story, which we broke off for that little voyage with my noble friends. I had to convince them of a few facts of dire importance: the fact that the Earth is round; that it belongs to a system of planets orbiting endlessly about our sun; and most of all—to convince them of the extraordinary abilities of the Baphomet ship, which can sail immeasurable distances. This was, I believe, accomplished."

John of Villiers and Conrad von Thierberg, to the vast surprise of their brother knights, nodded in agreement.

"—These points have been established," the Grand Master of the Templars went on, "our assembly has to resolve some other problems of vital importance to our race. The Baphomets, as I have told you, know of our existence, but they don't know how we dealt with the emissary they sent to our world, and that must throw them into a grand confusion. Surely they're wondering if they ought to leave us in peace or attack

us with a powerful fleet. Their hesitations leave us a little breathing space in which to act. The noble John of Villiers justly and forcefully reminded me a moment ago that we don't have enough strength now to fight in space. So an alternative suggests itself: brace ourselves and wait for the Baphomet attack—asking our friend Houen-Lun to gather a number of Adepts to repulse our attackers by means of their psychic talents. Second possibility: seize the offensive and launch an attack on the planets occupied by the Baphomets with a powerful fleet capable of beating these cruel adversaries. After careful reflection, the venerable Tibetan chief, our esteemed Djaffar, our learned Joubert and myself succeeded in setting a reasonable plan into motion. Houen-Lun has told me that the powers of the Wise Men were inoperative when they were shut within a metal vessel. At one stroke—our main weapon, out of action. But fortunately, after days and nights of research, Brother Joubert has found a means to get around that difficulty. He states that the Tibetans' brain waves can be propagated over an apparatus which exists on the Baphomet ships—the antennae they use for speaking long distance, which receive certain impulses. . . . The Baphomets in charge of receiving messages aboard the enemy ships could thus easily be deluded by one of the lamas. Thanks to his remarkable powers, the Adept would have the Baphomet believing he was talking to peaceful merchantmen. So one of the Tibetans could corrupt the judgment of officers and crew; one of us could finally get in through an airlock to spy on our enemies."

"Noble brother," muttered John of Villiers, "you're telling us marvels, to be sure, oh yes, but not enough to win a battle if the course of events should lead us to one. Surely it would be a good plan to send spies among the Baphomets . . . but our looks would have to be compatible with those of those sky-dwelling races or the men you send are going to be unmasked very quickly."

"I've foreseen that eventuality. A goat's hide and head would be enough to disguise one of us."

"Let's admit that there's one remaining problem," the Hospitaler said in a deathly silence. "That our forces are a joke and that we can't fend the advance of a powerful fleet away from our planet."

The audience was sitting as if paralyzed. All in the hall felt

that they were dreaming. Even the most learned of them needed all their faculties to follow the debate, the import of which they did, however, realize.

"Have I ever," replied the Templar, "pretended to have ships as numerous as our armies? Our numerical disadvantage will be largely offset by our experience in the art of war."

"Ve'd still haf to be able to make these demoniac machines," Conrad von Thierberg grumbled. "So far as I'm concerned, I don't understand a bit of it."

"Our learned Joubert and the wise Djaffar have made astonishing progress," William replied, "in mastering these esoteric sciences. They now understand the operation of most of the machines equipping these ships—that, in large part thanks to the tiny crystalline charts which carry all the instructions meant to teach ordinary folk among our enemies the arts of alchemy. Still, it took a powerful intelligence to gather the very elements of these understandings, and our ablest workmen would be helpless to reproduce the delicate mechanisms which move these ships through the ether."

"Then it is impossible," John of Villiers cut in dryly, "to beard the Baphomets in their lair."

"You omit one simple factor, noble brother," the Templar returned with a touch of malice. "No need, you see, of master artisans when one has a duplicator which faithfully reproduces all the pieces—even the tiniest—just so long as we feed the right metal into it. So then, our alchemists are quite capable of that much. Now, already, I have a dozen ships in perfect working order and I'm continuing to produce them."

A long silence fell on the crowd.

Hospitalers, Teutons and Templars reflected on the vistas opened by that unexpected revelation.

Conrad von Thierberg, always full of fire, exclaimed: "Ah, vell, in that case, no problem. Let's go get those demons!"

A good section of the crowd agreed with that proud sentiment. But John of Villiers was still thinking. Finally he decided to give his opinion. "Noble William, your words, I admit, are full of sense. It would be mad at this point to launch a blind attack on an enemy we scarcely know. So let's pursue the construction of a great fleet, and meanwhile, let's send spies to give us valuable information on our enemies."

"I thank you for your support, gentle brother. That solu-

tion seems wisest to me, too. Sirs, brother Hospitalers and Teutons, I appeal to you—all who approve this project, raise your hands."

They all knew the wisdom of the Grand Master of the Hospitalers. As for William of Beaujeu, he had the greatest empire on Earth, and he had won countless victories, so almost all the soldier-monks approved the proposal. Only a few Teutons abstained, more out of jealousy than on real conviction.

"Noble brothers, thank you for your confidence," William concluded, and rose to show that the audience was ended. "Let us thank the Lord that we were warned of our danger in time and let us pray Christ to bring this Crusade to victory! May this be a battle of the forces of good against those of evil. The Baussant flag will once more go in the van of the host which leads the holy war!"

The crowd dispersed then to enjoy the merrymaking which marked this holiday. Tongues wagged freely.

But the Grand Masters, meeting in a private chamber, went over the details of the future expedition in secret.

By nightfall, they had reached agreement.

Each withdrew to his own apartment, while the officers of the three orders passed their instructions to their subordinates. The crew of the ship which was to set forth into infinite space (until then the sole possession of the Baphomets) then gathered at the castle to be prepared for the mission by Joubert and Djaffar.

Chapter II



While the duplicators worked ceaselessly under the supervision of Joubert, Djaffar and their assistants, William put a finishing touch on his expedition to the stars.

The Grand Master needed a reliable man to run his empire during his absence. He chose his faithful commander, Thibaud Gaudin, whose courage and honesty he respected. Under William's eye, the Templar learned to manage the various factions which set Khan against Khan, to supervise the harvests, the extraction of minerals needed for the manufacture of the spaceships. He gave him precise instructions, too, regarding the agreements the Templars maintained with the Eastern Kingdoms. There, as it happened, the Commanderies flourished, ships and caravans brought in gold, spices, rich brocades, incense, perfumes . . . which attracted rich burghers and noble lords.

The Templars had become bankers to kings and emperors, with whom they dealt as equals. No one could make war without their approval. Ambassadors came to seek their advice. French, English, Germans and Italians must reckon with the wealthy soldier-monks, wielders of the thunderballs. Pope John XXI himself dealt carefully with them, for they were on their way to becoming masters of the world.

Power, alas, begets hate.

The kings were jealous of the Grand Master, though they dared not admit their hostility openly. They employed multitudes of spies in the Commanderies and even at Chang-Chu. Hospitalers and Teutons, reduced to a supporting role, were only too eager to aid their rivals' enemies.

So Thibaud Gaudin faced a very delicate task. Impossible to use the thunderballs against Christian kingdoms. John XXI

had let it be understood in so many words that this devil-weapon must never be used except against infidels, on pain of excommunication.

Any attack on the Commanderies of Europe had to be met with less baneful weapons, and Templar companies scattered over the face of the world were incapable of meeting any opposing coalition. It would be worse yet when the fleet took to space, taking with it the flower of the soldier-monks.

Only the posts in America gave them no trouble. The Templars, dug in behind the thick-walled castles they had built along the majestic rivers of the New World, had nothing to fear from the natives, who had no warhorses and whose arrows could not penetrate the plate armor and the mail shirts. Sachems and chiefs knew that these newcomers wielded the thunder. So they traded with these demigods whom they had learned to fear and took no chance of offending them.

It was the same situation in China and on Cipanghu. Only the maharajahs preserved a certain independence, limiting themselves to the payment of tribute to their powerful neighbors.

At least the main expedition would not be leaving Earth for several months, if everything went as planned. Thibaud Gaudin thus had all the time he would need to serve his apprenticeship in that crushing power.

For their part, the high officers of the Order never stopped working. William's two lieutenants, Peter of Sevry and Otto of Granson, tirelessly scoured the Templar Empire to gather the elite of the soldier-monks. Some arrived at Chang-Chu along the caravan routes, leading countless quite useless horses; others used the flying ships to reach the army's camp.

The Grand Hospitaller gathered drugs, opiates, elixirs and narcotics, along with wadding and linen bandages for the wounded. Djaffar the Wise had also supplied certain powders sovereign against infections, which they had found in the Baphomet ships. They had not yet fathomed the secret of their manufacture, but they had been faithfully reproduced thanks to the duplicator.

As for the Draper, he gathered cottles, surcoats, armor, chausses and helms. He also had recourse to the duplicator to assemble strange airtight armor, to let the men breathe in the void of space. With these there was no fear of suffering cold

or heat; the marvelous devices assured a moderate temperature under any circumstances.

Provisioning the ship with food was under the supervision of the Seneschal. The Templars, it developed, did not fare well on the fetid broth produced by the strange alembics which equipped the ships. These hardy warriors needed meat when they fought and even had a papal dispensation to eat meat on Friday and other fast days. So they had to alter certain ships to provide stables where they could raise cattle, pigs and chickens.

Stocks of jerky and smoked fish had been put aboard each ship to allow a crew to survive for several weeks if it found itself cut off from the rest of the fleet. The American possessions furnished an abundance of buffalo meat prepared in strips—the natives called it *pemmican*. And from Cipanghu came delicious, perfectly preserved fish. From China, bushels of a grain capable in itself of assuring the warriors' survival for months, if they added a kind of condiment called soy sauce.

The Chaplain installed portable altars aboard each ship and collected countless ciboria filled with the Host.

Finally the Turcopole received some light, fast ships, which had been mostly stripped. They were to play a role derivative of the light cavalry, making lightning strikes on enemy lines. Their hand-picked crews underwent intensive training on the Earth's moon.

Meanwhile the ship meant to spy on the Baphomets was checked over with the utmost care.

Marco Polo, freshly arrived from his commercial chicaneries in foreign lands, took command of that.

The crew consisted of the lama Houen-Lun, Brother Joubert, Djaffar the Wise, and three brave lads with nerves of steel: the Tholon brothers, natives of a hamlet near Auxerre.

Garin, the Templar, was the intelligence in the family . . . had the knack of involving himself in the subtlest intrigues and enjoyed success in discovering the best guarded of secrets.

Clement, a giant of a man with a wild temper, was a former woodcutter. His strength was incredible. He had amazed the army by carrying on his back an Arab horse with a wounded fore-pastern. The big fellow had quite cheerfully gotten under the poor animal's chest and walked the brave

beast along on his hind feet. The Mongols, horrified at this centaur, had let him pass unhindered, and Clement, whom they had all given up for dead, had appeared in the camp at daybreak.

Guiot, called Red Guiot because of his flamboyant beard, had the craft of a fox and a thief's quickness. He had no equal at discovering provisions hidden by peasants and treasures concealed by nobles. That won him a comfortable purse which he dissipated shamelessly in endless partying.

The three had one thing in common: aquamarine eyes and an astonishingly keen stare.

Garin was sorely aggrieved by his brothers' immoderate affinity for escapades, but for all his threats and exhortations he never succeeded in setting their feet on the straight and narrow path, and he said ceaseless prayers for the salvation of their immortal souls.

Despite all differences the three brothers got along like thieves at a fair, and their signal bravery had gotten them assigned to go with Marco Polo.

"'S blood," Guiot swore, wolfing down a mouthful of grease-dripping mutton. "Here we are in another damn mess. I heard what the Venetian said, I heard it every bit. I know how to use a sword or a good axe, a point, that's all . . . and here somebody wants to shut us up in some flying pot to go God knows where in the clouds. Garin, you're smart, you've got to explain it to me."

"May the Holy Spirit help me illumine your obtuse brain," the Templar groaned. "You've naturally heard about the Baphomet who gave us the fireballs."

"Sure. I even saw drawings of him—a goat's head with big horns, black fur all over his body, clawed hands and a pair of blue breasts. Man'd think he was seeing Lucifer in person."

"Good. Well, these devilish creatures came to conquer our Earth. Our reverend Grand Master, Lord bless him, unraveled their subtle tricks and killed their envoy. But there's still a threat hanging over Christendom. That despicable race surely won't stop at one check. One day or another the Baphomets will return in force to enslave us. So William of Beaujeu has decided to anticipate them and create a powerful fleet to destroy the enemy in his lair. . . ."

"I've got it. Only why are we going to go with the Venetian in just one ship?"

"To spy on them, for pity's sake! Marco Polo has long experience in trade with foreigners, and we're going to pass ourselves off as peaceful traders come from another planet."

"Huh, I don't get it," Clement grumbled in his turn. "They're going to see in a minute that we're not Baphomets."

"Indeed they are," Garin growled with a weary sigh. "That's why we're taking along a Tibetan to deceive the enemies who may observe us with his psychic powers. He'll read their minds and we'll disguise ourselves to look like traders from some race accustomed to deal with the Baphomets. So we'll be well received and we can spy on them."

"But I can't say a single word in their damn language," Guiot objected.

"Don't fret yourself. All that's been taken care of. The learned Brother Joubert has been able to make adaptations on the talismans from the captured ships. We'll undergo a treatment that will let us speak their language."

"Hah, I get you. We just have to get into one of their fortresses to know what they might be cooking up, right?"

"Right, my dear brother."

"Botheration, we got to go fly in the clouds and fight with funny-looking pipes that spit fire. Me with no axe, I'm good for nothing."

"You can still carry it off. As for the new weapons, you've learned to use them. Besides, in the events of the tourney we're giving tonight there're going to be prizes for the best shots. You can show off your skill."

"You think we can be in it?"

"Sure. Our ship doesn't leave until tomorrow dawn."

William of Beaujeu, as it happened, had reckoned that the best way to occupy these warriors who had come in from the far horizons was to offer them one of the entertainments they so prized.

A tourney would be a choice attraction for the army—acquainting them all with the new machines that Djaffar and Joubert had set up.

Of course there would be some classic sword bouts. The knights, clad in the new armor, would meet in a closed field. But even more ambitious maneuvers had been arranged: bursts of real fire where the crews of mangonels, catapults and firetubes could set off their shells with a full charge of

powder and test their versatility. (The latter weapons had been devised by the Chinese. They let them hurl the Baphomet thunderballs far afield.)

Most of all William wanted to test the knights' reaction to the explosion of the fireballs, which they had never had to face, and he also wanted to test a new battle tactic. In a real encounter the Baphomets would have a profusion of various explosives, and any wave assault would amount to suicide.

Under the guise of a preventive crusade aimed at enemies of the Holy Church (with papal approval) the Grand Master was actually hiding vast ambitions, ambitions which would have horrified any who might have plumbed the depths of his soul.

For him the universe was a new prize dangled before his rapacity. The empire of Earth no longer satisfied him once he realized the existence of stellar kingdoms much more vast. He would never, of course, openly admit his desire for hegemony: the prayer "*Non nobis Domine, sed Nomine Tuo da gloriam*" eased his conscience; he had almost succeeded in persuading himself that he was acting purely for the cause of the Lord and the True Faith.

So on this clear morning, when a stiff breeze was lifting the proud gonfalons, banners and standards, a huge crowd had gathered on the plain as well as in the silken and tapestried galleries.

Noble ladies and almond-eyed princesses arrayed in their most beautiful finery entered upon a battle no less fierce than the knights—oriental belles opposed to occidental. Each combatant had chosen a lady whose colors he bore, and she would become queen of the tourney should her chosen warrior gain the victory.

All over the camp, knights and squires were polishing their weapons. A melee of combatant troops were to meet afoot, after the joust which opposed the two men armed with lances.

Then would come the gauntlet of fire, and after that, a mock combat with Baphomet weapons. Finally, at evenfall, the victors would meet at a banquet, if their health permitted and they had not broken too many teeth.

The honor of directing the tourney fell to marshal Peter of Sevry. His blushing broad face showed that he must have

poured himself a few libations, but that hardly stopped him from having a lordly bearing when he headed for the Grand Master with all his house about him to ask permission to have the knights enter the lists.

William drew his sword, the heralds blew deafening fanfares and the marshal lifted his baton.

The future adversaries lowered their visors and entered the closed field, which was divided into twenty parallel strips.

Hospitalers and Teutons prepared to meet Templars, while Kubla's warriors met French, English and German knights.

The Mongol chief was sitting in the gallery overhanging the lists, beside William, John of Villiers and Conrad von Thierberg, which was evidence of the esteem the Grand Master had for him.

The laws of the joust provided that the combatant must strike the opponent on shield or helm. Blows below the belt were forbidden. Arbiters would watch to see that these rules were scrupulously observed.

In a thunderous racket, the destriers' shoes hammered the earth; the plumes of the crests streamed like living birds as the combatants lowered their stop-ringed lances, gathering speed.

Although the armor was the new model, they had all charmingly modified the helmets with allegorical figures and monsters to such an extent that the brave jousters looked like creatures from another world.

In the first shock of encounter, nearly half the knights bit the dust. Some got up swearing, stalking off to hide their shame in their pavilions, others staying flat on their backs while their squires came running to attend to them. Happily, a few of them were seriously hurt, for the strange metal of the armor had an exceptional resistance. On the other hand, more than one man hit on the head had cracked incisors and molars in a flood of blood.

The survivors went back to the starting point.

Among them stood all the officers of the Templars, Hospitalers and Germans. This time the victors were going to meet new opponents. So John of Grailly found himself face-to-face with a giant Teuton, Siegfried von Orselen.

As for Otto of Granson, he was going to have to meet Godfrey of Antioch, a Hospitaler of wide renown.

For the second time the horses stretched out at a gallop,

the shock of lances resounded like the axeblooms of woodsmen in the forest, the earth shook under the impact of unseated bodies.

This time four knights alone stayed in the lists, Otto of Granson, John of Grailly, Siegfried von Orselen and Thibaud Gaudin. As it turned out, the Frenchman and his adversary had broken their lances in vain.

Finally, after a last engagement, a single combatant remained ahorse: Thibaud Gaudin, who proudly took a little trot around the enclosure to lift his lance to the chosen of his affections and to come to receive the palm of victory from the hands of William of Beaujeu.

"Surely, noble friend, no more valiant warrior could receive this reward," the Grand Master exclaimed, delighted. "With you, I am assured that my empire will be in good hands in my absence."

John of Villiers and Conrad von Thierberg paid him compliments too, but with teeth clenched. Assuredly, they took no pleasure in the defeat of their own party.

But the melee which followed let the Hospitalers and the Teutons distinguish themselves. After two hours of merciless combat, in the course of which helmet plumes flew in the wind, armor was hammered, shields battered until their devices were rendered illegible, the two victors received in their turn the prize they had so painfully gained.

Now the sun was high over the horizon and hunger and thirst made themselves felt. Everyone went back to his quarters to gather strength for the struggles of the afternoon.

This time it was a very different entertainment. The armies united around Chang-Chu were split into two groups, mixed companies of Chinese, Tartars and the three rival orders of soldier-monks.

The point of the maneuver was this: the blue army had to try to cross the river under the fire of the red army, which was dug in on the plateau.

A spectacular innovation: judges and observers flew over the field of combat in the ships at low altitude to gain a better view of the whole, to appreciate the results of fire and to decide at a glance on the number put out of action.

Of course, the site of these war games had been chosen at a far distance from the palace, and the wind direction care-

fully studied so that the pernicious emanations might be rapidly dispersed far from the combatants.

William and the two other Grand Masters stood on the peripheries of the battle aboard a vessel with the Baussant arms painted on its hull.

The blue army followed Conrad von Thierberg, while the red drew up under the banner of Marshal Peter of Severy.

Before and behind the lines, the company flags served as targets for heavy missiles. The light arms were trained on the combatants, who found themselves spattered with black paint mixed with Chinese powder. These were judged out of action.

From the start, it appeared to the observers that the war-horses could not be used in this kind of encounter. Frightened by the unaccustomed explosions, they reared and fled in every direction. Kubla's elephants mirrored the panic in the ranks of the blue army.¹

William seemed to have foreseen these incidents. His orders urged the knights to scatter themselves wide and to get down in the individual holes dug by the squires the moment fire began.

The soldier-monks judged such a position unworthy of them, so they remained in the open, but when the horses and elephants came rushing down on them, they plunged head-first into these despised refuges.²

But as a whole the maneuvers eloquently demonstrated that the knights did not have sufficient training to fight enemies using explosive weapons.

When the first wave of attackers crossed the watercourse, the defenders, instead of staying in the trenches and maintaining a fire supported with light arms, rushed to the assault waving their swords. A number of them were mowed down—or rather spattered with paint—which in no wise hindered them from continuing to fight, contrary to all the rules.

Some, having regained their horses, even led a heroic charge, making an ideal target for the fire of the arbalesters.

All of it ended in a total muddle, which brought mocking

¹ Marginal note of the Templar of Tyre: This definitely put them out of the expedition. Besides, they were too heavy for the ships.

² It must be admitted that a few inexperienced marksmen had put in real charges. The army mourned about fifty dead. The disaster was hidden from the soldiers to preserve their morale; they were told the missing had been sent on a long reconnaissance mission on the borders.

smiles to the faces of the Grand Master of the Teutons and that of the Hospitalers, while William's countenance grew longer and longer.

His armies had decidedly forgotten the things they had learned in previous campaigns. They had to be completely taken in hand regarding land encounters as well as the ship-board combats which would surely bring more disappointments. . . .

By heaven's grace, William had time enough to attend to it. He thanked the Lord for having gone ahead in training his army, because if the Baphomets had attacked Earth at this moment, they would have won an easy victory over these poor simple souls who still believed in the power of the sword.

"All that must change," William said dryly to his officers and the other Grand Masters, at the banquet which found them together again that evening, under the vast tents set up in the open air of the palace gardens.

Only the dignitaries shared in this communal feast. The infantry, on the other hand, was in a sad state. Deafened by the explosions, half strangled by the dust clouds, their legs incapable of carrying them, and their eyes burning, the unfortunate Tholon brothers had thought their last hour had arrived when a heavy missile fell a little short and exploded not far from them.

"God's blood," Guiot swore weakly, "I really thought I was in hell. Now I know what chastisement's awaiting me for my sins. Garin, you were right to tell me not to go running after bawds—"

Whereupon he swallowed a cupful of spiced wine, which put a little heart into him, while Clement took up the refrain.

"Holy name, I still see the fires dancing before my eyes. Say, Garin, you really sure we ain't dead?"

"My brothers, I tell you in all truth: born of God, dead in Jesus, we rise again by the Holy Spirit. Repent your sins and you will inherit eternal life. Sin no more and ye shall know peace of soul. What matters then the loss of a mortal body? William—bless him—preaches a Holy Crusade which will give you the means to redeem your faults, by traveling infinite space to serve the cause of the Faith. During our voyage, we will have no chance to be tempted by sins of the flesh, far less to be moved by foul perversions. So we shall be meeting

creatures whose sex is surely not like ours, and all fornication will be forbidden you under pain of revealing your earthly nature. So you will have occasion to make a virtuous and complete abstinence. . . ."

"God!" sighed Guiot, dazed. "I never thought of that. That's true. We're going to have to give up women for a damn long time."

"That is exactly the truth," the Templar assured them with an ironic smile. "If we meet other star folk, they're surely going to have a shape different from ours."

"Holy name," Clement swore. "What a bore! And what do you think, we going to have to stay very long in that purgatory?"

"Hard to say. The equivalent of one or two of our months no doubt about it. Lord Marco Polo has to make contact with other merchants, get information out of them, maybe even enter one of the cities occupied by the Baphomets. Then we go back to Earth, taking the long way home so as not to draw attention of enemy patrols. Surely a minimum of two months, granted nothing unforeseen comes up. . . ."

"Ah, well, that's promising. Garin, my brother, thanks for letting us know. I'm done in, I'm going to bed. You coming, Clement?"

"I'm there. Night, Garin."

"The Lord protect you and grant you edifying dreams," the Templar wished them, astonished to see his two comrades become so virtuous.

He stayed musing a moment, staring into the glowing embers, wondering why his miscreant brothers had suddenly lost their appetites. Was it the prospect of leaving Earth that led them finally to think of their salvation? He shook his head, knelt for a brief prayer and, wrapping himself in his great white cloak, prepared to sleep the sleep of the just.

As for Guiot and Clement, they seemed to have forgotten all their fatigue. The moment their brother fell asleep, they went wide-striding along the road that led to Chang-Chu.

At the end of a quarter hour, they reached the drawbridge, identified themselves and entered the city by the postern gate.

There they followed a dark lane about fifty meters and reached the front of a brightly lit shop. Songs, cries, oaths rang far down the lane. The sign hanging over the door illustrated the name of the tavern. The Four-Day Drunk.

Through the upper-story windows came women's laughter.

The two brothers looked at each other with a conspiratorial grin. Before suffering a forced continence of several weeks, they were going to give themselves memories enough for this disturbing voyage, and even for several future ones.

Next morning, Garin found Clement and Guiot sleeping nearby. He recited his matins, prepared breakfast with the leavings of the last night's supper, then, as his brothers still kept snoring, hands curled, he decided to shake them, gently at first, and then more roughly.

The sleepers turned back over, grumbling.

Confronted with the futility of his efforts, Garin scratched his head thoughtfully, leaned over Guiot, sniffed his breath and straightened with a grimace of disgust, for his brother reeked of wine.

Suddenly he snatched a waterskin, emptied it into a shield and poured it liberally over the luckless fellows who came up like the devils they were, cursing and blaspheming.

"For sure," the Templar growled, "you'll always be impossible. Where did you spend the night?"

"Well, we thought we ought to say good-bye to our friends," muttered Clement, snorting. "Then we went to town. . . . Suddenly everyone was drinking our health, and we had to answer that. Couldn't offend them."

"Yeah," said Guiot. "Couldn't let old buddies down like that. . . ."

"Oh, yes? And then?" asked Garin, taking out of the rascal's pocket a red silk scarf. "A farewell gift, I suppose?"

"Right you are," said Clement. "Out where we're going, the nights can get cold."

"Cease your lies, you filthy sinners! You were sunk again in orgies and debauchery. I don't know what keeps me from giving you up to your sorry fate. . . ."

"You know, we were thinking about you," Guiot murmured, all abashed. "We were going to bring you a relic, a tooth of St. Agatha, because it would bring you luck, and you can't be wounded when you're carrying it on you."

So saying, he rummaged in his purse and brought out a yellowed stub that the Templar hurled far from him with a ringing slap.

"Stupid yokels! They'd have you believing any kind of

flummery when you're drunk. Eat and get dressed. We're supposed to be on board in an hour. . . ."

"All the same," protested Red Guiot, "you're going too far. A tooth that cost me thirty sols. . . ."

The Templar shrugged and, paying no more attention to them, turned back to his affairs, then brushed his white cloak meticulously and polished his armor.

At the appointed hour, the Tholon brothers presented themselves in front of the reconnaissance ship. Clement and Guiot were yawning fit to unhinge their jaws.

Lord Marco Polo walked up and down before the ladder to the lock.

The Venetian was a very handsome man. A large cap of red-striped velvet crowned his black, almost crinkly hair. His deep-set blue eyes enlivened an energetic face, full of health, tanned by his endless ridings forth. His short curled beard, which he frequently tugged, but half hid his bull's neck, which marked an uncommon strength. His wide shoulders were clothed in a spotless ermine mantle, which cloaked a fine figure well set off in a brodered pourpoint.

His piercing look, of astonishing keenness, passed over the members of his crew. Then he talked to them in his musical voice, with a slight Italian accent.

"My friends, we're going to live together a dangerous adventure. I know your bravery and I haven't any worry about your behavior if we run into a fight. But it will be your cleverness and your adaptability we need most of all. We're going to be staying among hostile populations and we have to watch moment by moment how we act and what we say. Be cautious: a casual gesture could be fatal among strangers. The secret of our success rests, then, in our constant care. Thanks to Brother Joubert's talismans, you will be inspired by God and speak fluently the language of the people whose look you will assume. The wonderful gadgets of the learned Joubert work marvelously, I'm sure of it. The wise lama who is going with us will keep us safe from all surprise by his power to compel souls. It is imperative for the safety of Christendom that we conduct this mission well. You'll be merchants, so no quarrels and no stealing. Only one thing matters to you, to sell your goods at a good price. Keep your ears open at all times and make your friends do the talking; be generous. Don't be stingy with gifts; keep an open table.

Most of all, don't ever let yourselves be rash in eating and drinking strange food and liquor; we'll inform you of the danger of certain items, but we could forget some details. So it's up to you to act with prudence. Be wise also in mistrusting others' generosity. Don't let people get around you. I don't know what the women of the other worlds may be, but the female kind always brings the most extreme danger! Now we're going to board. You'll get the rest of my instructions on the ship. Know finally that I have the utmost confidence in the success of our mission. You'll be equal to your job."

So saying he agilely climbed the rungs of the metal ladder which led to the lock, and his companions followed.

Besides the Tholon brothers, there were only two other passengers, Djaffar the subtle, the only one who knew precisely how the esoteric engines aboard worked, and the wise lama Houen-Lun, on whom rested the whole success of the expedition.

There was no lack of room. The ship could accommodate ten men. Everyone settled in comfortably.

The ships meant for William's army had been faithfully based on the Baphomet ships, the sole difference being that they could easily hold a hundred armed men.

The size of those ships might seem strange to the extraterrestrials, so Joubert had given the spies a ship similar in every detail to those of their enemies.

When the thick hatch clicked shut on its mountings, the Tholon brothers felt a little uneasy. They were going to face unknown dangers. And would they see the sweet Earth again?

But when the screen in front of Djaffar came alight and William wished his mission good luck, the men of Auxerre felt all cheerful and full of pride. Had not the Grand Master said that on them rested the destiny of all mankind?

They swelled with pride and swore they would accomplish their mission without fail, come what might.

Chapter III



The ship took off like a feather, headed for the light clouds which drifted lazily in the blue.

In bewilderment Clement and Guiot saw the green countryside shade off and disappear in the bluish haze, while the thin clouds unraveled themselves across the viewports or, at least, what took the place of viewports.

The sight became even more impressive when the Earth dwindled to become a plain blue-haloed sphere nestled in the ebon sky.

"God's blood!" Red Guiot gasped, "that's climbing."

"And our moon," raved Clement. "Look at that! You'd think it was a princess' jewels. . . ."

But the ship was still gathering speed. Djaffar stopped checking the instruments. Everything aboard was automatic, or practically everything, and his role was limited to watching the behavior of the whole.

The ship exited the solar system perpendicular to the plane of the ecliptic, so that they could hardly tell the other planets in the star-studded sky.

"My friends," Marco Polo said then, "our voyage is going to last several weeks. We'll pass close to several stars like our sun. Most of them shouldn't have any planets. But all the same, our wise Houe-Lun will proceed with a psychic broadcast when we cross the vicinity of those stars. Of course, the nearer we come to the land of the demoniacal Baphomets, the more careful we have to be. In the event we met another ship en route, Djaffar knows the procedure to follow. Our lama will try at that point to dominate the minds of the crew to get information on the way the extraterrestrials conduct their commerce. That will be one of the most dan-

gerous moments of our voyage. You will have to be quiet and not interrupt his spiritual concentration. He'll share with us then what he's learned and advise us the best behavior to follow. For the moment, don't fear that you're going to suffer from idleness. Doctor Djaffar is going to teach you our enemies' language, by means of a marvelous talisman. Every day you'll wear that network for an hour. You may perhaps feel a few headaches from it, but that won't last. At the end of a fortnight, you'll be speaking the language of the planet Baphom as readily as your own. You'll also know the Baphomets' usages and customs, which will keep you from making mistakes. Finally, if we make contact with a different race, your apprenticeship must be much more rapid, a few minutes, no more. Djaffar will give you a medication then that will ease your fatigue. Now, take your places for your first lesson."

The three brothers, a little reluctantly, took their places on the special seats, after which Marco Polo assured them that he had undergone this treatment himself with no hurt, and so had Djaffar and Houen-Lun.

This lesson went very well.

At the beginning they sat there with their mouths open. A thin voice whispered incomprehensible words in their ears. Little by little they relaxed and the murmur became inaudible.

Their lesson finished, they had a little liberty, and then, it being dinnertime, the Auxerre gourmands had to content themselves with a thin broth doled out by a mysterious machine. To quench their thirst they had nothing but water, a very poor beverage in the reckoning of Clement and Guiot, who were beginning to dream of the food of the good Earth. . . .

But they put a brave face on it, keeping their opinions to themselves. Marco Polo, Djaffar and Houen-Lun were under the same discipline, so the Tholons would have been churlish to complain. As for Garin, he was taking great delight in his two miscreant brothers' pretense.

This monastic life was going to last for days and days.

The Tibetan spent most of his time crouched on his mat, surrounded by a gold net, his skull shining with grease. Djaffar undertook regular examination of the strange instruments situated in the console before him, and he concocted unguents in his spare time. As for Marco Polo, he ceaselessly

compared the configuration of the constellations which shone on his screen with those depicted on a crystal sphere.

The Tholon brothers unenthusiastically submitted to their daily seances. Only Clement complained of headaches and nightmares. Djaffar gave him several drops of a bitter mixture and everything settled back into order.

The sun had long since become only one tiny ember lost among countless other stars.

One morning as Garin wakened he pronounced a few words in a strange language with harsh accents. Amazed, he finally understood Djaffar's maneuvers, discovering suddenly that the ship, driven by immaterial waves, was navigating in an environment without regard to their own, following a trajectory precisely determined by an automatic system. He realized that the images he was seeing on the screens were only a rendering in a spectrum of light perceptible to his eyes. Strange details came into his mind, visions of a ruddy planet with a sky streaked with amethyst cloud, or titanic cities lifting towers to assault the clouds like the towers of Babel. He knew, too, the unnatural customs of the perverted Baphomets, who committed fornications among themselves with males and females. From these monstrous unions were born little monsters which would be brought up en masse in warm incubators. Horrified, he perceived thousands of foul mouths suckling hungrily at the plastic tubes which dripped a foul green broth.

The Templar learned, too, that there existed besides the Baphomets three other races of aliens. First, the graceful Ethir with frondy plumage and vast wings, who had led a peaceful existence on their own planet, nesting in the great branches of the trees, feeding on grain and tiny insects. Then the Baphomets had come and the gentle flying-folk lived now in slavery. Certain of them, expatriate, served as household servants. Their long broken wings trailed sorrowfully behind them. The ones who stayed on Eth had been provided with tiny brain implants and worked without letup, cultivating the wondrous flowers which they distilled to produce a rare essence. This they saved in crystal vials and sent by entire shiploads to the Baphomets, who drank it prodigiously. This drug plunged them into an incomparable ecstasy after their interminable couplings.

The Orpheds, on the other hand, were insects like huge

praying mantises. They were expert in the making of strangely convolute horns from which they drew melodious sounds, and they had besides a marvelous gift for musical composition. Their race had been decimated by the Baphomets and the survivors were brought into captivity on Baphom. There, to soothe their masters, these poor creatures must play their inexhaustible repertoire without cease. They suffered from the climate of this planet of exile, which was too cold for them, and they died very quickly. Fortunately their race was very prolific. Each female laid about thirty eggs, which were hatched in artificial incubators. The little ones were then fed by metal creatures, which gave them the juices of the plants indispensable to their growth, especially imported from Orph.

The Odeous, the only race with an advanced civilization, had been enslaved after harsh combat which had ravaged their homeworld. Their bodies would have been very much like those of Terrans if nature had not given them an iridescent skin of changing colors. Their vast, translucent eyes were full of a marvelous tenderness. The Baphomets, lacking pity, made these spacefarers prisoners eternally chained to their ships.

These slaves had an inborn talent for electronics, chemistry and mechanics, which rendered them irreplaceable. They did ceaseless commerce on the planet Baphom, crossing immeasurable distances to make contact with other distant stars and to furnish their masters with new sources of nourishment and the psychedelic drugs of which the Baphomets were inordinately fond. Impossible for these ships of the damned to escape the despotic lords of Baphom: a special device inexorably brought their ships back to this planet, as a lodestone draws iron. No hope either of ending their pitiable lives, for tiny electrodes implanted in their brains rendered every attempt at suicide impossible. So for all the course of their existence, the Odeous gazed on one another with their vast, wide-pupiled eyes, slaves forever imprisoned within the hulls of their ships. Their females, beautiful as goddesses, knew a fate even more pitiless. The foul Baphomets, avidly seeking after new pleasures, appreciated their delicate bodies, their graceful beauty, and filled their harems with these unfortunate creatures.

All this the Templar learned without surprise, as if he had

always known it. Before his departure from Earth, he would have had difficulty absorbing these gifts, so strange to his mind. But thanks to the magic apparatus, he took in this information as if it were ordinary.

His brothers acquired these revelations almost at the same moment and painlessly assimilated them. As for the other passengers, they had undergone the treatment before their departure and already knew these details.

Marco Polo still had to give them some supplementary information.

"You know now what is the aspect of these creatures that we will meet on this voyage. Unfortunately, we don't know their language at all. The Baphomets despise their slaves and few among them speak the idiom of the enslaved races. Our wise lama will therefore have a very hard task if we chance to meet a ship inhabited by Odeous. Once the initial contact is established, we will disguise ourselves so we don't attract attention. Everything necessary has been foreseen. You just have to carry out your role. The most painful part of it is doubtless going to be enduring the lenses which will make your eyes like those of the Odeous. Come, I'm going to teach you to slip them under your lids."

This unexpected masquerade added a little charm to what had become a wearisome voyage. Clement dissolved in an attack of mad laughter when he saw Guiot looking at Garin with a dove-eyed and tear-streaming stare.

Happily, their long campaign across Asia, while William's army, coming out of Palestine, had warred against the Mongols, had taught them to live with people of customs often quite strange, and for them, an Odeous was not so very different from a citizen of Cipanghu.

On the ship, life went on afterwards with its accustomed routines. Djaffar passed most of his time watching to be sure the ship was behaving itself, kept taking notes and consulting the microparchment images, transparent as glass, which could be enlarged on a special screen. He even consented to give several cursory explanations to Garin, who was now capable of understanding these grimoires. When Djaffar went to his couch, he dreamed for long hours with his eyes wide open. Then he saw again the countryside of Alexandretta, his distant homeland, its blue sky, its long pebbled beaches, its dunes simmering with haze, its gardens of palms and

gnarled, centuries-old olive trees, the multicolor clumps of fig trees and pomegranates, the groves of aromatic gums.

He never missed his hour for prayer, for turning toward the pale and vanishing star where lay the tomb of the Prophet. This in no way prevented him from joining in the offices which the Templar recited faithfully each morning. The Turcopole seemed to have constructed a religion all his own, in which he mixed in perfect harmony the teachings of Islam and of Christianity.

Houen-Lun, now, lived apart from everyone.

Sometimes he exchanged rare words with Marco Polo or Djaffar, and spent the rest of his time in strange positions, his limbs bizarrely contorted, his spirit stretched out to seize upon the faint murmurings which he alone perceived, coming out of the infinity of space.

Once Garin, intrigued by this apparent indifference to the outside world, dared ask him what he was doing.

"Making progress," replied the monk.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm learning not to be troubled with human emotions."

"Is that all?" the Templar pursued, a little taken aback.

"No, I'm also losing the sense of my body and the perceptions that disturb it."

"But how do you do that?"

"I forget it by not moving it. I've stripped off my body, rejected the form of my intellect, driven off every preconception. So I can live in harmony with the universe and be one with it."

Garin went no further. Apparently the Tibetan through his long asceticism and draconian disciplines of physical control, had arrived at a mode of existence different from that of other human beings. The Templar would have liked to try it, but Houen-Lun seemed too far advanced in his practices to bother himself with a disciple. Besides, Marco Polo had warned him: the fate of the expedition rested on Houen-Lun. The first contact with the aliens would be decisive.

The ship thus stayed to its course for interminable days. Without the magical clepsydry aboard, they would have all been incapable of realizing the passage of day and night.

Now the Tholon brothers had accustomed themselves to their disguise, they had learned to anoint their faces and hands with a rainbow ointment the shades of which changed

subtly in a cyclic rhythm. Thanks to a salve also concocted by Djaffar, they could bear the presence of the lenses in their eyes without any irritation.

The Venetian spared them no compliments. According to his plans, the Tholon brothers would serve as his escort if perchance they had occasion to leave the ship. Djaffar could not leave the vessel, for he must defend it from all unexpected intrusion, and as for the Tibetan, he preferred to be alone, ready to probe minds, rather than mix himself in a crowd.

Now Baphom was clearly visible. The star appeared on the screens like a little red sphere. And so far its demoniac inhabitants had not manifested themselves.

But one day, when Djaffar was at his ritual of prayer, the Tibetan came out of his priestly immobility.

Without showing the least emotion, he said simply: "My spirit is in contact with strangers aboard a ship like ours. . . ."

Then he fell back into his habitual silence, while his companions scanned the screens in vain and Joubert feverishly worked over his several instruments.

A few instants later, Houen-Lun declared: "There are several Odeous traders. Four, in all. You're going to locate their ship in a moment. Brother Joubert, you'll send a distress signal, requesting their escort to the nearest spaceport. At the moment their minds are conditioned to this. They won't be amazed at anything."

While the passengers quickly put on their disguises, Joubert was still examining his detectors. Finally a tiny bright point appeared on a luminous plate. Almost simultaneously a message echoed through the ship, asking its identification.

The Templar was long prepared for such a meeting. He activated a tape which sent back a recording furnishing the requisite information.

Almost at once the communications officer asked for precise information on the breakdown which was afflicting their ship. Joubert nervously turned to Houen-Lun. The Tibetan went to the transmitter and snapped off several phrases which seemed to satisfy their questioner completely, for a few minutes later a metal sphere stopped several cables distant from the ship occupied by the Terrans.

"Brother Garin, and you, Guiot, get into your suits," the

Tibetan said then. "You're going to pay a visit to these strangers so that you can pick up some metal jars containing air, which is what they think is the matter with us. Take these here and have the Odeous examine this object. That will impress on their minds what they must know."

So saying, the lama handed Garin a bronze cylinder on which were strange, twisting ideograms. The Templar took it in his fingertips, studied it distrustfully, a brief glance which served to awaken in him curious hallucinations. A choir of crystalline voices repeated a monotone and ceaseless litany. He turned his eyes away and the noise ceased. Garin put the malefic object into a leather bag, then the Templar and his brother placed the magical networks onto their heads, which gave them a violent headache, but a swallow of syrup eased that quickly. Joubert and Clement then helped their friends get into their cumbersome suits. Finally the two envoys entered the airlock and manipulated the wheel on the hatchway. A few seconds later they found themselves outside. It was a breathtaking experience to find themselves so isolated between the two vessels in the face of starry infinity. The Terrans underwent a brief moment of panic.

But they quickly recovered their wits. The two ships were close, and the crossing was easy. They maneuvered themselves carefully with little rockets which let off tiny jets of air. Little by little they approached the lock of the second ship, and when they had grappled to it their anxiety much eased. Now it only remained to learn what manner of welcome was awaiting them.

The opening of the lock posed no problem, and when they had gotten the second hatch to work, they found themselves in the presence of the occupants of the other ship.

The network had conditioned them and they should not have felt any surprise, but the reality far surpassed the images their minds had received.

The two couples who regarded them with those immense eyes, eyes imprinted with a poignant sorrow, were of a breathtaking beauty. The graceful bodies of the two women, tightly fitted with translucent suits, were of rare perfection. And when the Odeous spoke to them in a musical voice, Garin and Guiot were mute, struck dumb with admiration.

Happily, their friends, thinking that they were suffering from oxygen deprivation in their ship, made haste to open the

visors of their helmets, asking with infinite tenderness: "Do you feel better now?"

"Thank you," Garin sighed. "Our strength is returning." And his brother was casting avid eyes on the two alien women, marking small pointed breasts under the bronze tunics, slender legs, impudent mouths, red as fruits, saying to himself that if all the Odeous women were so wondrously lovely, his mission was going to be ridiculously pleasant.

"What happened?" asked one of the athletically built Adonises.

"Our air tanks were filled wrong," said the Templar. "So we were trying to reach the nearest base, but, without you, I don't know if we would have gotten there."

"The Ethirs who tend the ships are getting more and more careless," one of the women agreed. "We've had some problems too. A food synthesizer broke down, that's why we've had to cut our voyage short. What was your destination?"

"Orph," Garin said. "Our friends are impatiently waiting for our return. We're going to reboard. . . . Do you want us to come back and bring you some food?"

"No. Our backup synthesizer is working, thank you. We've prepared four cylinders for use. Will they be enough?"

"More than enough. The base isn't very far."

"Two hours of flight time, about. You can just follow us; we'll advise the satellite authorities that we're coming in. But I'm uncommonly rude. I forgot to introduce myself. I'm called Ildes, and my companion is Ilea; and he is Wrer and she Wwera."

"Heaven save you," Guiot wished them, quite naturally using the formula ordinary in such occasion. "As for me, I'm Guioult and my friend is Garoun."

"Have you been long captives?"

"Alas, I was quite young when the Baphomets imprisoned me on this cursed ship," Guiot lied boldly. "How can I thank you?"

"Isn't it natural that companions in misfortune should help one another?" Wrer sighed, sadly smiling. "Death alone will bring us deliverance. Forgive us for prolonging your ordeal."

"I've brought you a gift," Garin said then, bringing out the cylinder Joubert had sent. "Quite a small thing, but this object will help you bear the long hours of captivity."

"Thank you from the bottom of our hearts!" Wwera ex-

claimed. "How marvelous. Just looking at it makes me already forget the monotony of my poor existence. Here are your tanks. We're going to help you fix them on your back."

The two Terrans then reclosed their visors and let themselves be harnessed up, bending under the weight. Then they worked their way back into the locks while their hosts made the hand sign for good-bye.

The return crossing was a little more difficult. Because of their burden, the projectors were less effective, but once they were launched everything went well.

Stopping was a little delicate and Guiot had to deaden the shock with his hands as he came in, but the contact was not too brutal.

The four Terrans found themselves a few moments later in the living quarters of their ship.

"Everything went all right?" Marco Polo asked anxiously, the moment his envoys had taken their helmets off.

"No problem," Garin assured him. "The Odeous are charming folk who are very willing to help their neighbor."

"Ah, yes, and their women have no equal," Guiot exclaimed lyrically. "My word, I've never seen such girls. . . ."

Marco Polo gave them a bewildered look. He was apparently expecting a different kind of report. But Joubert put the tanks in the place reserved for them. To render his story believable he had emptied the main reservoir of its contents.

"Good. Now we just have to board one of the space castles built by the Baphomets to protect their planet. What did the Odeous tell you in that matter?"

"Just that they would show us the way and announce our arrival," Garin answered.

"Perfect," the Venetian replied, rubbing his hands. "So the garrison won't suspect us at all. Let's hope it isn't too well manned and that our friend Houen-Lun can control their minds without difficulty."

"The prospect looks good," said the Tibetan, lapsing from his silence. "My talismans have completely dominated the crew of this ship. They've just destroyed the cylinder according to my orders, leaving no trace of it. As for the garrison they call satellite 289, it comprises about ten Odeous. I shouldn't meet any difficulty getting them to swallow our story."

"So much the better," Marco Polo rejoiced. "Let's follow our guides. They're going to our next destination."

After a short journey during which the Terrans watched neighboring space very attentively, the satellite they had been told of stood out against the inky sky.

Strange castle in truth, this glittering torus bristled with vanes—antennae, in the Odeous tongue—which turned slowly in space. About its circumference, several platforms had been set up to receive and refit the ships from space. All, luckily, were empty.

Joubert replied to a message demanding the ship's identification, and then the voice of the communications officer invited them to dock at berth four.

The learned alchemist programmed the autopilot for that maneuver and the ship grounded itself on the shining surface without so much as a shudder.

At once two dish-ended arms came to lock it in, and a supple tube adjusted itself over the outer hatch of the airlock.

For the first time since their departure, the Terrans found themselves in enemy territory. Marco Polo looked anxiously at the Tibetan to assure himself that all was going as it ought, but Houen-Lu stayed quiet, fixed in his priestly posture, his eyes glazed in mystic contemplation.

The inner lock opened then with a dry click; the passengers felt a slight pain in their ears while a light fresh breeze swept pleasantly through the living quarters, chasing away the stench which had accumulated there.

"Let's go," Marco Polo ordered in the alien language, and they went out through the brilliantly lighted tunnel.

His companions, save for Houen-Lun, followed him with a hesitant step at first, then with more and more confidence.

The Terrans, taking the ramp provided for that purpose, reached the passage which ran around the satellite. There was in effect an artificial gravity nearly equal to that of the Earth, so they walked without difficulty up to the section where the crew of the other ship was waiting for them, along with about fifty other Odeous.

With a signal, they bade them sit down. "Wrer," one said, "told me that you had trouble with the ventilation system."

"That's right," Garin said shortly. "The Ethir are getting more and more careless."

"Alas, they are slaves as we are. Their life is a long wait on

death. But I found no trace of your outward voyage. Where are you coming in from?"

"We left from Baphom by the nadir lanes," Joubert explained, "with Orph for our destination. Happily, we had gone through a routine check which saved us from asphyxiation."

"But a very painless way of getting from life to death," the officer murmured. "So. . . . Since you seem to cling to life, we're going to fill your reservoirs. That will take awhile. You can go then and finish your mission, unless you'd prefer to go back to Baphom for a general refitting."

"What matter?" Garin said laconically.

"Of course, it doesn't help you," the Odeous agreed with a look of understanding. "Yet, I have here a cargo jettisoned by a ship in trouble, and you could take advantage of that to get back to Baphom. It's a matter of supplies coming from Lyzog, a newly discovered planet, drugs for which our masters are so eager and a few instruments of undetermined use."

The Templar thought but an instant. He had in his hands an unexpected chance to introduce himself into the enemy fortress, and Houen-Lun would surely find a way to get interesting information out of their enemies.

"All right, Baphom," he growled. "There is as good as anywhere."

"You want help to load this cargo?"

"No. We'll do it alone. It's our business."

"Very well. Wrer will show you the way."

The Terrans rose then and followed their guide along the passages. He, luckily, did not seem at all talkative.

He brought the pseudo-Odeous to a room where about ten small cases were stored, then, considering his mission accomplished, withdrew to rejoin his companions.

Garin and Guiot gathered up the cargo without difficulty, using a small cart. Apparently the muscular strength of humans was superior to that of the Odeous. Then they set the machine rolling over the ground, which was covered with an amazing carpet, soft as velvet, with no seam; and they all regained the lock. In two trips the cargo was loaded.

There remained the business of taking their leave. The Terrans went back to the room where the guardian of the castle

was always to be found, and Garin announced simply: "Finished. Can we go?"

The technician cast a glance over the various dials. "The pressure in your reservoirs is normal," he replied. "You can put out." He consulted several forms. "Ah! I've found a record of your ship. The microfilms regarding you were lost. You are indeed Guioult and Garoun?"

"That's right," the Templar agreed.

"Sign these releases," murmured the Odeous, handing them a transparent rectangle and a stylus.

The Terrans did so, wondering all the while if their initials might not arouse the supervisor's suspicions.

Apparently the education they had received was perfect. The supervisor glanced rapidly over the documents. "Everything in order," he said. "May death free you soon."

"Wish you the same," the comrades said in unison, walking out without asking further questions.

They were all sweating liberally and feared their makeup might run.

On the return walk they met Wrera, who gave them the sign for farewell, but she spoke not a word to them. Guiot turned back to look at the graceful silhouette, but his brother dragged him along rapidly. The moment seemed ill chosen to be counting the flowers.

Once aboard, Marco Polo and Joubert closed the lock and the alchemist proceeded to the routine operations of undocking. The ship took off then, headed for Baphom.

"Well," said Houen-Lun, "did everything go all right?"

"Absolutely. You had the guard officer's mind in perfect control. They even trusted us with a cargo for Baphom. We're properly listed on their parchments."

"And what is this cargo?" asked Marco Polo.

"Drugs the Baphomets use," Garin replied, "and a variety of instruments from Lyzog, a planet recently discovered."

"Joubert will examine them. Perhaps he'll find some interesting information."

"The minds of these poor folk have already given me an abundant harvest," the Tibetan interjected softly. "These satellites, like formidable barbicans, defend the access to Baphom. Nothing can reach this planet without being found out at once by sensitive detectors. What is more, the space forts are covered with demoniac weapons. They can vomit

hellfires capable of melting the thickest hulls, and swift rockets equipped with thunderballs far more powerful than ours."

"And if we snatch one of these cursed weapons to make copies?" the Venetian suggested.

"I thought seriously about that," replied Houen-Lun. "Alas, we wouldn't know how to use them and those ogreish fellows who guard the fort don't know the secrets of their manufacture. We'll have to try to capture a Baphomet versed in these arcane magics, unless I can read into the soul of one of their scholars. Once on Baphom, it will be an easy matter. . . . But I still gathered some interesting data on our adversaries. These miscreants are unbridled libertines who seek pleasure above all else. Drugs, talismans which stimulate the senses, lascivious music, everything of that sort they enjoy. These androgynes copulate and fornicate without letup. Luckily they aren't fertile except at infrequent seasons, so their race is not numerous. Their perversion will surely be a precious help to us. Being of extreme sensitivity, they fear all pain. Being devastated by the least discomfort, these cowards seek tranquility by recourse to all sorts of calming drugs. Moreover, if the drugs should prove ineffectual, they'd not hesitate to suicide, preferring death to suffering. Ceaselessly they explore new planets to gain new pleasures to sate that inexhaustible thirst for pleasure. . . ."

To the vast disappointment of his companions, the Tibetan fell silent again and plunged back into his meditative state.

Marco Polo, Joubert, Garin and Djaffar entered long discussion of this intriguing information.

Clement and Guiot had better things to occupy them. Seated apart from the others, they discussed in low voices the exotic charms of the fascinating Wrera. The two of them would have gladly stayed some time on the satellite to make a more intimate acquaintance with her.

Chapter IV



While the ship headed toward Baphom, Marco Polo, Joubert and Djaffar hastened about in the process of a minute inventory of the cargo.

They carefully deciphered the grimoires which gave the use of the strange elixirs, the odoriferous unguents, the multicolor powders. All of them were supposed to give the Baphomets paradisiacal visions, marvelous dreams, subtle pleasures.

Certain of these drugs must be burned in incense burners, others swallowed in little cups containing a dose which must never be exceeded under pain of severe intoxication, and still others were meant to be consumed in long, curiously curved pipes.

In certain boxes were unknown pieces of apparatus which drew the attention of the alchemist and the learned Templar. Most acted directly on the nervous system, increasing sensory perception, transforming the least music into a celestial symphony, or the foulest broth into refined nourishment.

That gave Joubert an idea. "Why not," he suggested, "take advantage of these filthy Baphomets' inexhaustible thirst for pleasure? The Baphomets aren't familiar with these machines yet, since this cargo is coming from a recently annexed planet. With the help of Djaffar and Houen-Lun, I might make bold to arrange a talisman which will plunge these vile beings into such an ecstasy. . . ."

"But to what purpose?" Garin wondered. "How will that lessen the power of the Baphomets?"

"I shall explain. If the virtues of our talisman can far surpass those of these Lyzogan machines, the principal dignitaries are going to want to get one."

"Of course, but how does that profit us?"

"Suppose that we add to it a second effect, a delayed effect which will activate at our command. For example, an atrocious sensation of pain. We could then put our adversaries beyond harming anyone, at the moment we choose."

"That's not at all a knightly method," Garin muttered. "Until now we've always fought our enemies honorably. Our Grand Master would never condone the use of such vile tricks."

"What scruples, my friend! This demoniac race has never hesitated to enslave peaceful people, and it desires to reduce our compatriots to slavery, don't forget that. The Odeous undergo such moral tortures that they hope only to die, to put an end to a hopeless existence. So why have scruples in fighting the Baphomets by taking advantage of their vices?"

"Joubert is right," Marco Polo broke in. "I don't see how the tactic would be more damnable than the use of the thunderballs which themselves risk killing innocent slaves. In all probability, when we fight the Baphomet ships in space they'll not be guided by those vile cowards, but much more likely by the poor Odeous, incapable of disobeying their despotic masters. So this solution offers then an immense advantage of getting at the ones really to blame. It only remains to know if the adjustment of such apparatus won't present insurmountable difficulties."

Houen-Lun came out of his trance. "Once for all, I can assure you that we lamas can control pain at will, as well as the rhythm of our breathing, the beating of our hearts. To do that one has only to educate the mind to let it command the bodily organs. Certainly the Baphomet mind is different from ours, but we have sufficient knowledge of it to try to make the project work."

"Yes," said the learned Joubert. "We've studied the minute waves emitted by our brain by means of magic boxes in which there are woven threads as thin as spiderweb, fashioned after the documents aboard the ships which came to Earth. On a magic window, Djaffar and I could see the materialization of three sorts of waves, one corresponding to sleep, one to conscious activity and the third to meditative thought, prayer for example. The last lets us command the organs of our body, and our Tibetan friend has gained an extraordinary mastery of it. So we know how to act on the

Baphomets' sensations, and therefore these demoniac machines can be turned on their own thoughts."

"In my opinion," Djaffar remarked, who had remained silent thus far, "we have to use Tibetan methods as much as possible so as not to risk having our secret discovered—should the Baphomets be moved by these unfamiliar contrivances to start an investigation. The mechanism which reverses their action, in particular, must be commanded by human thought, and not by techniques known to our enemies."

"That's possible," Houen-Lun agreed. "But we may run into trouble if our devices are put in places inaccessible to my thought waves—underground, for example, or even in the middle of a metal fortress."

"Doubtless," muttered Joubert, "we won't reach perfection on the first try. At least nothing is stopping us from trying."

Everyone agreed with the Templar and he set to work, aided by Djaffar.

Both of them occasionally asked Houen-Lun his opinion, and he briefly interrupted his meditation to give them advice.

So the voyage seemed very short to the learned Terrans. After having worked out this Machiavellian plan, they helped Houen-Lun create the marvelous device which would subjugate their enemies.

Prudent addition to their plan, Marco Polo had decided to use one of the trinkets they found in the cargo and modify it, retaining its original shape, so the object seemed to come from the planet Lyzog, and would arouse no suspicions.

This solution offered the advantage that they might introduce a new twist, intercepting ships of Lyzog origin and adding to their cargo a few utensils adjusted by brother Joubert.

Clement and Guiot had acquired some gifts of science during the recent weeks, but these esoteric discussions were still clearly beyond their comprehension.

Houen-Lun had them undergo several seances of hypnosis, and the two brothers then found themselves able to fill in for Joubert at the controls of the ship. Their role was limited otherwise to watching the sighting apparatus and the luminous serpents which twisted across the screens, to give the alert if they took on certain configurations.

Whatever else, they showed themselves enormously proud

of their promotion and accomplished this new duty with the greatest seriousness.

While Djaffar and Joubert were proceeding with their delicate experiments, Marco Polo was studying the best means to get this malefic talisman accepted among the highest Baphomet dignitaries. Would it not provoke their mistrust if they attempted to sell it? After all, the plunder came from an enslaved planet. . . . It would be more likely to offer it without compensation. But according to Houen-Lun, the despotic Baphomets respected their new subjects' commercial practices. The best course then would be to pass himself off as a merchant anxious to improve his standing by bringing the most precious Lyzogian merchandise, while getting some reward out of it. . . . That would not quite match the observations of the occupants of the satellite, but the Tibetan could remodel their memories when they came back. The more the Venetian thought on the matter, the more he was seduced by this project. It only remained to take on the appearance of a Lyzogian. That did not present any insurmountable difficulty. These aliens had a look near that of Terrans, close except that their skin was olive green. The disguise would be easy. Whatever the risk, the stakes were worth playing for. The Venetian rogue then shared his project with his companions. Joubert, always full of good sense, advised him to declare that the apparatus would only work for a year. Then it must be recharged by Lyzogian specialists. Marco Polo was only a modest merchant and would pretend to be ignorant of the secrets of this delicate technique. So he would have the opportunity to leave on a mission, first to go find other such instruments, then to put the first ones back into working order.

The folk of Lyzog were apt to blow the lid off it, of course, but they had to hope that William of Beaujeu would hasten his offensive rapidly, so that the Baphomets would have other matters to occupy them.

Garin still raised a timid objection: could Christians act on the souls of other creatures, perverted ones to be sure, but created by God?

Joubert swept his scruples aside. The Pope had not settled the question and nothing proved that the Baphomets ever had been endowed with an immortal soul. Besides, it was no time for waffling. The ship was reaching its destination.

A little later, the heralds of Baphom made contact with the

arriving ship. Joubert gave the requisite information and sat down at the controls.

Thank God! The satellite had announced the arrival of the ship with a cargo coming from Lyzog, and the vessel was authorized to land at once. Then it was taken over by long-distance commands and began its descent toward Baphom. The scarlet sphere grew in their sight. The Terrans put a last touch on their makeup, all of them looking like Odeous except Marco Polo, Guiot and Clement, who were disguised as Lyzogans.

The Venetian had judged that it was appropriate for his person to be escorted by servants who would serve as his bodyguards. Besides, the ships' crews seemed usually to have four persons: the crew would thus be reduced to the normal figure.

The vessel did a long spiral orbit to the level of the atmosphere, then plunged toward the surface, passing through red clouds which, under the rays of the scarlet sun, gave the planet its fiery look.

Soon the surface of the earth became visible.

Its aspect was astonishingly like that of Earth: continents covered with luxurious vegetation, snow-crowned mountains, oceans, lakes, rivers, vast deserts. In sum, without the ruddy tint over the whole, the passengers of the ship would have believed they were coming home.

As they descended, details sharpened. They spied other ships leaving a vapor trail behind them, and then cities took form.

This time the Terrans fully realized that they were very far from their homeworld. The houses reached an incredible height, thrusting toward the sky until some of them brushed the clouds. These immense towers were walled rather like the walls of a medieval city, but not walls of stone. A moiré veil of light played between them, closing together into a dome over the city to form a glittering vault.

The sites designated for ship landings were outside this luminous dome; each site was provided with a pylon crowned by countless dishes, which the Terrans knew now to be antennae for scanning and communication.

The ship, in an impeccable parabola, came to rest quite gently on a semispherical cradle.

When that was in place, the whole contraption started to

move and the vessel stopped near several other ships, sitting near a dome provided with long appendages.

One of them came to place itself over the lock, repeating the operation done on the satellite, and the hatch opened on a long, brilliantly lit passage.

"My friends, let's not keep our hosts waiting!" Marco Polo exclaimed in the Odeous language. "Stay on your guard constantly. Houen-Lun is going to stay on board alone. I don't think he'll have problems with the crew that will come to refit the ship. He'll keep in contact with us and advise us of his location so we can rejoin him if the need arises. Don't forget that you're slaves, and that I'm only a merchant. Scrupulously obey the orders given you. If you are at a loss, Houen-Lun will help you. I'm taking our apparatus with me to present it in person to the Baphomets. May the Lord aid you and His Holy Mother guard you."

On these words, the Venetian went bravely into the long tube followed by his friends, who, to tell the truth, did not go with enthusiasm. . . .

Apparently the masters of this planet did not suspect their visitors in the least. They had no men-at-arms in view at all.

The little group thus reached a room where an Odeous slave was waiting on them.

Joubert, who was reckoned as the captain of the ship, handed him one of the tiny parchments given him on the satellite. The officer examined the document in a scanner and with a weary gesture gave them a sign to pass on.

Marco Polo obeyed and calmly opened the door before him. A curious vehicle formed of little carts attached one behind the other was drawn up along the dock. They all took their places on the seats, and the whole machine rolled at once on a hissing air cushion, to plunge into a tunnel lit by luminous plaques in the walls.

The cars, following a pronounced slope, plunged deep underground. The convoy thus made a long passage at great speed. The wind whipped the faces of the passengers, who sat plastered against their upholstered cushions.

Finally after a spectacular climb up again, the machine stopped at the end of the line. There, guards outfitted in metal armor ranged themselves on one side and the other of the guests, and escorted them through several corridors.

Marco Polo and his companions quickly ascertained that

they were dealing with automatons and not with living beings.

They arrived finally in an austere room where sat a Odeous and an Ethir, the first representative of that race the Terrans had met.

The birdman looked them up and down a moment in curiosity. "Well," he exclaimed, "the folk of satellite 289 were right. You have been roughly handled. You are hardly recognizable. No question, under the circumstances, of trusting you with another mission. I'm going to advise the personnel center to put you on rest and recuperation until further orders. But who are these three strangers?"

Joubert stepped forward a pace. "We were given the mission," he said in a dull voice, "of contacting the natives of the planet Lyzog, recently discovered. We took on a cargo and brought back three native specimens. One is a trader who desires peaceful commerce with our masters. He calls himself Polo; his companions are Garoun and Clem."

"Surely, noble stranger," Marco Polo agreed, expressing himself unasked, and in a strong accent. "Our friend says aright. I hear tell that their lordships the Baphomets are eager for new toys, amulets, talismans and drugs which refine the pleasure of the senses. So I made it my duty to bring my most precious samples to acquaint them with the use of them."

The Ethir with broken wings gave him a curious look, as if he could not believe that a being in possession of good sense could deliver himself voluntarily to their tormentors, but he limited himself to piping: "You are well informed. The powerful Baphomets do adore this sort of novelty. One of them will receive you soon."

So saying, he pointed out a chair, while the robots surrounded the rest of the crew to take them to the Odeous barracks, where they could wait for their next assignment.

"Many thanks for your help!" Marco Polo called. Then, turning to Joubert he added: "Thanks for the excellent voyage, captain. I'll see you again, perhaps on my next voyage."

Joubert gave no answer. He followed his guides with the downcast air which suited an Odeous.

The Venetian and his two companions then found themselves alone with the slaves, who regarded them with a

puzzled air, leafing through several dossiers to cover their confusion.

The ambiance of the Baphomet residence was vastly different from that of Terran castles. The smooth walls bore no ornament, not the least picture or tapestry. The costumes themselves presented a drab uniformity. The most humanlike were, paradoxically, the automatons of metal armor who, from a distance, might have passed as knights.

Gloom and sadness reigned here. The slaves did their duty without sloth, but without enthusiasm. Yet the scribes showed a certain compassion regarding these strangers who would soon be slaves like themselves and who seemed not at all to suspect the fate which awaited them.

A luminous signal lighted on a table and put an end to the Odeous' reflections. The door had just opened and two robots were waiting.

"Our lords the Baphomets are disposed to receive you," said one of the slaves. "Follow these guides. They will take you to their apartments."

"Many thanks for your courtesy," Marco Polo exclaimed. "Can I allow myself to offer you a little souvenir of our meeting?"

So saying, he held out one of the numerous amulets which Houen-Lun had sent with him.

The Odeous contemplated it in astonishment. Such an attitude was certainly not usual in these places. But the object pleased him. It gave off a disturbing harmony which seduced him, and he gave a faint smile. "I accept this gift," he said, "with great pleasure, stranger, and here's some advice in exchange: our Baphomet masters do not put up with much contradiction. Do what they ask you and don't expect to discuss it."

Marco Polo bowed in thanks and, followed by the Tholon brothers, trod in the footsteps of the two priestlike creatures who waited his pleasure.

This time the Terrans were invited to take an elevator, an apparatus strange to them, and when they got out at the top of one of the gigantic towers, they found themselves facing a decor quite different from that of the subterranean halls reserved for slaves.

Marco Polo had admired countless palaces in the course of his earthly wanderings, but never had he contemplated such a

mass of riches. The palace of the caliph of Baghdad itself, reputed for its treasures, could not be compared to this unheard-of treasure-trove, this veritable galactic Eldorado.

The antechamber opened on a vast salon full of marvels: furniture wrought by the most skilled artisans in the rarest materials, unknown jewels casting a thousand fires, living pictures wherein the colors mixed ceaselessly in a harmony always new; multicolored lights; graceful moving sculptures changing shape at the whim of breezes; statues of perfect realism where the fleshly hue of the skin made one believe them somehow alive; shapeless forms the sight of which plunged the viewer into ineffable bliss, and delicate curios of sometimes inelegant aspect, which could capture and magnify the senses to transport one into a paradisiacal universe peopled by visions and matchless sensations.

The Tholon brothers stared, mouths agape, at this incalculable wealth, not knowing where to look next. Marco Polo did not let himself be overwhelmed by this opulence. He wondered simply if the talisman adjusted by Joubert and Houen-Lun would meet with any chance of success competing with all these objects, these fruits of a science far in advance of the Terrans'.

The visitors' surprise increased still more when they were let into the salon, after having undergone a detection scan apparently meant to reveal any hidden weapons.

Before them, clad only in a diaphanous tunic with metallic highlights, a Baphomet softly lounged on immaterial moiré spirals, contemplating Odeous dancers, who were performing a lascivious ballet to the sound of ethereal music.

Within reach of his clawed hands, a cylinder starred with precious stones (a weapon surely), and a platter filled with unknown substances, dainties the monstrous creature crunched nonchalantly.

Marco Polo and his two companions remained standing a long moment, before the Baphomet lord deigned to perceive their presence.

Finally the ballet drew to its close and the dancers eclipsed themselves behind a gold curtain, leaped with unequaled grace which somewhat turned the Tholon brothers' heads.

The perverse being then turned his head, looking disdainfully on the strangers who had come, staring at them with lively eyes as if he were sounding the very depths of their

souls. Finally he belched loudly and croaked: "So you are the natives of Lyzog, the newly found planet. To judge by your hideous appearance and your stupid faces, there's not much to expect from you. But you claim that your artisans made remarkable devices that enchant the senses. I have a few minutes. Show me your knowledge."

Marco Polo, nothing daunted, declaimed with the volubility of a brave trader determined to have his merchandise well esteemed. "Noble lord, your subtle wit surely knows that one should never trust appearances. A doltish looking fellow can make objects of utmost delicacy, and a stupid looking one can turn out to be unbeatable in the most esoteric games. It happens that we Lyzogans have some talent in engineering mechanisms which can charm the senses."

"Your chatter is wearying me. Get to the point."

"Most puissant lordship, here then is the quintessence of our art: the treasure, fruit of interminable research and worked out by our most clever specialists. No one of its users has ever been disappointed and, moreover, it has no danger in it, not the least addiction."

"That remains to be seen," growled the Baphomet, and seized the bronze cone on the velvet cushion which the kneeling Venetian offered him.

For a few moments the alien remained silent, contemplating that object at all its seams. Then two knight-robots made their appearance, bringing a Baphomet whose arms and legs were confined in thin chain.

"Have this marvel tested on the condemned prisoner," the master of these places ordered. "He has nothing more to lose. So far as you're concerned, you can pray your gods, if you have any, that you were telling the truth."

"Heaven forfend," the Venetian protested, "that I would have wished to offer some trap to a representative of so powerful and respectable a race. This instrument is very easy to operate; just fit it on the crown of the head with this lacing. Then the user finds himself transported into a fairy world where there's nothing but beauty and total sensory pleasure."

So saying, Marco Polo placed the cone between the prisoner's horns. At once the fellow changed his manner, which had been up to that point tense and anxious. Now his features reflected ineffable bliss; his eyes, plunged into nowhere, appeared to contemplate visions of paradise. All an-

quish, all fear had fled him. He wagged his head gently as if he heard a symphony of rare perfection.

That lasted for long minutes, and as the prisoner did not seem at all incommoded by the experiment, the first Baphomet growled eagerly: "Take that apparatus off him and give it to me."

Marco Polo obeyed. "You have been able to tell," he said, resuming with some energy, "noble lord, the complete harmlessness of this precious houbit. You can use it without the least danger for hours, during which It brings to a quintessence all sensation: the sensory pleasures, with it, become incomparable joys. It increases too the joys of music, and those which go with the good life. But it is perhaps in the amorous pursuits where its action is most perfect. The most expert houri will never bring you such full. . . ."

"Are you going to shut up, cursed chatterer?" the Baphomet growled, snatched the object from the Venetian's hands and placed it feverishly on his head. "Your verbiage annoys me and I wonder what restrains me. . . ."

A blissful smile suddenly appeared on the hideous creature's thin lips. He heaved a groan of satisfied ecstasy and sprawled lasciviously on the couch.

The guards had taken the prisoner away and the Baphomet was alone with the supposed Lyzogans.

Marco Polo gave a sigh of relief. Evidently the talisman had worked perfectly. It remained to persuade the masters of this planet to let him leave again.

For interminable minutes, the alien stayed thus, eyes half shut, in the most total euphoria. A few dancers, curious, had put their noses out behind the curtain and were amazed to see their despotic sovereign so at ease.

Apparently, invisible observers also had some suspicions, for a strident alarm echoed out. Six guards in metal armor came rushing into the room, waving short weapons like that within arm's reach of the Baphomet.

This sudden interruption drew the pleasure-seeker out of his nirvana. He took off the device. "Out!" he screamed. "Stupid robots, I didn't call you! Who's the cretin who gave you the alert? Who sent you in here? I wanted to be left alone with these fine Lyzogans. I have to have a serious talk with them. Cut off those cameras at once. What I have to say is no one's business."

The guards vanished as suddenly as they had come and the delicate, frightened dancers vanished again behind the drape.

The Baphomet rose then, studying the marvelous cone from all sides, then, ignoring the Tholon brothers, took Marco Polo by the arm like an old friend and drew him into the corner of the room.

Some downy chairs and a marble table materialized before them and the door of a credenza opened, revealing appetizing food which surrounded flagons filled with various liquors.

"Sit down, my friend," croaked the Baphomet, signaling his guest to be seated. "Chose what pleases you and serve yourself."

The Venetian served himself moderately, while his host declared with a blissful smile: "Faith, I thought for a moment that you meant to fool me with fancy words. The impostors who've tried to slip us drugs or apparatus claiming incomparable qualities are . . . legion. But regarding you, I recognized that you were telling the truth. This houbit, as you call it, is a true marvel. I could have stayed for hours under its control, and feel no weariness; to the contrary. Have you more of them?"

"Alas, no, noble lord. That's the only sample in my possession. But that's of no matter. If it pleases your Magnificences, I can get a quantity from my planet."

"You don't know how to make them here?"

"I'm only a poor merchant, Light of the Universe, and only the most skilled artisans of Lyzog can make these marvelous devices."

"Pity. I would have given you a laboratory with all that you might have asked to make one. It's so long since I've felt such pleasure, and I would gladly have shared my plenty with my subjects. I am the master of this city, and in such cases as this, I have at my command vast authority and riches of which you have only the most feeble idea. . . . Let's be practical, what do you want in exchange for this little device?"

"Not much, in truth, Your Lordship. Quite simply the exclusive right to sell in the city and in the empire."

The Baphomet frowned somewhat. "So far as Tekaph goes, I gladly give you an exclusive license. But it's not in my power to give you an imperial *carte blanche*. With my influence, you can hope to obtain that monopoly. Of course, it

will require that you make gifts of several of these marvels to our emperor and me. . . ."

"May your Serenity be repaid for his kindness," replied the Venetian. "But I must advise your Mightiness that these hou-bits don't work but a single year; after this period, they have to be recharged by our specialists on Lyzog. To tell the truth, that would scarcely present any difficulties if regular relations were established between our planets."

"Relations for which you would probably have exclusive right?"

"Your Grace is getting ahead of my words. . . ."

"Well. I'm going to relay your desires to our Venerable Zolial. If he feels as I do about the use of this toy, no doubt he'll give you satisfaction. While you wait on his answer, you'll lodge in my palace. Go!"

Marco Polo and the Tholon brothers retired with much bowing and scraping. The Baphomet, without further ado, voluptuously replaced the cone on his head while two graceful Odeous slaves, robed as princes, timidly made their entrance.

Four metal creatures came to surround the Baphomet's guests as they departed the hall, guided them wordlessly toward the lift, which descended several floors and stopped at the door that opened onto apartments reserved for Lyzogans.

Without attaining the luxury of the apartment of the city's master, these rooms were still more sumptuous than those of the palace of Chang-Chu, and throughout equipped with an incredible number of refinements which delighted the Tholon brothers.

Foremost, they had eyes only for the six lovely Odeous who welcomed them, showing them about the place: three bedrooms with as many baths, a salon and a dining room.

Marco Polo let himself (without raising an eyebrow) be disrobed by two slaves, who replaced his clothing with a spidersilk tunic. They sat him down comfortably on a sofa, then knelt at his feet to await his pleasure.

The Tholon brothers had been treated in the same way and looked at the moment like two pashas.

"Tell me, lovely child," Marco Polo said then, stroking the nearest slave's long hair, "I'm a stranger to this planet and I'd like to be informed on the habits and customs of its inhabi-

tants. Can you get me some works dealing with the Baphomet nobles?"

The young woman rose, joined her hands in respect to him and took a box set on a pedestal, pressed on the reliefwork; and a square piece of furniture silently moved across the onyx floor, stopping in front of the Venetian.

A laquer panel slid back, revealing a screen and a keyboard with several buttons.

"You only have to push this green button for a detailed list to appear on the screen," the adorable creature explained in a musical voice. "Then you feed in the number of your choice and you'll receive all the information you want."

Marco Polo, eager to know the extent of the Baphomet empire, its history, its resources, performed the requisite operations without further waiting.

Images in three dimensions and in color materialized while the musical voice of an Ethir commented on the scenes as they appeared.

The Venetian stayed thus in contemplation for long hours in front of this magic mirror, unable to sate his thirst for knowledge.

When fatigue settled on him and he cut off this marvelous dispenser of wisdom, the Tholon brothers had been snoring for a long time, stretched on their downy couches. The Odeous, lying on quilts, were also plunged into profound sleep.

The pseudo Lyzogan let them rest. He ate a modest meal, contenting himself with the remnants of the gargantuan meal his companions had eaten, then let himself down into his bed with a satisfied smile. The results of his research already surpassed his expectations.

Chapter V



The sweet caress of a slender hand wakened the Venetian. His mind still fuzzy with sleep, he sought the sight of a window to know if it was daylight; not the least opening in the walls. Suddenly memory came back to him. Of course, since he was in the depths of the Baphomet palace.

But suddenly a terrifying thought sent him leaping out of his ethereal couch. During his sleep his two libertine squires must have committed considerable lecheries on the lovely Odéous. Surely those imbeciles would never have thought of their anatomical differences. Everything might be ruined.

In haste he pulled on his shirt, his breeches, his tunic, and flung himself into the dining room where the Tholon brothers were peacefully munching delicacies, stuffing themselves with many-colored jellies and beguilingly perfumed fruit juices.

"Did you sleep well, lord?" Clement asked courteously.

"Too well, I don't doubt. And you? Your companions didn't disappoint you at all?"

"Certainly not," Guiot replied with a beatific smile. "These poppets are delectable, sweet, sensual. . . ."

"They didn't make any disagreeable remarks?"

"Ah, no, we completely satisfied them, if that's what you're asking."

"Perfect. I'd prefer, however, that from now on, you don't give yourselves over to these romantic adventures; abstain. God will thank you for it."

"Well, now," protested Red Guiot. "It's not Lent, after all. . . ."

But the Venetian signed him to shut up. Two slaves made their entry carrying platters with shining vases. They poured the three men great cups of spice-smelling brown drink, then

retired, all blushing, with a conspiratorial wink directed at the Tholon brothers.

This copious breakfast done, the charming Odeous came to propose to the Baphomet's guests a massage and an anointing with aromatic oils after their bath, but Marco Polo refused them very shortly for all the disappointed looks of his companions.

All three of them then went then to the bath, a new luxury for them, and opened the taps full. A warm perfumed water flooded into the opaline tubs.

"Watch out; don't dive in there," the pseudo merchant warned them. "Our makeup could wash off. Let's just take advantage of this to make a few repairs." And so saying he drew a vial out of his pocket and all three of them repaired the night's damages.

Clement was busy fussing over his brother's face when he heard a light rustling. With a bound he leaped to the door and opened it wide. Behind it was one of the slaves, still bent over to look through the crack in the door. The Terran seized her by the arms, dragged her brutally into the steamy room.

"Little whore!" he growled. "You were spying on us."

"Aiii," the pretty child wailed, fighting and scratching like a crazed cat. "Let go of me, let me go, will you, you brute?"

"Let her go," the Venetian said. "Useless to hurt her. She's going to tell us very nicely what she was doing. Were you spying on us, gentle damoiselle?"

"Of course I was," the girl laughed, as if this question seemed to her the depth of stupidity.

"For the sake of the Baphomet lords, of course."

"Of course," the gentle creature laughed, and came to him and murmured in his ear. "Take me in your arms, you great simpleton. . . ."

So asked, the Venetian did so while the slave overwhelmed him with disturbing indelicacies, all the while hissing into his ear: "Listen, stupid! You don't realize it, but this palace is loaded with microphones. I'm going to pretend to fight; use that to give a hard kick at the head of the sphinx that decorates the side of the bath. . . ."

And she began to twist in every direction as if to escape the embrace of that great clod of a merchant.

Marco Polo had now understood the Odeous' cleverness.

He pretended to hold her clumsily, slipped, and with a blow of his heel, sent the appropriate image flying in pieces.

The slave immediately dropped her pretense, set herself in front of the three men. "Be constantly on your guard," she said quickly. "The Baphomets have placed devices to spy on you everywhere. Are you really Lyzogans?"

"Well," Marco Polo hesitated, "that seems evident to me. What do you expect we are?"

"I'm not too sure; and at any rate, I don't care. They only charged to warn you: the Baphomets are fearful tyrants who have but one desire, to enslave all the peoples of the galaxy. We don't know you Lyzogans at all, but if you have means to defend yourselves, fight to preserve your freedom before it's too late. Even if you have no hope of winning, fight to the last. Believe me, we Odeous have been through that frightful experience: death is preferable to slavery. Now let's go back into the apartments. You mustn't arouse their suspicion."

On these words, the graceful child fled, light as a doe. The three Terrans stared at one another. What must they think of this warning?

The Venetian in particular was asking himself anxious questions. Was it an insidious trap laid by the Baphomets? Was it possible that the slaves had set afoot a clandestine resistance movement?

He followed his two companions, leaving the bath, and started at the sight of two metal creatures which waited grimly silent in the salon.

"Our lords the Baphomets summon you to their apartments," one said. "Follow us, please."

The Terrans walked in their tracks, wondering if this visit had some connection with the events preceeding.

Their host's manner somewhat reassured them.

"Ah, here are our brave Lyzogans," exclaimed the Baphomet who had seen them the day before, smiling broadly. "Tell me your name, merchant. I forgot to ask you."

"Polo, at your service, noble lord."

"Well! my dear Polo, you seem to be born under an excellent star. I shared your coming with our emperor, the Venerable Zolial, and he has expressed the desire to make your acquaintance. Follow me. We must be punctual."

A lift then brought the three Terrans and their host up to a terrace where a flying machine waited on them. It looked like

a great bird with a hideous head, and its wings were only useless ornament. All of them took their places in it and the apparatus lifted at a dizzying speed, then slanted off toward the sun, which was still quite low on the horizon.

During the passage Marco Polo admired the layout of the city, more than he had been able to do on their arrival. Each tower was decorated with terraces, wondrous gardens, often linked together by footbridges adorned with flowering bushes.

The machine then flew over a smiling countryside of forests and luxurious vegetation. At last a crystal mountain sketched itself on the horizon.

"What splendor!" Polo exclaimed. "I have never seen the like on my planet."

"What do you expect, merchant? We are esthetes, sybarites, artists who adore beauty. It's natural that our emperor have a marvelous palace. This mount has been rebuilt piece by piece, from its origins on the planet of the Ethir. Those folk had no use for it, so we moved it here. It has the advantage of being incomparably resistant, and consequently, offering an excellent protection. The towers which top it are telescopic and they can, at need, retreat into the bosom of the mountain."

"Very useful precaution, when one fears attack," Marco Polo observed conspiratorially.

"Ah, it's practically a superfluous measure. We have nothing to fear here. Our squadrons are powerful, our satellites control neighboring space, and no one dares attack us. Quite to the contrary, we're ceaselessly increasing our domain. Soon a new planet will be added to our empire, I don't speak of yours. It goes without saying that we're going to have peaceful relations with a people who produce such useful artists."

"Thanks be paid you, noble lord," Polo chimed in. "My compatriots' only desire is to trade profitably with the mighty Baphomets."

"So, we understand each other very well, be sure of it. But here we are at our destination, and in a few minutes you're going to have the very rare honor of being presented to our emperor."

Now the machine had slanted for the summit of one of the adamantine towers and came to rest like an eagle in its aerie.

The four passengers climbed out and were led by a squad

of four robots into a little room where all of them had to submit to detection scan.

"Simple precaution," said the Baphomet. "See, I'm subjected to it too. Our Venerable Zolial never leaves anything to chance."

By now their clothing, the tiniest buttons, their shoes, the houbit itself were scrutized from all sides. Apparently everything looked harmless, for the visitors recovered their goods without any of them being the least damaged.

When each of them had put his clothing on again, a door opened on a lift and the Baphomet guided his companions to the secret place where his sovereign sat. This time they saw absolutely nothing of the maneuvers it underwent, for thick shadows enveloped them during the whole descent.

The opening of the hatch revealed a glittering scarlet light which somewhat blinded the Terrans. They recovered normal vision very quickly, and on leaving the machine saw a magnificent spectacle.

The entry hall had the height of a vast cavern with insubstantial walls, all chatoyant light whose colors fused, constantly making new forms, complex and rainbowed spirals. The ground itself appeared transparent, so much so that the Terrans no longer knew whether they were walking or flying. The lessening of gravity, which rendered their movements easier, contributed to this troubling impression.

Contrary to the Terrans' expectation, no eager courtesan attended the pleasure of the sovereign. A few Odeous slaves slipped furtively amid the furnishings arranged tastefully in the room, while an orchestra of Ethir, set apart in a loggia hung along a wall, was playing a melody of touching beauty.

Marco Polo, for the first time since his arrival, felt an uncontrollable anxiety gathering in him. If by misfortune the master of the Baphomets revealed their origin, they would never see their homeworld again. Assuredly their disguise had been done with all desirable perfection, and each button of their costume, the very patterns of their robes, constituted a psionic screen established by Houen-Lun himself, but how to be certain of their effect on such alien beings?

Of course the guards had found nothing out of the ordinary, and they must have incomparably good equipment. So why would Zolial show himself more perceptive?

An opening which showed suddenly in the wall put an end

to the Venetian's self-posed questions. An enormous Baphomet, big-bellied as a buddha, gently reclined on a gilded couch, awaiting them.

"Prostrate yourselves," chirped their guide, providing them the example.

The three Terrans let themselves fall to the floor in a single motion, arms extended. Then a deep voice said, "Rise and draw nigh."

They all gathered themselves up and with lowered heads took a few steps in the direction of the august sovereign.

"So, my brave Fizzur, these are the Lyzogans you told me about. You say their artisans surpass us in the creation of psychedelic stimulators to take the senses away."

"To be sure, Your Majesty," replied the Terrans' companion. "I myself have used it to assure myself of its harmlessness and the results have surpassed all my hopes."

"They don't appear highly evolved," growled the emperor. "Recall to me what is their stage of civilization."

"Eighth degree, Your Plenitude, with a rather strange asynchronism of maturation. They have gone very far in the study of biology and yet haven't reached the stage of star travel."

"Normal if they had stimulators capable of bringing them to a state of full contentment. What would they need to seek in space?"

"Your sovereign intellect sees it quite correctly. If they can attain to happiness, their civilization would be strongly introverted. According to the information we have from the crew of the starship which discovered their planet, they don't have any weapons, at least in the sense we understand them."

"Perfect. So, merchant, you come here to sell your famous devices. How does it happen that you've brought only one sample?"

"Your Serenity," Marco Polo squeaked slavishly, "the reason is that we're dealing with objects of great value and I didn't know if their effect would be adapted to your psychic makeup. My cargo is a sample of our production, so how could I know what your race would most prize? Now I know that our houbits work perfectly and I am completely at your disposal to bring as many as you may desire to your planet."

"You have set several conditions on your offer, Fizzur tells me."

"I limited myself to asking for a charter assuring me of a monopoly on the sale of this apparatus."

"And for what price would you expect to sell them?"

"Your Majesty will decide that himself."

"Well. We'll see later. Unhappily, these devices are relatively fragile, so it's necessary to recharge them at the end of a year?"

"Indeed. And only our able artisans can do that work. I'm incapable of it."

"Would you be suggesting that our own technicians couldn't succeed in putting them in order?"

"If they try to discover the method of function themselves, I fear, alas, that they will get no result. But our Lyzogan specialists will be happy to teach them the method to use, which demands a very long apprenticeship. . . ."

"We will get into that problem later," growled the master of the Baphomets. "If these houbits are as marvelous as Fizzur pretends, I will allow my most faithful servants a reward. Now, enough talk; put that gadget there and depart."

The four visitors withdrew backward, and well escorted, were led back as far as the lift, then from there to the terrace.

An hour later, Marco Polo and the Tholon brothers found themselves again in their apartments, easing their waiting by enjoying glasses of a wondrous-smelling topaz liquor, without worrying about the lascivious Odeous stretched at their feet.

The Venetian, plunged into his meditations, did not even see the delicate hand which caressed his body and set on his chest a little beauty patch.

Suddenly a screen lit and the image of Fizzur appeared like an incredibly real nightmare.

"I have excellent news for you," he announced jovially. "His Serenity has been fully satisfied with the test he had made. He allots you a monopoly on houbit trade for two years. You are going to leave immediately for your world and bring back five hundred of these wonderful devices. Have you any favor to ask?"

"Faith, no," replied Marco Polo. "I will act diligently to satisfy his majesty and I thank him from the bottom of my heart for his goodness. . . . Would it be possible to use the same ship on which we came? The crew seemed to me very competent and they knew Lyzogan regions well, so I would

be more reassured, for, I confess it, these voyages in starry immensities frighten me."

"That seems easy to arrange. Moreover, while we have no well established routes, we would prefer to use the services of the crews who already have experience in the regions of these new planets. Tell me—I am in a hurry to use this marvelous instrument again—will your artisans be long in making them?"

"I think they are already made," replied the pseudo Lyzogan. "I only have to go and return."

"For security reasons, you'll deliver your merchandise on satellite 289."

"Can I ask the price I'll be paid for each houbit?"

"It's true, I forgot. It appears that crystallized carbon is highly prized on your world; you'll then receive an eye-sized diamond for each apparatus in good working order."

"Excellence, you heap upon me. . . ."

"Fine. Now, go. Each instant delays the moment I can use this extraordinary stimulator again."

Marco Polo bowed deeply, hesitant to ask his host to make him a gift of the slaves which were lent to them, but he dared not for fear of awakening suspicion.

The three Terrans then returned to the car which must take them to the starport, and they were agreeably surprised to find that the Odeous went with them.

"Will we have the pleasure of having you as traveling companions?" asked the Venetian.

"Indeed," his companion replied in a breath. "Our lives depend on it. If you refused us, we would be reduced to the most painful duties. Never would a Baphomet lord deign to use the services of a slave polluted by a barbarian."

"Well, we are delighted, believe me," the three men said at once.

The starship was resting peacefully on its cradle, where the Terrans had left it a few days before.

Marco Polo, Guiot and Clement entered the lock and had a joyous reunion with their companions, still made up as Odeous. Houen-Lun, for his part, remained motionless in a corner of the cabin.

"Well, old man, it's a pleasure to find you again," exclaimed Guiot, giving the Templar a friendly slap on the

back. "But we were welcomed like princes. We even brought back souvenirs. But you. . . ."

So saying, he motioned at the slaves who were coming in to join them.

"Passengers for Lyzog," Clement laughed. "The return trip will be more pleasant than the one coming."

Joubert, the ship's captain, did not intend to risk trouble. "My compatriots are going to sit in front," he ordered. "Gentle damoiselles, would you sit on the back seats? We're taking off in a few moments."

They all obeyed. The lock closed and the Templar sat down at the controls. The ship nosed toward the wide sky, the bow toward satellite 289.

Houen-Lun then came out of his trance. "All went very well," he declared. "I had no trouble controlling the mind of the green Orpheds who came to set the ship in order and I could follow part of your peregrinations, except of course when you visited the Baphomet leader. Speak; you have nothing to fear from the Odeous. They are sleeping at my order."

"The emperor seemed enchanted with the houbit. He entrusted me with bringing back five hundred from Lyzog. I have to set them out on satellite 289. Do you think it will be possible to get such a quantity of them?"

"Once we return to Earth, that will be easy. It's not a question of complicated mechanisms, but rather of configurations harmonized with all the senses through the medium of sight. Did you get the other information?"

"Indeed, and in quantity, thanks to a marvelous device which told me the history of the Baphomets and furnished me all the details of their empire. Alas! I was not able to obtain any details on their crews, not much more on the placement of their squadrons."

"I know," interrupted the Tibetan. "I too did not discover much, for these questions seem jealously hidden and only the highest dignitaries must have knowledge of them. Pity."

"And these charming slaves," asked the Venetian. "What are we going to do with them?"

"I could prolong their sleep for the duration of the journey," murmured Houen-Lun, "but they seem desirous of talking to us, and maybe they have information of interest. I'm going to wake them."

The three Odeous stretched and yawned, and their immense eyes opened, looking about them.

"Well, we're now departed far from Tekaph," murmured the one who had spoken to Marco Polo. "I can scarcely believe that we're delivered from these monsters."

"What monsters are you talking about?" asked Joubert.

"The filthy Baphomets, of course! But you must know them if you're a slave as I am, and condemned to live lodged in disease-ridden barracks when you're not traveling in space. Surely your passengers are still ignorant of what's awaiting them, but I've warned them."

"Indeed," said Marco Polo. "But Emperor Zolial showed himself very courteous to my way of thinking. He promised to limit himself to establishing peaceful commercial relations with my Lyzogan compatriots."

"Give up playing this farce," cried the slave. "If you are a Lyzogan, why are you wearing makeup? My companions quickly unmasked your friends; you're lucky we hate the Baphomets so. I don't know who you really are. I suppose that you belong to an unknown race and that you came to spy on these demons. Please heaven that we never come back to Tekaph."

Marco Polo looked at the Tibetan.

"You've guessed aright," he said then. "You can see me now as I really am and my friends look like me, except they have white skin. We are inhabitants of planet Earth, and we fear that the Baphomets are going to invade our world. Can you help us fight them?"

"Indeed. We Odeous only live in the hope of someday regaining our freedom. For generations we have been gathering secrets in the hope of giving them someday to our liberators. The blessed day has finally come."

So saying, she approached Marco Polo and, opening the collar of his shirt, passed her gentle hand over his chest. The Venetian let her, not very well knowing what to think, and then the slave drew back holding a finger on which one could see a little dark spot.

"See this beauty mark. It contains in the form of microfilm . . . invaluable information. All the sites of bases and satellites are on it, as well as the total strength of the fleet of this cruel race. The miserable Baphomets are accustomed to discuss things among themselves when they have sated their

pleasure, without paying the least attention to us. For them, we are nothing but insignificant creatures, almost cattle. So from year to year we have gathered a mass of information. Our race is expert in electronics and mechanics, and it was easy for us to make this tiny disc which contains all our knowledge. I feared being searched in detail before my departure. Our foul masters would not have missed it, but I had had the time to put this microdot on Marco's chest."

"Delightful," Djaffar chortled. "If this houri tells the truth, our mission will have been a success."

Without further waiting, he put the disc on a special reader and plunged himself into the reading of that document.

Joubert and he, with the aid of Aira, the Odeous slave who confessed to a remarkable education, passed long hours in transcribing it.

The ship stopped near satellite 289, and Houen-Lun altered the memories of its inhabitants without the learned Terran scholars even interrupting their work. So the ship could change its heading and veer off straight for Earth without arousing the attention of the Baphomets.

After a peaceful voyage the travelers, mad with joy, saw the increase of the azure world from which they had set out some weeks before. Now, thanks to the golden nets, the Odeous spoke fluent French.¹

Before landing, the voyagers could admire the countless vessels parked around the castle of Chang-Chu.

The escort which had followed them since their arrival in the solar system left them then and the ship settled gently into its berth, in the interior of the hollow tower.

Peter of Sevry was waiting for the envoys of the Grand Master and escorted them as far as the Chapter Hall, where William of Beaujeu, surrounded by his principal officers, gave them warm welcome. "Welcome to you, valiant Marco Polo. Your absence has been long and we feared that the Baphomets might have captured you. Speak, I'm anxious to hear the news you bring us. But first of all, tell us what are these angelic creatures I see beside you?"

¹ Marginal note of the Templar of Tyre: For the reader curious to know the fate of the Odeous, I owe to truth to confess that they quickly died, except for Aira. Taken with a painful languishing they could not be cured despite prodigious care. Incapable of feeding themselves, they became like skeletons and died after being given last rites.

"Noble Grand Master, these are slaves of the Baphomets, of the Odeous race. Two other peoples have been enslaved by these demons—the Ethir, like great birds, and the Orpheds, who look like insects. Aira here with me has confessed herself possessed of vast knowledge in the sciences of our enemies and she has given us priceless information. But without the sage Houen-Lun, we would never have gotten our mission that far."

"Tell me your voyage without leaving out a single detail. I'm very eager to learn more about our fearsome foes."

The Venetian furnished a detailed account of his adventures, and then got to the information of a technical sort.

"The upshot of this all is that the Baphomets don't like to expose their precious persons. When one of them runs a risk, it's because he's been condemned for some grievous offense. We were able to confirm that when we tried out the houbit. The visitor who came here to Earth recently surely must have transgressed imperial edicts. Usually the ship crews consist of Odeous, who have been reduced to slavery, and these poor folk scarcely have the heart to fight for their implacable masters. The only thing that can incite them to fight against us is the device which kills them if they disobey . . . although they hardly cling to their lives. Many of them, and Aira will confirm it, only hope to quit this hopeless life. But the women in their harems have organized into a secret resistance movement, and they now know of our existence, which will inspire them to survive and help us set them free. Thanks to them we have a plan of the Baphomet empire defenses. As for the Ethir, they're hardly warlike; they're set over domestic tasks and the organizing of their masters' amusements. And the Orpheds . . . they do the most menial labor and their minds are vastly different from ours."

"Let's get down to purely military considerations," the Grand Master broke in. "In the light of all this information, what do you advise me, Brother Joubert?"

"Surely our houbits are going to be valuable in disorganizing the Baphomet hierarchy when we decide to use them. Their emperor intends to lend them out to his high chiefs as a reward, so delighted he is with the joy he's gained from them. When the delivery we promised is made, we'll have a trump card in our hands."

"No, I refuse to trust these little toys," Otto of Granson's

voice rang out. "These Baphomets aren't stupid. If they get onto the trick, they'll destroy these trinkets and we'll be up a creek! Nein, we got to run headon at the enemy aboard our ships and land on their planet by the strength of our right arms."

"Well said!" Peter of Sevry applauded proudly. "The Temple must fight for the holy cause of Christ as it has always done, striking point and edge!"

"We all agree on this point." William of Beaujeu cut them off. "But neither is it unfitting to use subterfuge against such implacable enemies. So Sir Marco Polo must diligently deliver those talismans to our enemies. We will take advantage of this brief delay to train our troops in tactics very new to them. For the first time, they will have to cross the defenses of fortresses set in space. These fortresses are guarded by Odeous, but also by metal automations which are going to obey their masters scrupulously. So we have to expect strong resistance. According to this young slave, we can't expect to blow them up with the thunderballs, because the Baphomets have devices that can explode them prematurely. Is that not so, my dear child?"

Aira answered the question at once, amazing those present with her knowledge. "According to our technicians, the antimissiles aren't infallible. They pursue attacking rockets by the heat they give off. You can trick them by either of two means: first by firing before and behind your projectile devices, giving off even more heat, which will invariably draw them off. Or your gunners might fire their rockets in pairs and make their trajectories intersect. When the Baphomet projectiles get to the intersection point of the two missiles, they'll hesitate and lose themselves in space. I don't at all claim that these measures would be effective on every occasion, but they'll let a good percentage of your rockets get to their targets."

"I admire such knowledge in such a beautiful creature," exclaimed John of Grailly. "No one would have thought such a lovely girl could teach such learned scholars! But I still have a fear at the bottom of my heart . . . Will these measures be useful when our ships are in combat with the ships of the Baphomets?"

"Certainly," the Odeous assured him. "But these perverse creatures are full of tricks and they won't be slow at all in

finding some countermeasure. We'll be well advised to anticipate a second series of machines guided to their targets by the transmissions that let ships receive orders and communicate among themselves."

"Now those are wise and prudent words," Joubert said. "But can we be skilled enough to work out such delicate machines?"

"Your race has all the necessary intelligence," Aira assured him. "And as for the knowledge, I'm here to give it to you. My people have not been slaves but for about a hundred years, and before we were exiled on Baphom, I was considered one of the foremost experts in physics and cybernetics. I still carry in my heart the image of my dear planet. I was giving up hope of seeing it again, but since your arrival, I feel a wild hope reborn in me. That's why I devoted all my strength to aid you in your noble cause."

"Now be you thanked, gentle damoiselle," said William of Beaujeu. "We Terrans have valor, but what can that do against magical arms? That's why we will have great need of your help. We're going to postpone our offensive so our crews can familiarize themselves with the use of these ships that are so new to them. Once we've destroyed our enemies' armada, we'll have to fight on the very soil of the Baphomet planet. Assuredly the battle will be hard fought, and our scholars are going to be of great help in putting these miscreants forever out of condition to harm anyone. The day that the Baussant banner flies over Baphom, your compatriots, I swear by Christ, will regain full and complete independence! Noble friends, it's late. Let's go rest a little. There's a difficult task ahead of us, in the face of which the combats we fought lately against the Mongols were only children's games."

On those words, the assembly adjourned. But William stayed awake a good part of the night in the company of his officers and the wise Houen-Lun, to make all the necessary arrangements for the rapid manufacture of the houbits promised to the Baphomets.

When the cock crowed to herald the new day, the Grand Master finally rested from his labors, but only for a few hours.

Chapter VI



William of Beaujeu had wisely decided to wait until his troops were trained before throwing them into an assault on the Baphomet empire; but he had omitted one important factor.

The troops assembled around Chang-Chu Castle were wallowing in idleness. Jousts, tourneys, shipboard training, mock combat around the Earth's satellites no longer satisfied them. Lordlings, knights, squires fretted with impatience. The soldier-monks themselves recalled their glorious ride across Asia, and dreamed of meeting new worlds, this immense space where they were going to carry the Holy Faith.

The arrival of the gentle Odeous ladies put the finishing touch on the impatience of the Frankish knights, the English and the Germans, who had had no expectation of such things. They had heard about savage worlds, monstrous races, and the image of the Baphomets was not exactly one to tempt them, but lo and behold, it turned out that these famous extraterrestrials had women of incomparable beauty. A little disturbing to be sure, with those immense eyes, but did not the Arabs use kohl to elongate their lids? All these rough warriors were conquered by the voluptuous beauty and the exotic charm of the Odeous. In that case, why not dream of settling up there? Of carving out at sword's point some duchy or barony? Assuredly, William would reward his faithful servants, and more than one family's second son, fated for Holy Orders and without expectation of lands, looked to the future with a wild hope in his heart.

Tartars and Mongols too, seized by an ancestral dream of conquest, were only waiting on a sign to hurl themselves madly into space.

Otto of Granson, John of Grailly, Peter of Sevry, Conrad von Thierberg, John of Villiers, and even Kubla, came then to intercede with William, complaining that they were no longer masters of their forces and that any moment some impetuous madman might be on the brink of convincing his vassals to go rushing off with him to some distant planet in space to carve himself out a kingdom there. So the effect of surprise, which was one of the main weapons the Terrans had, would be canceled.

Instantly the Grand Master flew into a towering rage, swearing that any rebel would be followed pitilessly and killed by the patrols which watched the borders of the solar system, but Kubla's intervention made him stop and think.

"Noble lords, it seems to me that we haven't at all taken into consideration a new element which does have importance," declared the Mongol Khan. "This war will have but few things in common with the wars we have waged on this, our planet. The weapons which will give our side victory are not those which we are accustomed to use. Strange, alchemical . . . we have learned that these purely mechanical engines of destruction have an overbearing importance. Now, the gentle Odeous damoiselles have told us that their compatriots were learned scholars expert in such subtle magics, letting them make destructive engines until lately unknown to us. Then why not modify our initial plan and change our first objective? Surely, it is tempting to strike the enemy to the heart and attack Baphom, but to take it all, is that not a mistake? Our troops aren't used to space combat, and the first engagements with experimental crews could bring us some serious reverses. The planet Oddh should not have any garrison as important as the one at Baphom, and in choosing the objective for our first assault we can test our crews and get what we most critically lack: scholars perfectly familiar with the alien alchemy that lets them make these ships and equip them with these terrible engines of destruction. And besides, we will attract the attention of all the races the Baphomets have enslaved, which can then bring us new allies. Beyond that, it would certainly be very useful to have an Odeous technician aboard each ship, because if the situation arose, he could then make needed repairs."

William was proud, hotheaded, but his extreme intelligence overcame his faults. He recognized at once that the argu-

ments Kubla set forward had weight. But they did not affect the sending of Marco Polo with the promised cargo. The Grand Master himself was beginning to weary of these endless maneuverings, of these jousts which only served to diminish his forces. He too had felt the seduction of boundless space, which stretched before him as lately he had seen the vast plains of Asia when he had just beaten Bibars. . . .

After a brief thought on the matter, he straightened, drew his sword and saluted the Baussant banner which hung above the seat of state: "Down with the infidels, good sirs! You've convinced me. Now we have to get to action. The army will leave tomorrow to board the ships and take off for the world of Oddh! Marco Polo will accomplish his mission as decided; two Templars and one of the Tibetans will go with him. Houen-Lun and Joubert the Wise will be part of my company aboard my flagship. So will the Odeous damoiselles, whose advice will be precious to us when we make assault on their world. Now and henceforth I pass my earthly power to my faithful servant Thibaud Gaudin, who will be my lieutenant on this world, awaiting my return. Come near, my brother! I must give you with my own hand my seal and my ring so that they may not fall into blaspheming hands. They give you supreme authority over all the Commanderies and Territories of our empire. You may dispose of our goods, lend gold and silver, and if I should not return, there will devolve upon you the honor of convoking the Council of thirteen member knights, priests and brothers of the various provinces who will discharge or continue you as my successor before God and men."

William's secretary then carried in on a black, white-barred cushion the two priceless symbols which would make the Commander the most powerful lord on Earth. Henceforth he would have the right to an attendance of fourteen squires, two knights and a brother as servants, to a secretary, a Turkish scribe, two stewards, two valets, four Turcopoles, a courier, a chamberlain, a cook, a fourth of whom carried lance and shield. They were all already assembled behind William's attendant when he touched knee to earth to receive the insignia of his new charge, while the Templars intoned gravely in unision:

"Non nobis Domine, non nobis, sed Nomini tuo da gloriam."

Having made that transition of authority, the Council adjourned. Everyone ran to his tent to pack his baggage. A feverish activity seized all those who were about to hurl themselves into this glorious adventure.

William had gone back to his private apartments and prepared three letters. The first was addressed to Pope John XXI. This learned doctor, known under the surname of *Petrus Hispanus*, and a very enthusiastic supporter of this Crusade, looked on the expedition with a favorable eye. This was the gist of it:

"Most Holy Father, Pontiff of all the Earth, bearer of the papal crown by the dispensation of God, your humble and faithful servant William, Grand Master of the Templars, makes you to know that, on this day, twelfth of the month of May in the year of our Lord 1277, the army of Christ's faithful servants has left our sweet Earth to root out this vile brood which opposes the heavenly Kingdom of our Lord Jesus, to make known the only True Faith, that of the worshipers of the Lord, to the very edges of the universe. May the Savior of the world have mercy on His soldiers! While we carry on this Holy combat to enter into possession of the heritage which He has given to mankind, God will see to the defense of the earthly goods that each of us leaves behind. All of us, servants of the Holy Cross, depart under the Baussant banner. Alas! we shall not all return from the unfathomable space where we are going for the glory of God. Be the defender of my brothers. Never suffer that they be despoiled or unjustly treated. My wise and faithful Thibaud Gaudin has received from me all authority to administer the worldly goods of the Order in my absence. Deign to be for him a Father and a Counsellor. Your faithful servant in Christ: William of Beaujeu."¹

The Templar sanded his ink with a sly smile. He did not at all begrudge papal sovereignty over the planets and territories he envisioned conquering, knowing that John XXI was going to give him the lion's share.

The second letter was addressed to the King of England.

¹ Marginal note of the Templar of Tyre: This letter could not have reached the Holy Father, for God saw fit to recall him on May 20, at Viterbus. He met a frightful death, crushed by the fall of a platform. His successor, Nicholas III, elected November 25, was not at all as well disposed toward our order.

"To my very dear lord Edward I, illustrious King of the English, Duke of Guyenne, salutations in Him on Whom depends the life of all creation! On this twelfth day of May in the year of our Lord 1277, the army gathered about the castle of Chang-Chu launches forth to distant stars to dislodge from them the vile and faithless villains who oppress the peaceful creatures engendered by Our Lord, God of the Universe. Otto of Granson, your faithful vassal, is accompanying us along with the English Crusaders. I have no doubt that they will show their valor as they have done already on preceding campaigns, in the course of which we have brought to the True Faith Tartars, Mongols and Cipanghi. In my absence, Commander Thibaud Gaudin will enjoy all rights and prerogatives in the management of my earthly goods. I am assured that he will find in Your Majesty a counsellor and a true friend. May the Lord bless his humble servant, William of Beaujeu."

Finally, the third letter was addressed to the King of France, Philip II the Strong, its tenor, like the preceding, indicating that John of Grailly and the Frankish knights who had taken the Cross were going with the army, having left in a war against distant infidels.

In conclusion, the Grand Master drafted a proclamation to his troops. It would be read that very evening in every camp.

"Brother knights, squires and men-at-arms, the time has come to serve the Eternal God. To you, the valiant, the brave, the glory of your battles will open wide the portals of heaven! You are going to war against the minions of Satan, who have enslaved divine creatures, issue as you are of an Adam and an Eve, whatever the aspect God saw fit to give their bodies; they the weak, the oppressed, are your brothers. We are going to bring them the Light of the True Faith for the salvation of their eternal souls. You know the dangers, the evils, the perils that await you. The vile Baphomets are, alas! expert in the malefic sciences which birth flames, death and destruction. But God will have you in His Holy keeping. Be ye not dismayed, for He has taught us the art of war through His archangel Gabriel, conqueror of the Evil One. You are going to voyage in unknown space, battle against powerful nations. If we win, you will hew out a new empire, and some of you may perhaps even settle beyond the Earth. If we are defeated, there will be no retreat, for the miscreant

Baphomets will come to invade our dear homeland. Never forget that you fight for the glory of Our Lord Jesus and His gentle Mother who will bear your sorrows. You have left friends and families; many of you sold lands and houses. Religion and honor are now your only possessions. But the power of the Baphomets reaches its end, for it is no other than that of the beast of the Apocalypse whom the Most High has determined to put down! May the Lord Jesus bless you! Always follow the Baussant banner. It will show you the way to heavenly bliss. Angels and archangels will help us in our just war."¹

After polishing his speech, the Grand Master changed his mind. Rather than trust that exhortation to the heralds, it would be much more impressive to have it proclaimed using the magical loudspeakers that would let them all hear it at one place. So he called in brother Joubert, who gathered the necessary equipment for him.

So William's voice echoed as far as the farthest edges of the camp, to the vast astonishment of the Crusaders, who saw in it a new demonstration of the astonishing powers conferred on their leader. More than ever they felt assured of conquering a fairyland flowing with milk and honey, where friendly peoples would welcome them with open arms.²

In all this business, the three Tholon brothers had been forgotten. They did not know whether they were to go with Marco Polo or go with the expedition.

Garin went to find Joubert, who gave him reassurance. The Venetian was in charge of delivering the houbits, but with other companions. The Grand Master wanted to have them on his own ship, as soldiers who had already had practice in the alien language. He had therefore ordered that Guiot and Clement should go with him on the flagship.

He himself was to stay a certain time on Earth to finish the manufacture of the apparatus promised to the Baphomets,

¹ Marginal note of the Templar of Tyre: William was surely thinking then of the Ethir, whose physical appearance is very close to that of the celestial legions, but he was going too far in attributing to them a soul, for the matter is still quite strongly debated, even among Templars.

² Another note from the Templar on the spirit of that day: This was, practically speaking, rather far from the truth.

but then he would join the host in the vicinity of the planet Oddh.

The cosmopolitan legions, gathered under William's banner, began their embarkation in good order. Thanks to the training they had undergone during their months of waiting, each man knew in what ship he must take his lodging. There was a clear majority of Templars and strong contingents of Hospitalers and Teutons whose crests in the likeness of monsters and chimeras dominated the crowd. Mongols and Turcoples were also there in good number. There were even folk of Cipanghu with their strange black lacquer armor, swords which bore guards with minutely engraved motifs.

All of them bitterly regretted not being able to bring along their faithful steeds, which had been turned out to pasture in the prairie grasslands. Henceforth their mounts would be metal engines that would carry them across infinite space. When they reached the soil of a world, these valiant horsemen would not rest content until they had domesticated some kind of steed to replace their brave Terran horses.

In spite of brief jostlings and shovings, everything went as smoothly as possible and the various ranks of the army went into space one after the other, to gather in the vicinity of the moon. Near Chang-Chu, the squires were putting aboard four destriers, for William of Beaujeu, John of Villiers and Conrad von Thierberg, the fourth being held in reserve.

From the height of the keep, Marco Polo was watching the ships of the armada lift majestically, each ship easily identifiable by the heraldry of the corps to which it belonged.

Suddenly, for an unexplained reason, one Templar vessel lost altitude and, completely helpless, crashed to earth not far from the castle. At once, rescue squads directed themselves at full speed toward the crash site. They could only, alas, recover poor bodies, frightfully mangled, impossible to identify. This was happily the only accident and it passed unnoticed by the majority of the armada. By the grace of heaven, it was not the flagship.

Finally the last ship containing the destriers disappeared into the blue sky and the Venetian was alone with several Templars and Commander Thibaud Gaudin.

The latter crossed himself piously. "Please our Lord," he murmured, "that His faithful servants someday see their dear

Earth again. The noble William is taking on a grave responsibility."

"Christ have them in His Holy keeping," sighed Marco Polo. "The Grand Master has weighed heavily the pro and the con before launching this attack on the Baphomet empire. This expedition is going to season his troops and our houbits will be a great help to him when he launches his attack on the main fortress: the planet Baphom. In four days, I too am going to travel to these far countries. Don't forget me in your prayers, for I have a hard part to play in this."

Far away in the skies, the armada was veering off toward its objective. The men had watched amazed as the Earth grew round as a ball, then Luna appeared, riddled with craters. Now they saw nothing but infinity studded with pale stars, and their hearts shuddered at the thought of their smallness before the immensity of the universe.

William had split his armada into three squadrons: the left wing was the English; the right the French; and in the center, a little withdrawn, the elite of his troops was composed of his faithful Templars, Hospitalers, and Teutons. Far ahead, a few fast ships commanded by the Turcopole Gerard of Tours blazed the trail for the fleet. They used particularly sensitive scanning apparatus, tuned by the learned Aira. The rear guard was under the command of Peter of Sevry.

Finally the Templar of Tyre had begun to move his finest pen over a parchment illumined with golden stars, to record this memorable expedition.

In the flagship, William of Beaujeu, standing before the spheres which represented the constellations, revealed his plans to his allies.

"The Odeous planet," he declared, indicating an orange dot, "is located rather far from Baphom, and, unlike Baphom, it isn't protected by a belt of satellite fortresses. There exists only a garrison meant to prevent any slave rising. It's commanded by Baphomets, but it's principally crewed by creatures in metal armor, the robots. The base of the ships that control space traffic is on Lyzar, Oddh's large satellite. We know the exact location of it, but it's likely that the ships will prefer to fight in space. Once these ships have been eliminated, we'll have to use main force to take the citadel near the Odeous capital, where their oppressors are well entrenched. In the beginning we won't rely on any help from

the natives. Their demoniac overlords have given them a damnable talisman that will kill them outright at any act of disobedience. Most of all it's important to preserve the installations where the Odeous alchemist scholars work. We have the utmost need of them in what's to come. Now I give you the words of our dear damoiselle Aira who, far better than I, can tell you about her homeland."

"Oddh is located near a tripartite nebulosity and a very dense mass of stars. Its sky is thus very different from that of Earth, for countless stars light its nights. By day, the light from our sun is much weaker than on your world, for dense clouds surround our planet. But the climate there is rather gentle, for a greenhouse effect stops heat from escaping. Our eyes, more sensitive than yours, see at night very easily, a trait we inherited from our ancstors who were hunters at night. Our vegetation is like yours, but it will surprise you by its scarlet color. Be careful: there are many carnivorous plants, and they are rivaled in ferocity by the azgar, a swift, six-footed beast, one of the most dangerous flesh-eaters known. Luckily the beast hardly ever leaves the mountain regions, except when its favorite prey, the elur, grow scarce. At any rate, don't ever let an unknown creature approach you. It's better to kill a peaceful herbivore than to be eaten by some monster. I do not have, alas! much information on the Baphomets, for they hardly ever go out of their fortress. From the age of one year, all our children must be brought to the genetic centers to be numbered, and the males are given that cursed device that they must wear all their lives. Some of my compatriots still live free, hidden in mountain caves. The bird-robots, drawn by their bodies' heat, track them without ceasing. Add to that the azgar, and you understand that it's useless to count on their help. As for the Baphomet fortress, it's surrounded on all sides by an energy dome. It will be very difficult to penetrate. But I have heard that there do exist secret passages that will possibly let you get in there. A last detail will be pleasant for you to hear: my compatriots breed herds of domestic elur that will remind you of horses, except that they have six legs and a horny shell that protects their flanks from azgar claws."

The Odeous bowed sinuously, joining her slender hands to salute with infinite grace and retreated modestly behind the

Terran leaders while the knights and soldier-monks meditated on what they had just heard.

For the first time they had real knowledge that differences existed between Earth and Oddh.

The armada followed its course without unlucky meetings, though sometimes Aira pointed out some curious stellar object—the blue gaseous clouds where stars were born in a fiery furnace, dark nebulae where the horrified eye believed it saw monstrous faces, sometimes some double or triple star system, giant stars, blue or purple, and the veritable lighthouses of space, the pulsing Cepheids and the dwarf stars, deadly traps that one dared not approach for fear of being sucked into some unknown universe. Fortunately, these maelstroms in space were carefully marked on the spherical charts the Terrans used.

After ten days of voyaging, Houen-Lun, far before the scanners, signaled the presence of an enemy ship. It happened to be a ship making the regular run between Baphom and Oddh.

Prudently, William had his armada come to a stop, while the wise Tibetan waited for the moment that the crew would use its transspace communications to control their minds more easily.

The flagship approached its prey as near as possible, while staying outside scanner range. Finally, after an hour of waiting, the Tibetan announced that he was in control of the aliens. The reconnaissance vessels could then board the ship and capture the crew.

The Odeous were then brought aboard the Baussant ship, and the remarkable Djaffar began to work at once, guided by Aira. They had very rapidly to remove the implants with which the crews were equipped. Only the female slaves meant for the harems did not wear these explosive devices, for it might provoke some little damage to a Baphomet if his companion of the moment grew restive.

The principle of this vile device was simple. The young underwent a hypnotic treatment which disposed them to obey the despotic Baphomets implicitly. When one of the subjects refused an order, there was a mental conflict and the emission of a certain form of brain waves, and these, being detected, acted on the detonator of a tiny explosive capsule lodged under the scalp. No direct connection existed with the brain.

A simple skin incision at the base of the skull delivered the poor fellows. There was only the physical conditioning, which was the lama's business, and they were rather numerous aboard the ships, to treat all the prisoners.

The operation was quickly completed and the captives regained consciousness.

They were surely frightened to find themselves surrounded by strange beings, but after a rapid conversation with Aira, a wide smile brightened their faces. They automatically brought their hands to the backs of their heads, touched the dressings Djaffar had put there, as if to reassure themselves of the truth of what their compatriot had said. Then Sonz, the ship's captain, cried: "Thank you, Terrans! We can never give you sufficient proof of our gratitude. And here we are free! We are finally going to be able to fight these despotic masters who have oppressed us. Tell us . . . your wishes will be our commands."

"Surely you can do us great service, being current with the customs and habits of the Baphomets," William of Beaujeu replied. "At this very moment we're bound for your planet to free it from the yoke of these devilish creatures. According to the gentle damoiselle Aira, there is no belt of fortresses in that area of space, and the crews based on your satellite are weak. We therefore plan to attack that base and destroy the ships that land there."

"Excellent," the Odeous applauded him. "And what armament do you have?"

"Thanks to your compatriot, we have rockets to strike the enemy ships, guided by the faint waves they emit. For our part, we're protected from their impact by devices that give off heat, since it seems that the enemy projectiles are attracted by them."

"That's so, but what have you done against the vortex mines?"

"Excuse me, learned friend," said the Grand Master, "I don't know these machines at all."

"What?" the spacefarer exclaimed. "You're going straight in without knowing about that trap?"

"I never heard them talk about it," Aira confessed.

"That doesn't surprise me. It's a secret device and very new. Our ships carry broadcasters that neutralize those mines. Failing that, they'll provoke a titanic explosion that will

destroy any ship in the vicinity. By the cosmos! you were lucky to meet me. I worked on the laying of that mine field and I know where they are. We'll use the disconnecter that's on my ship and we'll sweep ourselves a path. Later, we'll make copies of this device to equip your ships. One thing more. Do you have quark cannon?"

"Of course not, my son," growled William. "Is this another new Baphomet magic?"

"Ah, yes. We have been compelled to install them for these devils. These arms project elemental particles that tend to destroy the equilibrium of the atoms of the hulls, making the metal lose all cohesion. There's no defense against it, except the emission of antiquarks that annihilate these particles and make them explode. Our physicists don't know the secret, nor do I. So we have to confront it without protection, but you do have other weapons, don't you?"

"Surely; that's what let us take your ship without striking a blow. We can act on your mind by the use of the antennae that you use in communication."

"Excellent," said Sonz. "But that won't work against the robots. No matter. That ought to sow a grand confusion in the enemy ranks, at least. When you've taken Oddh, our scholars will give you antiquark devices. What forces do you have?"

"More than two thousand ships."

"That must suffice to attack this objective. Well! I suggest you get your advance underway, until we start the minefield. I'll send you a purple flash. The passage will be marked by green beacons to starboard and red to port. Whatever you do, don't get off the beam."

On those words, the starfarer, with four Templars for companions, went back to his ship, but his companions stayed near their new allies to advise them.

William at once called in Gerard of Tours to give him the order to get underway in the wake of Sonz's ship, and the armada followed slowly.

Now the Odeous' star was clearly visible and it was a matter of waiting till the enemy scanners signaled the unaccustomed presence of a fleet in its territory.

Luckily the promised beacons did not delay their appearance, detaching themselves near the base of a nearby tripartite nebulosity, visible only on the Terrans' course.

The Turcopole, assisted by Kubla, immediately put his swift ships on through and disposed them at the far opening of the breach in a fan formation, ready to defend the passage.

The enemy had still not reacted.

The blue squadron starboard, formed mostly of French, threaded through rapidly; then it was the turn of the English on the red side, and finally the mass of the Templars.

Scarcely had they run the gauntlet when Houen-Lun signaled the presence of a cloud of swift ships.

The Mongols under Gerard of Tours darted toward them, following their favorite tactic. Scarcely arrived, contact made, they discharged a spray of missiles, then fled as if seized by panic.

This trick had the calculated effect. Some of the squadrons rushed to pursue them, and then they fell among the French, who acted quickly to put them out of action. Until now the enemy had used nothing but missiles and the defenses Aira had arranged had worked marvelously. Few of the Terran ships had been touched, while numerous enemy vessels had been destroyed.

Houen-Lun and his fellow Tibetans stayed alert. They had a great deal of difficulty locating their enemies amid the countless mental contacts they were receiving.

The Baphomet squadrons, having gained prudence in the first engagement, concentrated then into two compact columns that headed in, with the evident goal of catching their enemy between their fire.

William then ordered Peter of Sevry to stay close to the open passage in the minefield to control a way of retreat, and signaled Otto of Granson and John of Grailly to maneuver so that their squadrons came at the enemy from above, crossing the T, which let all the Terran vessels fire their missiles, while only the ships at the head of the Baphomet lines could open fire, for fear of wiping out their friends in front of them.

William plunged under the opposing squadrons while the vanguard came back to range themselves in front of him.

These maneuvers were executed perfectly. The long months of training had paid off.

At the outset, the Terrans had gained a marked success. The enemy, crushed under a deluge of missiles, saw the head

of his columns founder, turn face about and take flight, followed by the Terrans who kept contact with them.

But far from flowing back in a rout, the enemy squadrons were departing in good order toward the nebulosity, to hide there.

As the Mongols of Gerard of Tours and Kubla pressed them too close, the Baphomet ships had recourse to a secret weapon, but, all their vessels were not equipped with it. In a scene out of nightmare, the hulls of the brave pursuers eroded, the crews vaporized; certain ones, thanks to their suits, scattered out miraculously and drifted off in the icy void. Some could be recovered at the end of the battle.

William, always master of himself, had his squadrons stop, let his battered enemy escape to find refuge in the dark windings of the nebulosity.

The Grand Master had acted wisely. A frontal assault on an enemy at bay would have been fatal to the Terran ships; by his action he brought his forces under control.

In fact only about a hundred ships had found refuge in the gaseous cloud. The Terran squadrons, firing volley after volley, had already won the victory, and it only remained to hunt the enemy out of his refuge.

Now it was the Tibetans' turn to prove their efficiency. They had only to fear the confusion of the ships, and their delicate waves could easily find their adversaries, putting one after another of their maddened crews out of action, for they were using their communications constantly to keep contact with each other in the labyrinth.

In a little while Houen-Lun and his adepts were in control of the minds of the enemy leaders, making them give an insane order to the bewildered armada.

"Abandon the shelter of the nebulosity!"

One after another, the vessels then came to expose themselves to the Terrans' fire. As the admirals alone had the secret weapon, the enemy destroyed only a few of the ships, and soon the Templars could enter the nebulosity in their turn to board and seize the ships under the Tibetans' control.

Ten hours after the beginning of the engagement, the last ship of the squadron defending Oddh was put out of commission.

Although the Odeous on those ships had died, still William's tactic had let him use the Tibetans' psi attack under

the best conditions, and he had saved almost all those who were on the flagships.

Six Baphomets were captured too, and chained in the hold of a ship prepared for that purpose.

The hardest task was accomplished. Now it remained to gain the base located on the satellite, then to land on Oddh. Now, without the use of his ships, the enemy would have the hard task ahead of him.

Chapter VII



William of Beaujeu was not accustomed to rest on his laurels. He ordered Peter of Sevry to leave the post he had filled during the battle—he was fretting with impatience in that position—to procede to the rescue of the scattered and shipwrecked crews. He lent him several Tibetans to stop the surviving Odeous from suiciding or being killed by their cursed implants.

Sonz had appreciated the progress of the battle like a connoisseur. "Lord," he suggested to the Grand Master when calm was restored, "we've made some good catches. The ships the Baphomets were on had quark devices and these cowards were so afraid that they didn't even sabotage them. Let's use them against the satellite base."

"Is that really necessary?" the Templar objected. "We'll need them to attack Oddh. What forces do the defenders of your moon have?"

"Now they aren't numerous at all. Fewer than a hundred, half of which are robots. Instead, the base is equipped with a powerful antiship defense—automatic missile launchers buried in the rocks of the mountain."

"If you know where they're placed, it will be enough to pepper them with our thunderballs. We have a lot of them."

"Excellent tactic. The explosions will ruin the mechanisms that let them uncover the silos to launch. Only you'll have to rout out the defenders buried in the tunnels."

"That's no trouble for my troops. They're more at ease fighting on solid earth than in the sky. Let your companions take one of the captured weapons. We'll make copies of it with the duplicators. The others can stay in reserve in the case of some ugly surprise."

"I'll get busy about that at once. But it's still possible that these delicate mechanisms aren't going to be easy to reproduce."

The Grand Master then asked Houen-Lun to probe the minds of the Baphomet prisoners to get all the information they had on Oddh's defenses. Then he regrouped his squadrons and turned his bow toward Oddh's moon, whose crater-pocked face seemed to smirk at the inky depth of the heavens.

Blue squadron was charged with the sweep operation. It met missile fire, but thanks to the thermal devices, most of that was lost in space.

In answer, Terran missiles came crashing down with full force on the silos where the enemy launchers were buried and quickly destroyed them. This base was of minor importance, and the disproportionate number of forces present let them saturate each device so thoroughly that the antiship defense was promptly silenced.

John of Grailly split his forces, one part staying in orbit as emergency reinforcements, the other landing at the starport, which had been spared destruction. It went without saying that the hot-tempered Frenchman was one of the first off the ship.

His forces met little opposition. Only a few robot squads launched a counterattack. The knights' training had taught them to disperse and hide, using all the resources of the terrain. They became invisible in no time.

The Baphomets did not appear to have given such prudent instruction in programming the metal beings, who were battered down one after another by the steel projectiles from the powder arquebuses.

A second wave met the same fate and the French then began a methodical advance by successive squadrons, each covering the other while they progressed out of cover.

The port installations were quickly taken. They were in perfect condition. Apparently the Baphomets, never having envisaged the possibility of a defeat, had never provided any mechanisms.

It remained now to get the missile silos lodged in the mountains around the base. The ground was poisoned at surface level by the residue of the nuclear explosions. John of

Grailly decided to use a classic tactic for assaulting fortified castles: sappers.

Assuredly the exits of the tunnels leading to the silos had to be strongly guarded, and a frontal assault would cost them very dear. Then the clever Frenchman discovered in one of the rooms of the starport a detailed plan of the underground retreats occupied by his enemies. With the help of the Odeous, he moved out the earthborers stocked in the hangars, the very ones which had permitted them to build the silos, and pierced vertical wells to the tunnels.

One after the other, the companies of space-armored knights, carrying shield in one hand and short arbalest in the other, descended into the holes.

They began by routing the robots who guarded the entry ports, taking them from behind. Then reinforcements flowed into the tunnels. In a few hours all the installations had fallen into the hands of the French.

In all, few Odeous were captured—only five, freed thanks to the Tibetans who disconnected their implants. The defenses were practically automatic, robots rather than slaves assuming the maintenance and defense of the whole.

As soon as the victory was won, John of Grailly ordered his men-at-arms to go back to their ships, only leaving a hundred to clear the tops of the silos buried under the rubble, using the machines they found on the site.

The whole operation, from start to finish, had only taken about a dozen hours, and soon the batteries of missiles could be turned against the planet.

During this time, William had massed his squadrons in the stratosphere of Oddh, at the other side of the world from the capital, the Baphomet den wherein these perfidious creatures were entrenched.

The Grand Master, concerned not to damage the precious factories, had decided to launch a land attack with his Templars.

They had still to destroy the energy dome which protected the fortress the tyrants held. Houen-Lun had painlessly probed the captives' minds and William knew perfectly the defense forces, the armament they had at their disposal and the configuration of the tunnels linking them with the castle outside. He thus learned that they were full of deadly traps letting them make bloody defense of the walls in case of in-

vasion. No question then of using the strategy which had lately worked so well for John of Grailly.

Instead, Sonz, the Odeous spacefarer, gave him precious advice. "In theory," said he, "this energy dome is uncrossable. Of course, it would be possible to lay siege to this fortress. Its provisioning would hardly let the Baphomets hold out more than a month. But our principal advantage is surprise. We mustn't give the Baphomet squadrons time to intervene. Let's use the few quark cannon we have to wear away the soil, just under the energy dome, so our troops can slide under and make a direct attack on the inside of the fortress. Your knights have a crushing numerical advantage. Using a simultaneous assault from six different positions, you can very quickly overwhelm the robots and get yourselves into command central."

This proposition gained the agreement of all the Terran leaders. Templars, Hospitalers and Teuton knights then left the ships out of range of the defenses and began their march toward the city in dispersed groups.

Some batteries opened fire but they were quickly silenced by the ships' weapons. The Terran groups reached their objectives without excessive casualties.

In the capital, everything remained calm. The Odeous, obeying their masters' orders, remained cloistered in their residences. A sporadic fire broke out at times, coming from the robots. Might the Baphomets have begun to mistrust their slaves? No Odeous contingent opposed the Templars.

It was an unhoped-for chance for the city; its architectural marvels would surely have taken a great deal of damage in a fight in the streets.

The citadel was set on an eminence dominating the capital, which it controlled in normal times by its batteries of weapons, but the force field had one inconvenience: it did not let them use those batteries, for it was impenetrable from either direction.

The Baphomets' devilish tactic seemed simple. Believing themselves invulnerable in their lair, they were calmly waiting on the help which would unfailingly be headed their way from Baphom.

Fate had decreed otherwise. The ships bearing the quark cannon had just made a rapid passage above the protective dome, aiming at ground level.

The dense rock eroded like sand, leaving large holes. At once the Templars brought up metal plates, platforms, putting them on the yielding earth as they advanced.

Very swiftly, the attackers reached the other side of the translucent wall. They saw then the massive palace of the governor, a baroque masterpiece of chiseled stone.

Trusting to their dome, the Baphomets had hardly bothered to fortify the castle. Flowered gardens and pleasant woods surrounded it; a few domestic animals which looked like deer and birds with fairytale plumage sported there.

The Templars, taking advantage of the cover, were able to thread their way up to the gate without hindrance. There, it was quite another matter. The massive portcullis with bronze engraving was closed and the robots posted behind its ogive windows met their assailants with heavy fire.

But the rough warriors were in their own element. While the arbalests cracked clouds of explosive projectiles that were swallowed by the openings, Conrad von Thierberg, at the risk of his neck, attacked the thick panel that closed the entry with blows of his axe.

In a few minutes the giant German had gotten it down, and followed by his Teutons, broke into the castle. For their part the Templars were not idle. Using ladders, they entered through the windows, while John of Villiers directed the fire of his Hospitalers toward the roofs where the defenders had fled.

Without regard for the rare wood furniture, for the thousand treasures gathered in the vast halls, the soldier-monks broke through, sweeping all before them.

The Tholon brothers, always riding on their luck, broke into the harem. They had to face the eunuchs, who hurled at them incongruous missiles: fruits, vases, amphorae, incense burners. The Odeous slaves, bodies shining with perfumed oil, scattered in all directions, dismayed, with a clicking of their bracelets and collars. Some dived into a pool of bronze fish, sinking among the lilies and lily pads floating on the surface of the water, which wound like jade serpents round their wet bodies. Others huddled as much as possible behind the huge porcelain vases, or under the piles of cushions, even behind the spidersilk curtains suddenly rainbow glittering with a thousand reflections that played over the sparkling gems adorning the lovely harem servants. All of them were chitter-

ing and chattering, frightened by these metal-covered giants who had broken into their luxurious though well-guarded prison. They quickly realized that the palace had fallen to assault by considerable forces, come to set them free. Pressed with questions by the Tholon brothers, they gave all their information on the placement of the command devices in the dome, and even offered to guide them there.

The boys from Auxerre climbed four abreast up the stone staircase, disdaining the lifts, and came rushing into the room where four haggard Baphomets watched in anguish the screens which showed them the invasion of the domain they had believed impregnable.

Seized with abject terror, they hurled themselves at the feet of the Templars, begging them not to torture them, and they were content to get them on their feet without touching them and order them to cut off the protective field. Immediately the vile creatures obeyed them. Then taking advantage of the Tholon brothers' instant of inattention, they swallowed vials of poison. This was the end of the fortress. The armies of the French, the English and the Mongols in turn broke into the castle. A half hour later the last robots were destroyed and William triumphantly entered the fortress over which the Baussant banner was already flying.

It was from the command post the Tholon brothers had captured that the Grand Master directed his operation of liberation for the world.

The few garrisons scattered over Oddh were destroyed without difficulty by ships flying at ground level, and occupation forces were brought into each major city.

The Terrans' first objective was to free the male Odeous from the deadly implants which had enslaved them to the Baphomets. That took a long time, for the overburdened Tibetans could not treat them all at once. At any rate, there was no haste, for, at least the moment, there was no threat hanging over the planet.

On the night after the end of the fighting, William gathered his principal officers in a vast hall of the Baphomet palace, which was covered with a film of shining tissue with strange scarlet arabesques. At one end began a monumental stairway of wood veined with black serpents. Purple cushions fringed in gold covered the massive chairs.

On the immense tables were spread strange foods, birds

served in their bronze plumage, game baked in cinnamon-perfumed sweet sauce, fried insects floating in a mellow sauce, mounds of pâtés stuffed with spices, vessels filled with crèmes mixed to make a subtle design on their surface, veritable works of art, cakes with crackling crusts or covered with smooth glazes in rainbow colors. Voluptuous Odeous presented the platters to the guests. Each of them, robed like a goddess, had put on her finest dress in honor of the liberators. Some wore gold bands confining their thick hair; others had thrust carved insects in the metal behind their heavy chignons. Diaphanous tunics of pastel colors reflected the light of the crystal and emerald chandeliers, and all were anointed with the same heavenly smelling ointment which filled these rough warriors with dreams.

In finely turned flasks, transparent liquors of heady aroma were ready to quench the warriors' thirst.

French, English, Germans and Mongols were honored at this celebration.

When they had finally finished, the Grand Master, who had hardly touched these tempting offerings, rose and summed up the situation. "My brothers, let us give thanks, let us praise and give glory to Our Lord for having given us the victory! For the first time, the host of the Crusaders has met the miscreant aliens and given them a sound thrashing. Now these creatures born by the will of God are going to know the True Faith and regain their freedom. In sum, our losses have been few and we must congratulate ourselves on having so easily eliminated enemies who had devilish weapons hitherto unknown to us."

William was silent a moment while he drank a mouthful of water from an engraved cup. Then he continued. "But we will make a great mistake if we think we are invincible. Formerly I thought long on the use of the starships and of likening them to sailing vessels. I have read and reread ancient texts recounting history's naval battles: Salamis, Actium, Bravalla, Constantinople . . . and I have discovered there not one valuable instruction to help me work out a battle tactic for space. Our recent campaign was a succession of improvisations. How to liken ships that fight far from one another with vessels of sail, with galleys which meet and board? The fire missiles have no proper comparison with Greek fire; and magic circles, like that which protected this

castle, bear no resemblance at all to the stone walls of our strongholds. For awhile I hoped to find advice among the Odeous, whose practice of alchemy is very old. Alas, this peaceful people has never worked out a specific tactic for this kind of battle. We must then rethink this problem entirely, thinking soberly on the possibilities offered by the new machines we have at our disposal. Let's not forget: we have only met a small portion of the forces opposing us; the effect of surprise was working in our favor, but now we can't count on it. Before ending his life, the governor of this planet sent out alarms in all directions, signaling our attack and asking for help. We're going to be meeting squadrons equal if not superior in number to our own. What must be our objective? To try to liberate the Ethir and the Orpheds? Or, instead, to go to Baphom to engage in decisive battle? We have to broach that question without delay. I am open to suggestions."

That declaration threw a pall on the party. They had all, in the euphoria of the banquet and the victory, forgotten reality, and the Grand Master had reminded them of the precariousness of their position, nothing held back.

A heavy silence reigned for a moment. Their stomachs were full of strange food, tender meats, succulent vegetables, plump, juicy fruits, all of which had all been tested by Brother Joubert on Turcopole slaves, which guaranteed their partial harmlessness, but not their easy digestion by a Christian stomach. On top of that, one had to add the consumption of volatile liquors, quite pleasant to the throat but tending to befog the celebrants' brains somewhat.

Ascetic John of Villiers had not participated in these feasts. He drew himself up to his full height. "Are we bloodthirsty wolves," he growled crossly, "or Christ's soldiers? I've not heard anything here but talk of fighting and conquests, while problems of primary importance are passed over in silence. As far as I understood, we still came here to bring our brothers of beyond the Earth the True Faith. Well, no one seems to be worrying about learning whether the Odeous have souls, if they knew a Christ, and how they worship the Divinity. So far as I'm concerned, I refuse to go any farther in this universe before having raised that question. So I demand that we immediately call in the leaders of this people

to listen to them and to decide what our response should be toward them."

All the Hospitalers earnestly applauded, while William of Beaujeu sat with a scowling face. These theological discussions could go on forever, while he had to seize the advantage the Terrans had won to prepare the next course of operations. Nonetheless the Templar assumed a more pleasant expression. He could not leave aside a question of dogma without risking having himself disowned by the Pope and abandoned by a portion of his forces.

"I was meaning to address that problem after the purely strategic questions were settled," he avowed, "but since our brother John of Villiers wants to discuss this major point first, I am glad to support his opinion. Let someone bring in the Odeous."

A few moments later the heralds brought into the hall four aliens of very saintly age, eminent scholars, secret leaders who had escaped during the painful years of enemy occupation. All of them had a rather disturbing look, with their vast eyes, but their features reflected an extreme intelligence.

"My brothers, be welcome," William of Beaujeu exclaimed. "We have called you to this place before our assembly to enlighten ourselves on various points of utmost importance. Please be brief in your answers, but conceal nothing."

"We take the greatest pleasure in answering your questions," replied the eldest of the Odeous. "Before anything else, I shall make myself interpreter of my people in thanking you from the bottom of our hearts for having freed us from the foul Baphomets. I was elected leader of this planet during the days of the underground. I'm named Adoos, and my companions have asked me to speak in their name. I think that it's an opportune moment to normalize our relations so that no shadow will remain between us. My fellow citizens are aware of the immense service you have done us, and we're ready to work with you in all areas."

"Perfect. We're certainly going to understand one another. Our wise brother John of Villiers, who leads the Hospitalers, is going to ask you some questions."

The Grand Master turned to the Odeous, looked them up and down for a moment in some disdain. "Your folk are very civilized. They tell me you've existed for some number of years. So you have a religion?"

"Of course," said Adoos. "It has, of course, evolved over centuries, but our present belief is simple. We worship the creator of the universe, who manifests his power at every moment through the harmony that exists in the world."

"And this divinity is unique?"

"In a certain sense unique, since it is the universe, and the universe is in it. God is everywhere."

"How do you worship him?"

"Very simply. In each family, the father is the priest and he dedicates a few moments each week or each day, as he can, to teach his family about the double nature of the universe, of the necessity of good and evil, the smallness of our individual selves, the duties we owe to our fellows."

"Dualists of some sort," John of Villiers replied, and framed another question. "Do you believe in life after death?"

"Our poor self must rejoin the universal Intelligence and merge with it, if that is your meaning."

"But your body. Is there a resurrection?"

"How could the atoms which compose it reunite after being scattered over our planet? It would take a great pride to think that God could bend to regard folk as unimportant as we are."

The Grand Master turned toward his people with a venomous smile. "Of course," he pursued, "you are entirely ignorant of original sin?"

"I don't understand what you're referring to. Why should our origin be stained with sin?"

"Consequently, you are not awaiting the coming of any Redeemer?"

"We hope to be free of the Baphomets. You are our liberators. The exact meaning of your question escapes me."

"Have you holy books that recount the creation of the world?"

This time Adoos seemed to doubt his questioner's sanity. "Do you not know that the universe began its existence in a titanic explosion billions of years ago? No Odeous was in existence then. How could we have works reporting such ancient facts?"

"Quite simply, by the voice of prophets speaking in the name of the Lord," John of Villiers returned, annoyed. "Of course, you don't have any prophets?"

"Faith, no, our philosophers have never had the signal honor of entering rapport with the Divinity."

"Consequently we can't find among you any trace of the holy Word, no hope of a Redeemer. Have you heard tell of angels, and of Lucifer who revolted against the Lord?"

"Absolutely not. The words I have heard you use make me think of winged beings . . . maybe you mean the Ethir. As for Lucifer, would he be the father of the Orpheds?"

"Useless to follow this idle questioning," the Grand Master said without answering. "It's self-evident that we're dealing with obstinate pagans. That's nothing very surprising, though, since on our Earth itself many peoples have never become acquainted with the Truth without the Crusaders and our missionaries. Our task is considerable, but with the help of Christ, we will lead them to the good. If our brother William sees no inconvenience in it, my Hospitalers are going to begin work as soon as possible and teach these infidels the catechism. I think that half our force will suffice to preach the good word. I'm going to send a brief to His Holiness at once to advise him of the deplorable state in which these poor folk exist and ask him for the creation of bishoprics and parishes, as well as the dispatch of an ecclesiastical court to take care of rebels, apostates and magicians. Thanks to us, to our Crusade, these poor sinners can learn about salvation."

So saying, John of Villiers sat down again. William seemed somewhat in disagreement with his conclusions, especially with the unilateral decision that deprived him of a part of his forces, but he wanted most of all to get back to strategic questions. "Thanks to our brother's foresight," he said, "we've now settled that thorny problem. Does someone else want to ask other questions?"

"Certainly," trumpeted John of Grailly. "First of all, I'd like to know if the Grand Master of the Hospitalers intends, by leaving half his forces here . . . to claim this planet?"

"This is a question only for His Holiness the Pope, who will allot these newly discovered territories to whoever seems good to him," the Hospitaler replied hotly, applauded in that by Conrad von Thierberg.

This time too, William made no reply, although he had some few motives for bitterness.¹

¹Note of the Templar of Tyre: Messengers had now reported the

"May I know what your form of government is?" the Frenchman asked then, addressing the Odeous. "Do you have a king, an emperor?"

"We've long had a democratic government elected by the sovereign people. An assembly designates a president, who chooses his ministers from among it."

"But the land. To whom do the lands belong?" wondered John of Grailly, somewhat horrified.

"To the people, of course, who work it by communities. It's the same for our factories and our residences. Each citizen receives a salary proportionate to his work. In the case he's temporarily unemployed, the community gives him half his highest salary; if he's sick, he's cared for free. But why such questions? Is it different in your world?"

The Frenchman did not answer. He sat down with a profoundly disgusted expression.

"And your armies, whom do they obey?" asked Otto of Granson, who despite his well-lit and swollen face, had kept his clarity of wit.

"Primarily the chief of state, myself currently, and then their generals and officers of various rank."

"But who pays them?"

"The state! How could it be otherwise? A fleet of starships costs a fortune."

"Who directs the work of your scholars?" Djaffar the Wise asked then.

"The one among them they've chosen as most apt to direct the course of their research. No one obliges them to do something they don't approve. But the Minister of Science can, in time of need, mobilize scholars of various disciplines to examine an urgent problem. Credits are voted them by the assembly in either case."

The remarkable Arab seemed quite interested in this system, since all his life he had had to finance his own works himself, but he made no comment.

"I ask you in my turn, since I have satisfied your legitimate curiosity," Adoos said. "You have delivered us from the yoke

accidental death of John XXI. The Council gathered at Viterbus was under pressure from monarchs jealous of the Templars and the other monastic orders. Papal candidate Cardinal Gaetano Orsini, ex-inquisitor, was jealous of William, and once elected, lost no opportunity to advance his rivals.

of the Baphomets, but what will be our status henceforth? Will we be free or will we simply have changed masters?"

This time William found himself caught short. For him, cast into a new universe, the temptation was great. After having carved out a vast empire on Earth, why not reign as all-powerful master over these infidel peoples? After all, as John of Villiers had remarked, these people might be compared to the Mamelukes or the Mongols. They did not practice the True Faith and so they could be made slaves without the Pope seeing any impediment. . . .

But in fine diplomacy he gave a shaded reply. The Odeous scholars were indispensable to him in conquering the Baphomets, and consequently he had to handle them cleverly to make them his allies. There would still be time to change his manner later.

"Your question surprised me, I confess," he said. "That's why I didn't answer at once. It goes without saying that you'll remain leader of the Odeous and that you'll govern your world as you see fit. We only ask you to listen to our priests, who'll teach you our religion. Besides, my Hospitaler brothers are going to leave a garrison here, but only in the intention of defending you against a return of the Baphomets."

"And when you have finished with these demons," Adoos insisted, "will the Terrans leave our planet?"

"That goes without saying. When all danger is removed, we will limit ourselves to establishing fruitful trade relations."

"I am happy that you've given me that assurance. Certain of us feared that we might have escaped the Baphomets only to fall under a yoke even worse than theirs. Under those understandings, we are quite disposed to work with you."

"And I'm quite happy with your statement," William exclaimed. "We have great need of your scholars to give our ships powerful armament, in particular to install on them the quark devices. I would also like to have your opinion on the strategy we should adopt to beat the Baphomets once for all."

"Our specialists will gladly help you. I'm going to give orders for them to put themselves at your service at once. But I fear I can't be of any help to you so far as your second demand is concerned. You see, the Odeous are a peaceful race, and we've never practiced the cursed art of war. That's also why the Baphomets conquered us so easily, for our technology is far in advance of theirs. But I can give you a bit of

advice: the Orpheds are much better in space warfare. Unlike us, they have only a rudimentary science and yet the Baphomets had great trouble conquering them. You must then turn your ships toward Orph, to use that race's experts. Their aspect differs greatly from ours, and the Orpheds look even rather hideous, but they hate the Baphomets from the depth of their hearts, even more than we, for they have been slaves longer."

"Thank you for your advice. We'll deliberate the matter. My wise brother Joubert is going to go with you; put him in contact with your scholars so that work can begin with the fewest possible delays."

"Thank you, Lord Templar. We'll do everything to your satisfaction."

So saying, the Odeous left the hall with Joubert.

"Well! my brothers, what do you think? Must we follow the advice of that stranger and turn our ships to Orph, or meet the majority of the enemy forces near Baphom?"

"No hurry about that," exclaimed John of Grailly. "These demons have a training we lack. The Orpheds might give us precious advice."

"Zo let's get moving," Conrad von Thierberg broke in. "A miscreant rabble has no weight before the Knights of Christ. Let's crush dese barbarous Baphomets."

"Vell spoken," thundered Otto of Granson. "After all, we just won a battle; why not follow up our thrust? We'll make a mouthful out of those infidels."

"We only met weak forces," Peter of Sevry remarked then. "If we attack Baphom, our adversaries will fight with the energy of desperation, for if their planet falls their hegemony is finished. No! We must limit our ambitions for the moment and go against Orph."

"The cunning of the fox is equal to the strength of the lion," Kubla remarked, smiling. "Our adversaries don't know our intentions. Why not lead them to scatter their forces by threatening to attack the satellite barrier that surrounds Baphom, with weak forces, then draw those that follow us near the main part of our strength?"

"That's an interesting idea," William applauded. "But I don't intend to do it in the near future, because our troops aren't seasoned enough. We wish fighting against too important forces. Orph is not far from that world. If the Bapho-

mets launch a counterattack, we'll be warned by our scouts and we can get back in time to make sure our garrison isn't overwhelmed. Let's take the Baphomets' empire before facing these demons in their own domain where they are powerfully entrenched. Our losses will be few and our armament will be increased by the aid of the Odeous. I propose to attack Orph without further delay. What say you to that, my brothers?"

John of Grailly, Peter of Sevry and John of Villiers allied themselves at once to the Templar's proposal. Only Conrad and Otto refused their agreement. But when John of Villiers had murmured a few words in the ear of the Grand Master of the Teutons, he finally acquiesced.

Then it was agreed that, as soon as fifty ships had been equipped with quark weapons, the squadron would take to space and head to Orph.

The dignitaries scattered then, casting a mistrustful look on the drunken soldiers who sported with Odeous women, with no regard for the salvation of their immortal souls.

Outside all was quiet in the camp, lit by braziers which heightened the scarlet tint of the neighboring woods, making them look like flaming torches.

Chapter VIII



William was satisfied with having gotten a decision which left him all his freedom to maneuver. If by chance the Baphomets attacked Oddh during his absence, that would only be half a misfortune, for they would be rid of allies who were becoming more and more troublesome. The Templar had no intention of turning to a hostile pope to distribute the fiefs his own troops had won. Besides, time was on his side, so Marco Polo would have more chances to carry off his mission to good effect. He could even bring other houbits, since Lyzog was not in the neighborhood and its communication with Baphom remained free. He only had to hope that the clever Baphomets would not discover the trick.

Finally, the Grand Master hoped that the Orpheds could lend him precious advice on the way to handle a war in space.

The fleet turned its bows toward Orph four days later, proceeding at cruising speed. John of Villiers stayed behind with half his forces.

The armada found itself thus stripped of a goodly number of ships, but in their place it now had quark cannon, which made up for this loss, at least in some measure. In sum, William, the soldier, had reason to be satisfied; but the monk, the Templar, the servant of the living God, sensed a great deal of trouble in the offing. When, long ago, he had discussed with John of Villiers, had he not assured him that there must have been Christs on other worlds? Well, for the Odeous, there had not been. Must one believe that only the Earth had been so chosen? That only men were the sons of God? In this case, no alien would have knowledge of the True Faith, and Terrans must carry the Word across the uni-

verse—an immense and somewhat frightening task! But on Earth itself, not all creatures believed in the existence of Christ. Houen-Lun, for example, had a philosophy quite different from that of Christians. For him, all living creatures were sacred; he killed no animal; he ate only vegetables and boiled cereal. He was one of the only humans who regularly ate the mixture the ships distributed, for, he said: "It doesn't come from any living creature." Contrary to Djaffar, who had within broad lines, adopted the Christian religion, the Tibetan had refused to have himself baptized, and the Hospitalers had often brought that matter up with the Grand Master.

But the Grand Master had a practical mind. Houen-Lun had rather frightening powers, which had let him overcome the Baphomet who had come to Earth. Now the Asians constituted the armada's shield, for they alone could overcome the aliens' minds, using powers which were reserved for prophets in the Bible. Surely the wise men had secrets the Odeous themselves did not know, so William was very careful not to provoke the wrath of his old allies by trying to catechize them contrary to their will. Later, when peace reigned over the interstellar empire of the Templars, it would be time to take up that delicate problem. Houen-Lun, for reasons known to him alone, served him loyally, so why ask more for the moment? Surely hate of the Baphomets was the main reason for what Houen-Lun did, and his faithfulness to the Templars would not likely be forever. The future would tell what attitude to take with him. At any rate it was useless to think too much on it, for after all, that devil of a man could quite well be spying on the thoughts of the leader of the armada.

The soldier-monks, aided by the Odeous, began to accustom themselves to handling the ships. Their maneuvers were more rapid, their evolutions more precise, and they all found this space navigation exciting. They fearlessly watched the stars pass, crossed nebulosities as if they were some sort of marshland, and began to discover by instinct the multiple ambushes of space without even having recourse to the delicate instruments with which the ships were provided.

All that augured well for the future.

It remained to learn how to attack Orph. William called in

the Odeous to get some few bits of information from them. Captain Sonz furnished it to him quite gladly.

"The situation on that planet is quite like that of Oddh, except it has no moon. The Baphomet ships are therefore stationed near the governor's palace. We have to fight in space to eliminate them, then we have to cross an energy screen the same as on our world, passing under it by using the quark cannon. As for the forces there, they're not numerous, not more than a hundred ships."

"And the Orpheds . . . what will be their attitude toward us?"

"This race has hardly any points in common with us. Once they lived in common in immense pyramids, veritable mazes. Most of the individuals were asexual and only the royal pair engaged in procreation. The warrior castes assured the protection of the city. The workers gathered the necessary food. Altogether, they did not have a very advanced civilization, except in the field of music. The central hall of the pyramids used to contain titanic organs, and all the Orpheds would gather there to perform enchanting symphonies. They played strange instruments only they knew how to make. At present the Baphomets have suppressed the royal couples, and all the individuals are sexual, but the tyrants carefully control their reproduction. Only the best musicians have the right to breed. That way the Baphomets hope to get from their unfortunate slaves more and more refined music. But don't mistake it, the Orpheds are brave and even cruel. Each fertile female can lay up to thirty eggs a season, which is why their masters saturate them with contraceptives. The young reach maturity quickly. The Orpheds will be valuable allies for us, although they are sometimes difficult to understand and don't readily form bonds of friendship. One more bit of information. If you trace a circle taking Baphom as the center, Oddh and Orph are just about an equal distance from the Baphomet planet. It's the same for Eth, the homeworld of the Ethir. Only Lyzog is much farther removed. That's why it was only recently conquered."

"Well, we are advised. The business will be delicate, at least if we want to spare the natives. So I'll adopt a different device for our fleet: instead of putting each ship behind the file leader, I'm going to shift them in space, each locating itself in a different plane from the preceeding. Thus, whatever

quarter the attack comes from, our firepower will be equal, without our ships risking running into each other. No nebulousness near Orph?"

"None. The planet is isolated in space with its four companions, which are not inhabited, and only infrequently visited by prospectors."

"Perfect. We'll arrive above the equatorial plane, so we will have a much greater freedom of movement. Let each man go to his post. In five hours, we'll be starting the operation. We can't let ourselves suffer heavy casualties. Consequently, we'll have to win a quick victory. Let everyone do his duty for the glory of Our Lord."

The leaders of the various squadrons went then to take the positions assigned them in the new plan. They all watched the screens anxiously to spot the Baphomet ships.

The Baphomets remained invisible, and when the armada came in sight of Orph, the enemy had still not manifested themselves. They discovered no mines at all.

William, worried, feared a trap. His enemies were surely advised of his arrival, so why did they not try to drive him back?

Houen-Lun, questioned on the matter, could not give any answer. He did not perceive any mind touch in space. Must he then conclude that the Baphomets had abandoned their conquest? After all, this planet played but a minor role in their economy, and they knew that they must go into combat for it with a very clear numerical disadvantage.

William sent his Turcoples in on reconnaissance near the planet. They met no opposition. Growing bolder, they descended then into the atmosphere, but no one attacked them.

Kubla made an orbit of the planet at low altitude and then sent this message to his leader: "Noble Lord, there is not a single important city here that is not in flames. Apparently, your adversaries have used a scorched earth policy. They leave you a planet on which all installations have been destroyed to stop you from using it. That appears to me a good tactic and we Mongols are accustomed to use it. Some hordes of natives are still wandering here and there. They seem to be in the greatest poverty and apparently have no weapons. But the palace section is invisible. A shining dome like that of Oddh is covering it. Your enemies have probably

gathered all their troops there, and we will have to use main force to get them out."

The Grand Master was rather discomfited by this news. He would have liked very much to destroy some enemy ships to diminish the Baphomet forces.

These demons had delivered him a planet void of all interest, more, they risked having been tricked, drawn off to Orph while the Baphomets destroyed the Odeous factories, which now took on a vital importance.

Without further delay, William ordered blue and red squadrons to go back to Oddh with all possible speed. John of Grailly took command of them with the express order to alert his leader if he met enemies on the way.

But no message had been sent by the Odeous. Maybe the French and the English would arrive there in time to save them from the fate of the Orpheds.

Thus, having taken the risk of dividing his forces, William bore down toward the nest of Baphomet resistance with the intent of finishing it as quickly as possible.

This time his ships were caught by clouds of missiles launched from the ground. They were almost all intercepted, but this defense forced William to abandon his projected air attack.

Furious, the Grand Master had to resort to debarking his troops all around the fort, out of missile range.

Orphed was in no wise similar to smiling Oddh. This world had a luxuriant vegetation more like terrestrial jungles.

The Templars, cursing and swearing, saw themselves faced with the obligation of breaking a road through immense trees, in stinking marsh, infested with insects of all kinds, from which the Orpheds were moreover descended.

Only the leaders had mounts, the six-legged elur, whose horny carapace shrugged off spurs and who must be guided with reins fixed in their ears.

The squires gritted their teeth and built carts to carry the quark cannon and the firetubes to hurl the thunderballs, an innovation they owed to the Odeous and which weighed considerably. To that they had to add the victuals, munitions, and to undergo the damp heat which reigned under these thick leaves. The very air was almost unbreathable due to the strong content of carbon gas and its mephitic odor. But the Crusaders must count themselves lucky not to have to suffer

the continued fire of enemy missiles. Sometimes one of the projectiles got through to the ships which were patrolling at low altitude and the green hell transformed itself into a volcano, knocking down all the trees within a league about.

Of course, the Tholon brothers were part of the foot contingent who dragged themselves through the mud, having lost all sense of direction in these dense thickets.

But sweating and panting, they drew on the cords linked to the carts, following a narrow road opened by the woodsmen whose axes hacked through the brush, after explosive charges had destroyed the largest trees.

Luckily, they had not so long a road to go, and the column of which the boys from Auxerre were part reached the edge of the forest at nightfall.

In the distance, before them, they saw the shining dome which shielded the enemy fortress.

By way of prudence, William ordered his troops to stay under cover and to fortify the strip along the edge of the forest.

That was hardly business for tired infantry who had had to struggle a good hour with their shovels to dig out individual trees.

Finally, when they were able to take a little rest, it was night. An almost total darkness enveloped them, for no moon rose to lighten the shadows. Water seeped into the trenches, legions of big insects like giant mosquitoes gnawed in vain on their spacesuits, but they all slept a leaden sleep, while sentries surveyed the area about them and while patrols walked between the lines, exchanging passwords.

The Terrans thus slept a good part of the night. A few hours before dawn, flashes streaked across the jungle. Coming from before and behind, a heavy fire fell on the positions of the Templars, who wakened with a start.

In the light of the explosions, they could see their enemy, robots in dark armor who were attacking them from cover, without concern for the losses they suffered.

William learned later that these implacable warriors had used underground passages and come out in the forest to catch his troops from behind.

At the moment the Templars had to get themselves out of this one alone, for the melee stopped any intervention from the ships. The training they had undergone on Earth saved

them from destruction. In their shelters they could locate their enemies without difficulty by the fires in the brush, while staying under cover themselves.

The robots used a fire that acted as far as arrow range, which pattered down and set aflame the trees it touched.

In this furnace the Terrans' position very quickly became untenable, while their attackers had no worry about the devouring flames.

For good or for ill, the survivors had to leave their individual holes to reach the plains around the forest.

A few carts could be saved, but most had been destroyed by the fire. Yet as a whole the situation turned in favor of the Templars, who had done slaughter at the start of the attack while the robots were attacking on open ground.

When the glow of dawn lighted the woods, they could train their fire on their enemies who were cornered against the fire in the forest. These demons could certainly bear passing through the flames, but they could not stay there long, so that when the emerald star of Orph arose, the battle was won.

But at what cost! Now the Templars had no more heavy armament to attack the dome, for most of the quark cannon had been destroyed.

William, on Sonz' advice, decided then to drop the necessary machines by parachute, while his fleet opened a concentrated fire on the missiles vomited forth by the fortress.

Toward noon, everything had settled into order.

The Templars, well sheltered in new diggings, had set the firetubes and quark projectors up in a battery.

All of them took a little snack and drank a few gulps of wine, which had become a rare treat.

Now it remained to get the enemy out of his lair.

As the message receptors stayed silent, the Grand Master decided to participate in the final operation in person.

Accompanied by Conrad von Thierberg, whose height and broad shoulders gave him the carriage of a giant, he debarked from a small ship in a forest clearing. William stolidly adjusted the straps of his cuissards and, digging in the spurs, forced his destrier at a gallop through the thickets.

A few moments later he reached the front lines.

Garin Tholon and his brothers, who looked like living statues of filth, for their armor was coated with grease, met him there.

"Well, my dear fellows," their leader said, "how are we doing?"

"It's been a hot time, noble brother," replied Garin the Templar. "But we gave them a good thrashing and they haven't come back from it. The attacks of the metal creatures have stopped. Now our weapons are set up in battery and we can open fire against their fortress."

"Perfect. Fire the quark cannon to weaken the soil at the base of the dome. Then wait on new orders before the attack."

Garin went to pass those instructions and soon the luminous beams were digging at the earth, without reaction from the enemy.

"What does it seem to you, Brother Conrad? Apparently our adversaries haven't anything left in there but a garrison of robots to slow us down."

"That seems likely to me. These cowards don't dare risk their precious necks, nein. But I wonder if their crews are reduced to nothing. The way I see it, they're waiting in the castle enclosure to fight der last battle."

"Maybe. At any rate, I don't want to take any chances. We have to finish this fast, so much the worse for those inside. I'm going to blow their fortress."

Now a few openings gaped around the dome and Garin came back to receive the Grand Master's orders.

"My brave friend, I forbid you to go into that hole. There's no Baphomet there and I fear some trap. Train our cannon on the openings, and use the largest caliber and the most powerful thunderballs. Go."

Again the Templar went and the servants of the firetubes charged the guns which opened fire in unison, while all put themselves under cover, including the two Grand Masters who had made their precious destriers lie down on the ground.

Everyone waited for a powerful explosion, but the reality was even worse. A conflagration of titanic force deafened the besiegers; an immense column of smoke like a black, twisting mushroom shot skyward, making the daystar dim, settling its shadow over the battlefield.

The first trees of the forest were laid low to the earth, while the burnings were snuffed out like candles.

When the dust settled, the Templars got up, staggering,

shaking off the bits of earth that covered their suits. They saw then that the dome had disappeared, and an enormous smoking crater gaped in place of the fortress.

"My vord," exclaimed the Teuton. "They must have had a stock of thunder material our spheres exploded."

William did not answer. He was in shock from the explosion, tottering. He put his hands to his ears, forgetting his helmet.

"You're vounded?" asked Conrad.

"No. Just shaken up. Help me get my helm off."

The Teuton undid the straps and lifted off the confining headgear, observing that a thin thread of blood trickled from the ear canal, but the hemorrhage stopped very quickly.

"Ah, vell, you got off all right," the German said.

"Yes, our enemies must have had explosives gathered there, or maybe it was a trap meant to blow up our knights if they risked going in. We'll never know. But here's a new proof of the demoniac cleverness of the Baphomets. We must constantly be on our guard."

William and Conrad climbed back onto their mounts, which had not suffered too much from the shock, and went to review their troops. Thanks to the individual holes there had been only a few deaths, those when blocks of stone had fallen right on some unfortunate occupant.

The knights and the squires gathered to go back aboard the ships, which had set themselves down nearby. William was in haste to leave this cursed planet, which could no longer be of any use to him now that its installations were destroyed.

"Look, my lord, there's a column of knights coming down the hill."

William turned. Truly, a line of gray dust marked the advance of knights arriving at a gallop.

At once the Templars set themselves in battle array in front of the ships.

They all saw quickly that they had little to fear, for the arriving forces were not numerous, not more than fifty.

When they were in firing range, the Terrans were able to identify them. They were Orpheds. These strange green creatures rode on bronze beetles quite like the noble Terran scarab. They differed little except in one important point: being warm-blooded rather than cold-blooded, which meant they could reach the size of small horses.

The aspect of the newcomers created a stir of panic among the soldier-monks. These beings looked irresistibly like grimacing cathedral gargoyles. For these devout souls, no doubt at all, these Orpheds could not but be demons spawned by Lucifer, the fallen angel who had rebelled against his Creator. It needed all the authority of the Commanders and the discipline of the Templars to avoid a massacre.

William himself sketched the sign of the cross and sent for Sonz to ask him if these were really the natives.

When the captain answered in the affirmative, he ordered him to go ask their intentions.

The Odeous, mounting an elur, galloped as far as the strangers, with whom he carried on a moment's discussion, then came rapidly back to the Templars.

"Well?" asked William. "What did you learn from them?"

"Nothing very disturbing, my lord. They belong to a little community that lives in the mountains and escaped from the Baphomets. They ask medicines and weapons. They don't lack food, being vegetarian. You have nothing to fear from them."

"Do they know whether there are other fortresses on Orph?"

"I questioned them on that subject. They answered in the negative. As we supposed, the Baphomets left some time before our arrival and destroyed all these installations. Only the robot legions had hidden under the fortress that we destroyed. The Orpheds are certain we've destroyed the whole planetary garrison."

"Good. Have them given what they want. Go tell them I don't want to talk with them. They look too much like demons vomited up out of hell. Even the Baphomets aren't so hideous."

"Will you leave troops in this place?" Sonz asked then.

"Will you not ask them strategic advice?"

"A company and four ships, useless to leave more. I want nothing more to do with this planet and these people. Go talk to them if your stomach can stand it. They turn mine."

The captain saluted and went back to the insectoids, while William and his officers boarded the flagship.

It took to space at once and was soon joined by the rest of the squadrons, which gathered in battle formation, waiting the orders of their leader.

The Grand Master was entirely undecided. Without any news of Oddh, he did not know whether he should go back to that planet or make a rapid raid toward Eth to gain it instead.

A message from Otto of Granson put an end to his hesitation. The giant Swiss reported that blue and red squadrons had reached Oddh without hindrance. The planet had not suffered any attack. Elsewhere, space seemed empty. The Baphomets had apparently retreated to Baphom. He added that the Odeous were working around the clock and that in a few weeks the Templar forces would be doubled. Finally, he concluded, without giving more details, he had to announce the arrival of a legate of the new pope, Gaetano Orsini, elected under the name of Nicholas III.

William took in this information in particular, and it sent him into a towering rage.

"What have I to do with that brainless chatterer?" he growled. "By the Glorious and Blessed Virgin Mary, there's no fat glutton courtier of His Holiness going to tell me what I'm going to do. These worlds are mine and I'll allot them to whomsoever I like! Ah! I'd laugh if somehow the Baphomet fleet turned toward Earth. Sure, they'd be praying to me then and begging me, if I let that pernicious horde go. When I think that they never even sent me reinforcements . . . !"

"Good sir," the Templar of Tyre broke in, "it's not fitting for a servant of Christ to say such things. Anger has gotten the better of you. His Holiness is the representative of our Lord in this world and nothing escapes his authority."

"You forget the prerogatives of our order!" William returned, red-faced. "We constitute an independent power which enjoys the protection of Rome without accepting its guardianship. Who has worked more than I for the Glory of Our Lord? Thanks to me, the Holy Faith will be spread from one end to the other of the Earth and of the universe. I laugh at papal bulls and I account for my actions only to the Master of the World, the God of the Cosmos who created all the stars and those among them. But after all," he noted, sweetening his tone somewhat, "I am very wrong to give such importance to cowards who came to feast on my conquests. We're heading for Eth. Then we'll go force those demoniac Baphomets out of their lair. Now let me alone."

All those present, far from eager to run afoul of the Grand Master's temper, retreated at once.

William went and knelt before a shrine and submerged himself in his meditations.

Surely, if the Grand Master's faithful could have read into his thoughts, they would have been dismayed, wondering if their leader had not fallen prey to a demon.

Happily, only Houen-Lun could enter minds, and the Tibetan stayed mute as the grave.

Plunged into an abyss of desolation, William felt his faith waver. Lately when he was still on the sweet Earth, had he not stated to John of Villiers that the power of Christ was sufficient so that He could incarnate on every planet, bringing about the redemption of sinners? Well, on Oddh and on Orph—Sonz had assured him—no native had ever been moved to die to assure the salvation of his brothers' souls. It was for that reason, rather than for military motives, that the Templar wanted to go to Eth. There, finally, he might discover the traces of a local Christ. If he did not, what must he think? That beings of such demoniac aspect as the Orpheds might never have known original sin? Come now! What, would man be the only bearer of that stain? Surely even on Earth, quite a good many nations had not known Christ, and it was precisely his role, as servant of the Faith, to spread it among them. But why did the Son of Man not manifest Himself to give him a mark of his power? After all, the business at hand was worth it. Never since Moses had any human had so much effect in increasing the kingdom of God. Why would he not also have right to a message? To tablets of the Law? On Oddh and on Orph, soldier-monks already worked to convert the infidels, but could the rules of the Ten Commandments and the Gospel be applied to creatures as different from men as the Orpheds, who laid eggs like serpents, or even to the androgynous Baphomet? William did not know what to think. His brain was overwhelmed. For the first time since his childhood, the proud soldier felt tears flow over his seamed cheeks. The Templar wept for himself, for the shattering of his universe, for after all . . . If this multiform pantheon discovered on Earth and in space implied that beings rampant over the worlds created gods at their own need, and if, in fact . . . He did not exist . . .

Little by little, the Grand Master felt his reason totter, for

these problems were impenetrable, and he hardly had the gift to resolve them.

Gradually he slid into a deep sleep.

The soldier-monk rested long in that state, his head on the rail bench of the prie-dieu. During this time, the ships lanced through the infinity of space, tiny dots carrying aboard them weak creatures driven by insatiable pride to desire unfathomable secrets that their tiny souls could scarce conceive.

William was not the only one who plunged himself into esoteric meditations. The wise lama also had his problems.

Of another sort, of course, but still painful. Convinced that beings reincarnated after death as other living creatures, Houen-Lun saw no obstacle that Terrans should not reincarnate as Orpheds, Ethir, Odeous, Baphomets, and vice versa. That increased the stretch of the cycle each must run before reaching supreme felicity. Again, his benevolent inaction regarding the world and its inhabitants found itself in shabby state by now. Houen-Lun had succeeded in unifying the mysterious supernatural power which manifested itself in nature; he had now added to that the stars and planets, but how to excuse his acting in complete contradiction of the maxims which bade him kill no living thing, not to do harm to any, neither to birds nor to beasts, not even to flowers and plants?

Once, he had acted to kill the Baphomet who had come to Earth, by telling himself that these pernicious creatures abused the world's harmony. He had held the same rationale then in agreeing to help the Grand Master of the Templars in his crusade against the Baphomets. But were not these perverse creatures too born of the Master of the World, Adibudha? Then why destroy them, since the mountain tiger too has a right to exist? The world, surely, is only illusion, but where is reality in the immensity of the universe? Was it necessary to give up helping these western warriors, these rude-mannered folk and their primitive faith? Such an abandonment meant, pure and simply, their ruin. Without the psychic activity of the lamas, they would only be playthings in the claws of Baphomet tigers. In sum, which was the greatest risk of disturbing world harmony? The Baphomets, to be sure. But the proud Templars, the Hospitalers, the Teutons, were they not also greedy and despicable as these filthy beings?

Houen-Lun, torn, realized that he was very far from realiz-

ing his supreme disinterest, for close ties still bound him to this vile world he thought he had rejected.

His heart thrust him toward aiding his fellow humans.

His reason told him that by doing so he would intervene still more in the disturbance of events, flagrant contradiction of his doctrine.

Powerless to make a decision, the lama drove all thought from his mind.

So the time rolled past rapidly.

The Templar and the Tibetan were both surprised to learn that the fleet was approaching the world of the Ethir.

William leapt to the command post, forgetting his problems to plunge himself into action.

Houen-Lun waited and watched.

Chapter IX



The planetary system of the Ethirs had ten planets. Notable fact, two of them were capable of sheltering living things, but they were vastly different. The first, nearest the white star, enjoyed a tropical climate. Covered with jungles of luxuriant vegetation, it sheltered an abundant wildlife, often dangerous, somewhat like that which existed on Earth in the Cretaceous period. The Ethir had only arrived there recently, having constructed ships capable of space travel only within a mere hundred years. That world had served primarily as a hunting preserve. Only a few posts had been put there. Since the conquest of the second world by the Baphomets, it was completely abandoned.

The civilization of the birdmen was widespread in the temperate and serene climate of Eth. It was far from advanced compared to the Odeous. The Ethir still lived in fortified cities girt with high walls, and covered with a transparent roof. The castles, the houses in which they lived, still had an access mechanism high above, pierced through that sturdy roof.

Their owners had easily flown great distances. They had sometimes used balloons to transport heavy weights, dirigibles drawn by powerful birds, petrels. Animal evolution had followed a special course on Eth. Almost all species were capable of flight.

Besides their powerful wings, the Ethir had thin arms ending in a slim, four-fingered hand with an opposable thumb, which let them do all manner of work.

To prevent these unfortunate folk from flying, the Baphomets had broken the humerus, which healed crooked and prevented the wings from extending; but these cruel masters took

great care not to damage their hands, which were indispensable in the playing of musical instruments.

The Ethir, of a peaceful disposition, had let themselves be conquered almost without striking a blow. They had been slaves for only about thirty years, gentle and graceful slaves, with their downy, almost immaculately white plumage, remarkable musicians.

William had learned all these details through Sonz, but for the moment he had no concern for them, for he was only looking to know if Eth had been provided with defense systems.

The detectors had found no mines, and as for the three moons, they proved deserted. Evidently the Baphomets had not had time to fortify them.

Examination of the planet showed that it had been evacuated. There was only a garrison of robots charged with watching the slaves and taking care of rebellion.

The summit of the hill supporting the fortress was protected by a vast shining dome.

This time, however, the Baphomets had not indulged in systematic destruction. Eth, the flower planet, produced heady essences much prized by these demoniac creatures. They had left intact those vast plantations with specimens lovingly selected over many years. Only the factories near the cities had been leveled.

All that pleased William considerably, for he did not even have to worry about attacking the enemy fortress. His troops knew the tactic to use backward and forward, and they had quickly eliminated fort and garrison.

When that was accomplished, the Grand Master went to Ethor, the planetary capital, in order to deal with the lord of these lands.

He then had leisure to admire the delicate architecture of the city, flying at low altitude. The streets, useless before the coming of the Baphomets, were teeming with an awkward crowd. Only a few despised collaborators had kept their wings unbroken.

As a privileged distinction, the collaborators had also had the right of flying the transport dirigibles. Since the arrival of the fleet, the majority of these cowards had fled into the planet's desert regions. Without weapons, they represented

but a small danger and they would be quickly obliged to surrender.

Sonz assured the Templar that it would be easy to heal the unfortunate victims of the Baphomets. A very simple surgical operation would let them recover the use of their wings.

William was welcomed on the platform covering the palace by musical trills of an orchestra and a choir singing the praises of the liberators of the planet. Then he was led into immense high-ceilinged halls, the walls of which were decorated with silver perches and soft nests of velvet, now unused.

Arros, the venerable Ethir who had once been governor of the planet, welcomed him with the greatest marks of deference. He and his ministers cast themselves at the Templar's feet, kissing his hands in token of thanks. William gave himself over to this effusive welcome for a moment, then lifted Arros impatiently to his feet and asked Sonz to translate what he said.

"Don't abase yourselves so," he ordered. "Such acts are for gods alone, and I am only a humble creature of the Living God, Master of the universe. Don't you have any god, that you worship his work in this fashion, like as you are to the angels of our religion?"

"Of course we do," answered the old Ethir through the Odeous' translation. "We believe in a supreme creator who reigns over all the universe, but we do not deny him in any way by thanking him for his grace through your agency, for you have chased away these monsters who oppressed us."

"Tell me, old one," the Grand Master pursued, "has your God sent onto this world the incarnation of His beloved son who, taking your carnal form, came to set you free from original sin?"

"Assuredly!" Arros replied with an astonished look. "How could you know that, coming from a distant planet? Dhret took on flesh several centuries ago, to give our people the teachings of religion that conformed to the desires of his Almighty Father."

This time William felt himself seized with joy. Finally he had found the proof he searched for so hard. Earth had not been the only place chosen for the Incarnation. A Christ existed on this planet. All his doubts were wiped out in an instant. Neither the Odeous nor the satanic-looking Orpheds had yet reached the stage of their evolution when God judged

it right to send His Beloved Son to bring them His Holy Word, but these angel-like Ethir were, like Terrans, redeemed by Christ, who had taken on the form of the inhabitants of this world.

"And how did He die?" the Templar asked anxiously.

"Covered in years and revered by our people," replied Arros. "How could it be otherwise? We owe him great gratitude, for he gave us the Holy Precepts, the models of all our life, which will let us pass after death to supreme happiness."

William suddenly went white. Without the pain of a shameful death, how could this Christ be able to redeem these creatures?

"And what are these teachings that He gave you?"

"Never to kill those like us, never to eat flesh, only grains and vegetables, to leave the family nest to make our own at the age of fifteen, to rear our children and care for them, to receive those whose parents have died, to marry our brother's widow, if perchance he should have left this world untimely, to despise wealth and abandon the quest for material goods save as we need them, to praise the God of the universe twice weekly by our songs, and to gather on the anniversary of Dhret's disappearance to glorify him, to take only from the rich, to charitably smother our brothers when they grow old . . ."

"What?" gasped William. "That impostor preached euthanasia and polygamy, by Christ! You're making fun of me, old one. Take care!"

"Don't get so angry, my friend. Each race finds appropriate a different moral code. What is good for us birdfolk would not necessarily be suitable for you other folk, you warriors come from the stars. So it is forbidden for us to fight to take the goods of other folk, while your God surely orders you to fight without mercy against the peoples of the universe to increase your domain. For I have no illusions, stranger, we have simply changed masters and we thank you for it, for you seem much gentler and kinder than the foul Baphomets."

An amused light shone in Sonz' eyes as he translated these words and William almost choked. "You are completely mistaken, old one," he assured him. "The Templars never enslaved anyone. They limit themselves to teaching the universe the True Word."

"Under constraint, for it in no wise corresponds to what we follow."

"Your doctrine, true, does differ markedly from ours, but you venerate a Redeemer and it will be easy to explain to you the errors in the Dogma that your people have followed until now. For example, it's not at all right for you to marry a brother's widow when you're already married, for it's forbidden to have more than one wife."

"In your world, perhaps, if your race were prolific, but we, who only lay a single egg, hatching after an incubation of two years, how could we perpetuate our race if all the marriageable females were not fertilized?"

William gave a vast sigh. "The ways of God are inscrutable. I see now how an alien could differ from a human. His needs, his moral code, his soul . . . are not like ours, so how could a religion be universal? Already on our Earth, there are numerous ways of worshiping the Lord, and how to know which has the Truth and, especially, if there exists a Dogma applicable to all . . . you appear moved by good intentions when you preach polygamy. Among other peoples more prolific than either of us, there is a selection of births they call eugenics, which is I believe the case of the Orpheds, who smother all the subjects that have flaws or deformities. All that is forbidden by our God. But how to know if we must impose His Laws on peoples like yours?"

"You are surely understanding and good and you realize that any intervention in our ancestral inheritance would amount to a new slavery. Yet you must decide and you seem torn."

"Certainly, I am facing formidable problems, but I pray God to enlighten me to act according to justice and according to His desires. For the moment I'm going to leave you a little garrison on your planet. You'll be free to practice your religion your way. Later, when the war against the Baphomets is finished, we'll have time to reflect soberly on the attitude we should adopt. Go."

The Ethir withdrew, his great wings trailing behind him. He looked clumsy and awkward, but what must be his lightness and his grace when he glided through the sky on his immaculate wings!

William went back to his flagship without delay. He wanted, before leaving this solar system, to take a look at the

neighboring world to be sure that no enemy troops had taken refuge there. The squadron then made a rapid turn and the Grand Master stepped out on this new world of a luxuriance and savagery unimaginable.

Voracious lianas had already invaded the precarious Ethir installations, breaking the walls with their weight.

The Templar and his escort perceived monstrous trees whose trunks and branches were covered with foot-long spines. According to Sonz, the Ethir had used these sharp darts as daggers in preference to better steel, for they contained a deadly poison which killed in a few seconds. Men-at-arms gathered a great number of them, in spite of the trouble they had detaching them from the trees. In this woods also lived countless plants with saps that intoxicated, irritated or poisoned, of which the Baphomets had made once an ample harvest.

There also he found strangling vines the quickness of which defied imagining. Countless skeletons of animals, hung above the ground, marked the presence of these implacable green killers.

William quickly understood that no garrison could survive in these places, at least without having major means to fight against the vegetable assault that each night regained the territory of the clearings made the day before.

So he left these cursed places after having consulted his oracle Houen-lun, who confirmed his impression. Outside of a legion of beasts and insects, no being with a brain could live there.

Reassured, the Grand Master then turned their bows for Oddh, to concentrate his forces for the final assault.

On the way, he received excellent news from the message darts. The enemy fleet had disappeared from space.

This was reassuring for the moment and disquieting for the future. The Templar disclosed this information to Sonz, whose intelligence he respected, and Sonz confirmed his fears.

"I discussed that with the Orpheds at some length," the Odeous assured him, "and here is what they conclude: the Baphomets are cowards. They gladly annex planets when they face only a feeble resistance, which has been the case until now. They surely reckoned that your Earth would be ill defended, and their surprise was considerable when they found themselves faced with a people resolved to fight with

all their resources. Since you have at your disposal, besides, technological means equal to their own, these cowards have adopted the tactic of walls. Only their planet has a power device behind which they can find shelter. Their satellites constitute a sealed enclosure which few ships can face and even in the event attackers succeed in making a breach, they will have to defeat the massed squadrons behind them. On Baphom, there are food supplies and minerals which must let them hold out for years. What matter if they have to sacrifice a few slaves?"

"We know that tactic very well," William murmured, mechanically stroking his black beard. "Our kings have fortified cities, and their dukes and barons have mighty walled castles, very hard to destroy, except with our thunderballs. We are expert in the art of siege and we are well experienced in tactics that require this kind of fighting. So then why can't we come at the enemy in his lair when we have forces enough at our disposal?"

"There's a good reason, noble lord," the Odeous said. "When you fight on Earth, your troops can feed themselves on the land. In space, it goes differently. How can your ships stay near Baphom without provisioning with fuel and food? You have to divide your forces, one part coming back to Oddh to take on supplies, while the other maintains the ring around the strong place. Then the enemy will have a hard time making sorties en masse, but you will be numerically inferior, and for all the courage of your warriors, you will sustain serious losses, maybe even disastrous ones. Then when your crews are reduced, the Baphomets, assured of combat at odds of ten to one, will only make a single mouthful of your ships."

Those were the right words to make all the soldier-monks stop and think, accustomed as they were to the art of war.

William himself could not but recognize the correctness of his ally's opinion. Of course it was possible to leave the Baphomets in their lair and exploit the planets they had liberated, increasing the squadrons with new crusaders. But for their part the demons would surely take advantage of this to reinforce themselves, and the installations on Baphom were intact, while the Templars could only count on Oddh. Time was surely in favor of the besieged, who someday would break out in force.

So it was necessary to make a choice: to protect Earth, without great strategic interest, since its science, still in its infancy, could not let them build vast factories; or Oddh, the only world capable of furnishing a great quantity of indispensable minerals to the duplicators and to the alchemists who worked out the delicate mechanisms of the ships and weapons.

Thinking well on the matter, the Baphomets had the master cards and only Marco Polo with his houbits could change the course of events.

Now, the dart messages had not furnished any clear information on the Venetian. Had he been unmasked or had he indeed found himself quite simply walled into the enemy fortress?

Houen-Lun would perhaps have been able to answer these questions, but the Tibetan wise man, plunged into a sort of catalepsy, had escaped this world and its intrigues.

William was thus alone, face to face with his dilemma, while the unbeaten armada turned toward Oddh.

Marco Polo had kept his promise faithfully. He had left Chang-Chu four days after the departure of the Grand Master's squadrons, the lama Tarim, Brother Berard and Brother Montclair going with him, all of them, of course, made up like Lyzogans and speaking the language of those aliens fluently.

The route followed by this cautious ship drew off to one side, away from that followed by the invasion fleet, so that the pseudo merchants arrived unhindered at satellite 289.

There, things became a little more complicated. The garrison had been relieved and none of the new people knew Marco Polo. Surely the memory of the central computer kept a record of the passage of the Lyzogans, but the Odeous captain in command of that station demanded the arriving ship stay in orbit, waiting on precise instructions. A state of war had been declared, and no ship could get into the fortifications of Baphom without a special safe conduct.

Marco Polo and his companions must then wait patiently for the requisite authorization to arrive. Evidently the Baphomet leaders had other matters to occupy them, for the Terrans stayed in that condition in range of the satellite defense for five interminable days.

The Venetian, worried, racked his brain to discover some subterfuge which would let him carry off his mission, but in vain. He could not help but alert the Baphomets and compromise the success of an operation of extreme importance for the Terrans.

He had, besides, other worries, for Tarim did not prove very cooperative. The Tibetan disliked to leave his meditations to probe the minds of the occupants of the satellite and the Venetian was not very sure how to bring him out of it. The two Templars were hardly better recruits, being unbridled loudmouths who constantly talked about the fine points of swordsmanship and tricks of war, making ceaseless fencing passes in the narrow living quarters.

Marco Polo paced like a fox in a cage and was beginning to wonder if his trick had not been discovered, when the satellite finally gave him authorization to approach.

Each occupant of the ship put a final touch on his makeup and when the Odeous captain made his entry, all was ready to welcome him.

The Odeous looked the Lyzogans over arrogantly, comparing them against pictures previously taken of the visitors to Zolial without their knowledge, then inspected the cargo in detail and finally deigned to growl at them: "All of it looks all right to me. You're going to take yourselves directly to Baphom. You see, our emperor fears our fortifications may be the object of an attack and he wants the houbits to be turned over to him in his palace. You'll land directly at the imperial starport; there, they'll give you new instructions. Two starships will escort you as far as Baphom as a security precaution. I warn you to obey these instructions strictly. It's worth your life, if you value your lives at all."

Then the Baphomets' slave turned his back without further civilities and went back to his post.

Marco Polo easily found the two ships indicated to him and put himself at once at the disposal of their commanders. They had come to guide the ship and the three vessels veered toward Baphom.

The Venetian, during the passage, did not fail to look carefully at the borders. He could thus observe that countless patrols were cruising about, making any invasion impossible. The convoy was checked more than ten times before it arrived in Baphom's near neighborhood.

There a grand and frightening spectacle was awaiting the Terran spies. As far as the eye could see extended clouds of ships of all sizes, well arranged in squadrons.

Their forces matched the size of William's armada, and they still had to reckon with countless ships stationed on the satellites and on Baphom itself.

Berard and Montclair were seized with an understandable dismay and Marco Polo had to reassure them, reminding them that if they succeeded on this mission, all these fine vessels would be without leaders to command them. That cheered the Templars somewhat, little accustomed as they were to such sights as this.

Before entering the planet's atmosphere, the ship underwent a new inspection, made this time by Orphed slaves.

The two monks had the utmost difficulty mastering themselves, for these creatures reminded them of the demons of hell, minions of Lucifer. But the Terrans underwent this last test successfully, and a few minutes later they were authorized to set down before the palace, but on automatic pilot, like all the other vessels, doubtless to avoid having candidates for suicide missions hurl their ships onto the defensive installations.

Finally, after a perfect landing, the hatch opened and the four passengers found themselves in the presence of a squad of robots. This time it was quite necessary that Tarim follow his companions.

Marco Polo, anxious for his cargo, went back for several checks. Ethir slaves were already proceeding to off-load the precious houbits into vehicles ranged beside the ship.

The Venetian heaved a sigh of relief. Apparently the Baphomets had no doubts and were taking the agreed delivery of the precious devices.

Nothing had changed since his last stay. The patrols were better equipped, the checks more frequent, but the palace was still thrust toward the clouds. The emperor had not yet judged the situation grave enough to hide the high tower in the entrails of the rocks.

The Terrans' escort followed the same route as they had on the Venetian's first visit. As far as he could judge, the lift led to the same floor, and they let them into an apartment identical to the one they had previously occupied.

The moment he knew they were not headed for some dark

dungeon, Marco Polo found himself perfectly satisfied. But as his guards were going to leave without uttering a word, he made up his mind to question them.

"Can I know when it will be possible for me to meet a Baphomet lord?"

"Question without answer," replied the robot in a rasping voice. "Our lords know your presence in these places. They will call you when they deem fit. I advise you the danger of crossing the threshold without being asked. You will receive very disagreeable shocks to your organism, which will become fatal if you make a second attempt."

Then the metal machine turned its back and walked out.

Marco Polo's first concern was to put a finger on his lips to signal his companions that all conversation would be overheard.

Sulking, the Templars went to lie on the downy beds while Tarim cast a psychic message to his companion.

"I don't particularly approve the object of our mission," he stated. "This interference in the existence of creatures endowed with reason does not please me at all, but Houen-Lun has charged me to guard you. So then here is what I could learn. The Baphomets have detected the fleet of the Grand Master of the Templars. They have decided to remain on the alert and to retreat behind their powerful defenses where they enjoy a crushing superiority. So far as concerns us directly, I have not noted any particular distrust."

This information was of the greatest interest, and Marco Polo would have given a great deal to send it to William, but that was unhappily impossible.

So he asked in his thoughts:

"Do you think they will let us leave their planet to go get other cargo?"

"I don't know. Emperor Zolial is presently in conference with his generals. He scarcely has time to concern himself with us. Now leave me to my meditations. I will advise you if something unforeseen comes up."

The Tibetan then broke off all mental contact and Marco Polo, for all his attempts, could not get further information out of him.

But the Lyzogans appeared still to enjoy certain prerogatives, for scarcely had the robots crossed the threshold than

four slaves with slender bodies and small high breasts slipped furtively into the room.

Pertly they came to size up the guests, curious to look over their anatomy. To judge by their frowns they were not seduced by the virility of the Lyzogans, for they went off into a corner of the room, squatting on a rug of long downy fur, and began to babble and whisper in each other's ears commentaries which made them laugh like little mad things.

One of them, though, came to Marco Polo, whose breadth of shoulder seemed to impress her. She planted herself in front of him, hands on hips, the tips of her breasts thrust forward under the diaphanous tissue of her tunic, and smiled at him quite wickedly. Then she drew closer to him, slid her hand under his shirt to caress his neck, and breathed in his ear: "You're the stranger that left with Aira, aren't you?"

"Indeed," the Venetian agreed. "Was she a friend of yours?"

"My sister. I'm called Daicha. What happened to her? Pretend to embrace me if I don't displease you too much. You know that they spy on us."

"You're even prettier than she is. I take the greatest pleasure in covering you with kisses." So the Venetian assured her and set to work. This lasted some few moments. "Your lips are soft as velvet," he said. "And your perfume drives a man mad."

"Tell me about Aira," the slave insisted.

"She's getting along well," Marco Polo replied evasively. "I left her on my planet."

"You aren't Lyzogan. I know you're in disguise. Tell me where you come from. Is your nation powerful and well armed?"

The Terran hesitated a moment. Such confidences risked compromising all their plans. But on the other hand, he was alone, without ties with the Templars, and an ally was not to be rejected. Besides, the female slaves wore no implant. "I come from Earth," he answered. "We have a powerful fleet which is right now not far from Baphom. That's why the Baphomet emperor has decreed a state of emergency. An attack against this planet . . . would it be possible?"

"Alas, its defenses are impenetrable. I heard Fizzur talk about it. The Baphomets have decided to retreat behind the wall of satellites and wait till your people come here, then

destroy them. Now your people are attacking my homeworld of Oddh. I hope they free it! Then your people will doubtless attack Eth and Orph, but you must warn them not to go up against the defenses of Baphom."

"And how might I do that?" Marco Polo asked. "Normally I would have set my cargo out on a satellite and gone back to Lyzog, but the Baphomets decided otherwise, for all ties with other worlds have been broken."

"We're going to think on this problem," whispered Daicha, who made herself quite small in his arms, groaning with pleasure. "Take me. I want you . . ."

Surprised, the Venetian carried her to the bed and let her down delicately. At that moment a robot entered.

"Lord Fizzur," it said, "is waiting on the Lyzogan Polo."

The Terran straightened, straightened his hair and clothing, then followed his guide. He knew that the Baphomets did not like to be kept waiting.

The governor of Tekaph received him in the same luxurious apartment he had occupied when the pseudo Lyzogan had made his last visit.

"Salutations, my dear Polo," he exclaimed jovially. "I have to congratulate you. Your houbits are marvelous. No psychedelic drug ever gained us such a quintessence of pleasures. The emperor is enchanted. I learned that you have faithfully discharged your mission. Perfect. We love faithful servants. Alas, due to a slight mishap, we can't let you go back to bring a new cargo. Pirates are menacing our communications lanes and we can't let you run such a risk. Don't worry. This incident will be of short duration and we'll soon resume fruitful exchange with your planet. Tell me. Have you had any difficulty on your way, met any fleet?"

"No, your lordship, everything went as fine as could be, apart from the usual small incidents, we met a magnetic disturbance that shook us up a little, but nothing serious."

"I was only wanting to be sure that the pirates hadn't sent some ships toward Lyzog. Apparently they haven't done anything of the sort. That confirms our information. Well! my dear merchant, go back to your apartment. You have to rest there a little while, but we'll give you all you desire to entertain you. The slaves do seem to be to your taste."

"Indeed, sir. Daicha is a marvelous creature. I was going to try her out when your robot came to get me."

"Perfect. Go back to her and avail yourself of her till you've had enough. When you tire of her we'll find you others."

"Thank you, thank you, munificent highness. Your humble and obedient servant only asks to be useful to you."

"You please me. I think we're made to understand one another. Go. If I need you I'll send for you."

Marco Polo withdrew, bowing liberally. He reentered the lift and went back to the gentle Odeous, who was still lying on his bed.

In a corner the Templars were devouring the tempting food, while the Tibetan stayed in lotus position on the carpet.

The Venetian took off his boots and lay down near Daicha.

"Everything went all right?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yes. He only wanted to ask me questions about my voyage and to tell me I was going to be here a little while. In one regard, that isn't displeasing to me, although the place does lack privacy."

"Don't let that bother you," said the Odeous.

So saying, she pushed a button in reach of her hand. A bronze curtain at once isolated the bed from the rest of the room.

"Now I think we are going to have to make love." She smiled. "If you're not too tired, that is."

The Venetian's fervent grip left her no doubt on the subject. As for Fizzur, if he was watching the scene, he was going to be satisfied.

Chapter X



During the days that followed, William's envoy lived the life of a pasha. He did learn interesting details on the slave organization. They had a well organized information service. They had even succeeded in stealing some very useful instruments, several devices to command the robots, devices that looked like little cylinders, that one could slip into a pocket; and even the pen-shaped weapons which gave off a killing ray. The most precious was beyond a doubt the electronic key that disconnected the energy screen at the doors. All these objects had been stolen from wastebaskets, for they were broken equipment that the slaves had patiently put back in working order.

But for the moment the Venetian could only wait. He was still without communication with the outside world and Tarim was not at all cooperating.

That lasted several weeks.

During this time, William of Beaujeu also was fretting, without pastimes as agreeable as Marco Polo's.

The voyage to Oddh had not posed any problems. They captured one enemy ship damaged by an antimatter particle, but its occupants had not possessed any interesting information.

A patrol of Hospitalers came to meet the armada which had settled on the moon Lyzar, and the Grand Master rejoined John of Villiers in the capital of the planet Oddh.

This time he had considerable reason to forget his military worries.

When he made his entrance into the hall of state, he found the Grand Master of the Hospitalers enthroned on a chair bearing the emblem of his order. At his right sat a bishop in

a scarlet robe, at his left stood a monk with a weasel's face whom he had no difficulty identifying as a Dominican of the Holy Inquisition.

Knitting his heavy brows, William of Beaujeu marched toward his ally, who was flaunting a wicked smile.

"Welcome to my domains, noble brother. Your expedition was successful? Permit me to introduce you to His Holiness' legate, Bishop Liccardi, and to the President of the Holy Ecclesiastical Court, Father Evrard, who has already done an excellent work in my estates."

"Salutations to you, my brothers," grated the Templar, lips taut. "Can I ask the reason for this little joke? Especially when has John of Villiers arrogated to himself the right to give orders on my lands?"

"That demands a few explanations, I do concede," the Hospitaller said in a mocking tone. "If Your Eminence would read his papal bull. . . ."

The bishop stood up and drew from his long robe a parchment bearing a lead seal at the end of a ribbon. He unrolled it and read in a loud and solemn voice.

"To my loyal servant in Jesus Christ, William of Beaujeu, by the grace of God Grand Master of the Templars, I Nicholas III, Universal Pontiff by the decision of the bishops and cardinals meeting in Council at Viterbus, under the Inspiration of the Holy Spirit, do order and require the Grand Master of the knightly brothers of the Temple as follows:

"Upon reception of this bull, John of Villiers shall be recognized as legitimate and absolute sovereign of the Planet Oddh, of its dependencies in its star system, and of its inhabitants.

"Conrad von Thierberg shall receive the same rights and prerogatives on the planet Eth, in the name of the Teuton brotherhood. These rights shall be transmissible to those who succeed them in their courses in the dignity of the Grand Mastery of their orders.

"We declare the Planet Orph a papal domain and install as governor our loyal Paolo Liccardi, who will be recognized by all as papal legate in outreTerre.

"We allot to William of Beaujeu for the services rendered to the cause of the Holy Faith the Planet Baphom, with all authority over its inhabitants, the Baphomets, and this donation shall also be transmissible to his successor named law-

fully with pontifical approval in his charge of the Grand Mastery of the brother knights of the Temple.

"We give all powers and competence over these four planets to the Reverend Father John Evrard at once President of the Holy Tribunal of the Church, agent of the Inquisition, who will judge, condemn all apostates, backsliders, magicians, sorcerers, and blasphemers belonging to the peoples of these aforementioned planets, herein comprising all miscreants of Terran race who, overcome by the devil, might show themselves rebel against the orders of Rome or fall into criminal error touching the domain of the Faith.

"We are assured that our faithful servant William will show himself loyal and obedient, and that he will not raise any difficulty or any objection of any sort in the application of our desires, this on the salvation of his soul. If however he show himself reticent and rebel, we would be led, not without deep sorrow and regret, to abolish the aforementioned order of Templars, to declare all its members subject to the Holy Tribunal of the Church which might render in their case, with our approval, any sentence upon its members. It goes without saying that, henceforth, all his temporal goods, Commanderies, domains, fields and forests, moneys of gold or silver, precious objects, be they on Earth or on other planets, would be immediately and without delay confiscated and remanded by us to whomsoever would be judged worth of possessing them. Ships and arms of all sorts would be sent to the Hospitalers and the Teutons.

"In the name of the Most Holy Virgin Mary, pious and full of glory, of her Son Our Lord Jesus Christ, our defender, creator, redeemer, merciful and beloved Savior, of the Eternal Father and of the Holy Spirit, *amen.*"

If lightning had struck William he could not have gone whiter, while his rivals looked him up and down triumphantly. He seemed to become smaller, as if crushed by the weight of adversity.

Behind him, his faithful companions, haggard of face, had set hands on the pommels of their swords.

The Grand Master was thinking. In fact they gave him nothing but a domain still inaccessible, taking from him the indispensable alchemical treasures of Oddh. They even threatened him with stripping him of his earthly possessions.

They were going to burn and torture aliens to whom they had promised freedom.

All this under pain of damnation and destitution for him, who had always been a defender of the Holy Faith. Him who had conquered the Holy Places, protected Earth from a frightful invasion.

A wave of rage overcome him.

One moment he thought of spitting his spite in the faces of these jackals, but he did nothing of the sort. Turning his back, William drew himself up to his full height and, flanked by his brother servants, quitted the hall without saying a word.

While stalking back to his ship, he pursued somber thoughts. After all, this was what he might have expected. Like the emperors, could the kings and the pope himself have endured that the representative of an order of soldier-monks should become the most powerful lord the Earth had ever known? These cowards owed him everything. Without him they would be nothing but dogs fawning at the feet of the foul Baphomets, and behold how they showed him their gratitude. Was this the image of Christ? The accomplishment of His word, of His justice? How could the just and good Lord allow such exactions? Unless of course, the Holy Trinity was nothing but a false image and the real God of the universe laughed at the weak worm that he was? All his old doubts came flooding back. But if this were a testing? If he found, he, William, found himself in the position of Christ tempted by the devil on the mountaintop, faced with the riches of the universe? Must he like Jesus, turn the left cheek when someone had struck him on the right? Could it be a question of saving his immortal soul? He must think it through, but the power he held had drained his spirit and he had seen himself complacently becoming the richest of the rich. How to reconcile power and asceticism? And if the order must die by his failing? Proud and brave, the Templars had been praised and adored, and now all the world was jealous of them.

Without even realizing it, he reached his flagship, his soul afire, without having made a decision. Then he saw an elur racing up at full speed, ridden by his faithful marshal Peter of Sevry.

Peter leapt to the ground and crossed himself, groaned in a strained voice: "Good brother, I have sad news. A ship has

just come from Earth with a message from Thibaud Gaudin. Here it is. I know its tenor from our brothers in the crew, who told me the terrible happenings. . . ."

"Faith, they couldn't surpass what I've just heard. Follow me. We're going back to Lyzar at once. All the brothers must leave Oddh without delay to come to join us."

Without a glance at the marvels which spread across the screens aboard, the two Templars, seated in the command post, waited until the ship had taken to space before they spoke again. During that time, William had carefully read the report of his representative on Earth.

Surely what it reported in no wise helped the already embroiled affairs of the Grand Master.

Thibaud Gaudin advised him that the kings and emperors had not waited for the papal injunction to rush to the spoil. All the Templaries of lesser importance, in France, in England and in Germany, had been attacked and seized by royal or imperial troops. In France, the Templar domains had been confiscated. Only the fortified Commanderies were holding out by passive resistance. Well shielded behind their thick walls, the Templars feared nothing in the near future, at least while they had provisions. Already the situation was worrisome in certain Templaries and Thibaud Gaudin had to use ships to reprovision them.

The besiegers, however, appeared still undecided. They did not rush to all-out assault, probably waiting for the papal decision to abolish the Order of the Temple.

Thibaud Gaudin refused to use the thunderballs against the troops of their suzerain without express order, for each Templar carried graven in his heart the motto:

My body is the king's;
My soul is God's;
My honor is mine own . . .

So he asked William to let him know quickly what he must do.

The Grand Master, when he had taken in this terrible message, buried his head in his hands. His reason tottered. Everyone had turned against him. The pope, supreme authority of Christian folk, representing Christ on Earth; his king to whom he had always been faithful, making him many loans

of money; his very allies to whom he had trusted his ships, his thunder weapons . . . and they owed him everything!

But his pride quickly got the upper hand. No! He, William de Beaujeu, would not fail his brothers who had entrusted to him the supreme title of Grand Master; they expected salvation from him; he would save them, though they all denied him.

The high dignitaries of the Order were now at his sides, anxiously waiting for his decision. John of Grailly and Otto of Granson were there, and they were also torn between their duty as vassals of the kings of France and England, and their friendship for their comrade in arms. They must decide quickly.

"Noble brothers," declared the Frenchman, "I have never received any order enjoining me to withdraw my troops from your fleet. Consequently, you can still count on the men of France."

"Dose vords are trut' for me too," the giant swiss Otto of Granson assured him. "Besides, I am a mercenary who sells his services to whoever he likes; and I haf decided to stay true to your cause. My men at arms will continue to fight at your side."

These words went straight to William's heart. He sighed deeply, signed himself with the cross. "Thank you," he said, "my brave companions, for not abandoning me in adversity. May the Holy Spirit inspire me, for on my decisions depends the future of the order. We see things before us, and what remains for me at the moment? My fleet is still powerful, even if it's stripped of Hospitaler and Teuton forces. Kubla too remains loyal to me, and I can count on his Mongols. The situation is then grave, but not desperate. After all, we still have the houbits . . ."

A deep voice then made itself heard. Houen-Lun, coming out of his meditations, had decided to intervene in the debate. The Tibetan had played a major role in the success of the Templars, and all of them began to hope.

Alas, he had quickly to disenchant them.

"Noble William, I must, to my great regret, tell you that you can no longer count on my help or that of my companions. I have thought carefully before taking this decision. My convictions forbid my actively intervening in the unrolling of events in this world. The houbits therefore will not be ac-

tivated to kill the Baphomets. They will keep their euphoric powers for a few years, but they will not become deadly traps for their minds. You must fight henceforth without relying on our psychic powers. But I shall not abandon you yet. I am waiting for the return of Tarim, who is on Baphom. I will relay you his messages, if need be. Later I will ask you to set us out on Lyzog. There is no ecclesiastical court there to condemn us. The Lyzogans have beliefs close to our own. They will let us create a community and recruit adepts. My decision is without appeal."

So saying, the Tibetan went back into lotus position and his eyes went into the beyond, contemplating visions he alone could see.

A deathly silence fell over the gathering. The soldier-monks dared not look at the Grand Master any longer.

But this news did not seem to surprise William overmuch. He had always known that the Tibetan's position was in contradiction with his belief and one day or another he would desert the Templars' side. Alas, everything was crumbling about him. Without seeking to draw Houen-Lun back from his decision, the Grand Master began in a brittle voice: "Well, the situation is no longer grave, it's desperate. I refuse, you see, to fight the Hospitalers and the Teutons. They are, like us, Christian, and they're only obeying the orders of the sovereign pontiff, even if the terms of the bull are unacceptable to us. I can't make up my mind to give the order for my loyal Thibaud Gaudin to use the ships and the thunderballs. The kings are our suzerains and we don't know how to deny the oath that binds us to them, even if, instead of helping us, they crush us . . . Have a letter sent to Thibaud at once by message dart, and bid him gather all the Terran ships and put on them all our brothers who are still free, without forgetting our stocks of thunderballs, and head for Baphom at once. All the documents regarding the alchemical secrets and those having to do with the making of starships have to be burned to the last. We must not have these terrible arms serving our human brothers to commit massacre among them."

Brother Joubert went off in a hurry to execute that order, while William went on.

"I don't have much choice left, actually. My heart is broken at the thought of leaving the poor Odeous, the Ethir and the Orpheds in the hands of the Inquisitors, who are going to

hunt them and burn them at the stake, but I have no choice. My honor is in question. I've lived all my life fighting for the Holy Faith. Like Christ in his passion, I cry my despair, aye, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? Thou who once saved St. John at Acre by giving us weapons that let us defeat Bibars? But Thy designs are inscrutable and I must doubtless rejoice in my misfortune, for it assures the salvation of my poor torn soul, crushed by a dire destiny . . . Well, now, my brothers, there's nothing more left for us, but to finish our existence as we began it, and the way we would have wished when we pronounced the vows to join our holy order; then you knew the great disciplines of the House and its inflexible commandments you swore then obedience to your Grand Master elect and promised not to abandon your brothers. Remember on this day of trial the words of St. Bernard: 'The knight of Christ kills in conscience and dies at peace. Dying, he works out his salvation, in killing he labors for Christ. Doubtless he should not kill the pagans at all if he had another means of stopping their invasions, but it is better to commit massacre than to let the menace of sinners hang over the head of the just.' So down with the filthy Baphomets. Death surely awaits us, for we will have to face satellites that vomit terrible walls of fire, but your honor will be safe and your salvation assured. For myself, I look upon the end of my days in this vile world as a deliverance.

"This age is too vile and low;
Yea, I fain would go;
when I think on the lords
And their deeds and their words
dead, now, long ago!"

William fell silent, his face reflecting vast sorrow. For him even the hope of gaining a day of the heaven promised the faithful servants of Christ was only uncertainty. His faith wavered under his experiences and only despair possessed him.

But he lifted his head when his faithful companions drew their swords and thundered out a hymn in their rough voices.

"God Almighty and Eternal
Who guided good St. George,

Thy knight and holy martyr,
Gave him grace and merit
In martyrdom and passion;
By him and Virgin Mary,
Most Holy Mother, She,
For Christ's sake grant us strength
To keep our vow and laws.
May we win to Heaven,
Thou God forever King:
*Non nobis, non nobis Domine,
Sed Nomini Tuo da gloriam."*

A few hours later, the ships of the fleet came to rest on Lyzar, one after the other, to complete their refitting in arms and munitions.

Their hearts were heavy, but the soldier-monks' resolution was well and deeply anchored in themselves. They could not hope to destroy the vile race of infidel Baphomets, but at the least they could fend invasion away from Earth and let the Hospitalers and Teutons gather their forces, giving them a chance to survive.

The former would stay on Oddh, without expecting to oppose the movements of their ex-ally's squadrons. John de Villiers had been advised of the decision his rival had taken and could only congratulate him on it. Evidently, William was not contesting the papal division and was going to seek a glorious death. Good riddance. This Templar was becoming altogether too bothersome. It did not stop the Grand Master of the Hospitalers and that of the Teutons from putting their own squadrons on a war footing, for they had not forgotten the power the Baphomets had, after all, being filthy and very fearsome miscreant creatures. They had no intention at all of stopping the Templars from destroying themselves in an attack on the barrier of satellites protecting Baphom. But they wanted to be in the immediate neighborhood to watch the peripheries of the drama, and, one never knows, to participate in the combat. After all, French, English, and Mongols remained faithful to William. The Tibetans seemed to have abandoned him, but, with that astonishing man, anything was possible. He was capable of succeeding against all probability, in getting control of Baphom and its treasures—which had been imprudently allotted him by the Pope.

The old lion's rivals were still mistrustful of his leaps.

William, shut in his cabin in the heart of the flagship, spent long hours in meditations and in prayers, waiting for Thibaud Gaudin to join his fleet before attacking with maximum strength. He did not worry much at all now about strategy, seeking to strengthen his shaken faith and to die a good Christian. He at least had no illusion of his chances of success. Without the houbits, his ships would be massacred.

The Tholon brothers, crowded in with the others in the scant quarters of the base installations, had not even the chance for one memorable binge before hurling themselves into this suicidal attack.

"Ah, well," sighed Clement, "I don't understand how we got into this mess. William conquered three worlds and he finds himself robbed of them."

"Our Lord means to test our faith," Garin replied. "We Templars came to the height of power; now we must pay for our pride. An old saying has it that the Tarpeian Rock is near the Capitol. We aren't the only ones to know disillusionment. Many others before us have conquered vast empires and lost them."

"All the same, the Pope has gone too far," growled Red Guiot. "Give a planet to the Hospitalers and the Teutons, that's bad enough, but to keep one for his personal use . . . Not to mention those filthy monks of the Inquisition, who stick their noses in here wanting to rule everything on Oddh. There've already been twenty so-called heretics burned by those butchers! So far as I'm concerned, Christians or not, I'd throw the scum out!"

"Mind your words, my brother," the Templar chided him. "You owe complete obedience to our Holy Father the Pope, even if his decisions seem debatable to you. You're only a worm without great importance in the eyes of Our Lord. How could you judge then, when you're ignorant of so much?"

"S'dearth! maybe I don't know everything, but I'm sure that without William, no one would have these damn planets, and I'm sure that the Baphomets would have invaded the Earth a long time ago. So all that's platitudes and we . . . we're going to lose our heads for it."

Garin did not answer. In spite of himself he could not stop thinking that his brother was right, only he owed a blind

obedience to the Grand Master of the order, and if William ordered him to die in battle, he would throw himself blindly into the fray.

A week later, the fleet lifted majestically into the starry heavens. Each vessel had been prepared for this last battle. Certain of them, crammed with explosives, had been devised as fireships to try to blow up a link in the chain of satellites, thus opening a passage to their attack, but no one had much confidence in it.

Thibaud Gaudin was headed directly toward Baphom and must arrive near the Baphomet fortress almost at the same time as William's squadrons.

Behind the armada as it left Lyzar, John of Villiers and Conrad von Thierberg followed at a distance, like jackals shadowing a caravan to eat the dead.

The voyage was dotted with various unimportant incidents. A few ships collided and a nervous Templar fired a salvo at a Teuton ship which was following a little too close for his liking.

The armada then arrived in sight of the fortifications around Baphom. Their configuration was simple: the satellites were set in a quincunx pattern circling all parts of the planetary system of Baphom, forming a sort of saucer above and below the plane of the ecliptic.

The direct path to the lair of the demoniac Baphomets consisted then of attacking head on into the plane of the planetary system. Of course, that would be the sector best defended, five successive lines of fortified stations barring their way.

But it was there that William chose to make his first thrust, for behind the satellites, the enemy fleet would only have a narrow area to deploy and all their fire could be concentrated into that mass.

But before launching his ships the Grand Master must handle some preliminary operations. He must in particular sweep the vicinity of mines.

The quark cannon were very useful in this task. They let them work outside their range of the defenses and reduce these deadly machines to dust, making large gaps in the mine field.

A brave enemy would have tried to engage the

minesweepers with swift ships, but the cowardly Baphomets, trusting in their defenses, let it go on without reaction.

When that work was finished, William prepared for the attack. The ships of Thibaud Gaudin had rejoined him, and his forces were now complete. The Grand Master listened to the grim report which his faithful friend made him on what had happened on Earth. As it happened, all the kings, all the emperors had decided to make an end of the Templars, deeming that they would never dare turn their thunder weapons against Christians, and the Pope not only let them do it, but secretly encouraged them.

There was now left only one outcome for the honor of the soldier-monks: to die fighting the miscreant Baphomets.

The Grand Master had the attack order sent to his squadrons. This time there was no question of sending the Turcopole and Kubla's light ships in first.

These were the Templars themselves, supported on either wing by the French and the English, who met the deluge of projectiles belched out by the satellites.

Conforming to the established plan, several fireships were among the contingents in the van. This tactic proved double-edged. Sometimes one of them exploded prematurely in the heart of a formation and the neighboring ships, gravely damaged, became an easy prey to the guided missiles. But from the fact of the abundance of targets, the fire coordinators found themselves swamped and could not recognize these fireships in the heart of the mass of Terran vessels. So almost half these destructive engines reached their targets and a breach was opened in the barrier.

Seeing this the Templars gathered hope. Now in place of undergoing fire of powerful armored forts, they were going to be able to fight against other ships on equal terms.

The brave soldier-monks plunged into the gap. Their assault was so headlong that the vessels at point came within firing range of Baphom and got off several missiles that hit the capital, sowing consternation among the Baphomets, who had thought their city invulnerable.

At this instant if the Hospitalers and the Teutons had rejoined the Templars, the battle would doubtless have been won. Alas. John of Villiers and Conrad von Thierberg did not judge their rivals diminished enough to come to their rescue.

The squadrons of the Baphomets then had the chance to regroup and to launch three counterattacks, one frontal, meant to protect Baphom, the other two in a pincer movement to cut off the Terrans from their rear guard and encircle them.

This time too the combat was long undecided. Before them the Templar lines bent under the shock, but held. Clouds of missiles and antiquark beams made ravages among the two adversaries without deciding the encounter.

On the flanks, French and English had to bend back, then reestablish new lines where they could hold without retreating an inch.

From one side and the other, however, the losses were considerable and finally the Baphomets, more numerous, were winning the encounter.

William, whose ship at the heart of the combat set off volley after volley, was wondering if he should not retreat. He still had his light ships in reserve, which might break the deadly circle, but the Grand Master hesitated to use his last reserves.

Then Houen-Lun, who was still aboard the flagship, came out of his silence.

"Rejoice, William!" he said. "Tarim has just entered contact with me. We are now quite near to Baphom, where he is in Marco Polo's company. Your faithful Venetian has learned some news of import from the harem slaves. Zolial the Baphomet emperor has become rather talkative under the influence of a houbit. He revealed a fearful secret. There exists, at little distance from this solar system, a sort of maelstrom in space, a microscopic black hole, infinite access to unfathomable depths. Once it menaced Baphom, but Baphomet scholars succeeded in stabilizing it without being about to get rid of it. Here are its coordinates. If you succeed in passing the installations which maintain it, you can cast it onto the planet of these pitiless creatures. But you must act quickly, for some few enemy ships protect that place."

The Grand Master saw at once the advantage he could get from that incredible information. He immediately ordered Kubla to disengage his rear guard while he himself maneuvered as if he were beating a retreat.

Thanks to heaven the Templar forces were still sufficient,

and soon all the survivors were back at their starting point, outside the belt of satellites.

There William established a solid line of defense composed of Templars, French and English to block the gap.

He then sent commands to his faithful Thibaud Gaudin, and he himself with the Turcoples and Mongols peeled off at all speed toward the site Marco Polo had told him of.

Soon the Baphomets' secret installations appeared on the screens. They faced satellites bristling with antennae, set in an octohedron in the distance. Of the black hole he saw nothing. In his delirium, had Zolial lied?

Sonz hastened to explain to William that that was no wonder, that these strange formations, tiny objects of incredible density, trapped all material objects, all radiation passing near them. Once plunged into that vortex, they disappeared forever and no one knew exactly where they went. It was always a black hole of small dimensions. One could pass through a world, making a tornado at its point of impact and another at its exit. And in that there was a slight problem . . . for if the course of this black star by some ill chance were stopped at the heart of a planet it would see all the matter in it absorbed like water by a sponge, and the world would disappear, leaving nothing but a tiny navigation hazard of enormous density, a deadly new trap of slightly increased dimensions.

But already the enemy ships charged with its defense were rushing toward the Terrans.

A merciless battle ensued.

The Mongols' swift ships did wonders. They whirled around their adversaries, feinting, threatening to flee and returning to the assault on an isolated enemy, turning with a mad address to escape opposing fire.

This time numbers were on the side of the Templars, for the Baphomets, trusting to the small size of the black maelstrom, had never thought that their enemies could discover it, and they had only gathered light forces there so as not to draw attention to it.

In a little time the last defenders were put out of action and Sonz, even before it was all over, took over the controls of the installation.

These had not been destroyed for a good reason: they alone kept the black hole at a distance from Baphom.

The Odeous signaled William to move all his ships out of a

direct line with the foul planet, then with a grimace of hate, he hit the controls, changed their settings to aim the monstrous projectile to its objective, and put the whole device into motion.

At once the black maelstrom shot inexorably toward Baphom. Only special instruments let them see it, for its intense gravitational field was not visible to the naked eye.

Paradoxically it seemed to distort space and time, for it went at a truly incredible speed.

Epilogue

Directed by the sure hand of the Odeous, the deadly object headed right for the cursed planet. In front of it, the Terran ships, warned by William, headed out of its way, but the enemy ships had no time to react.

Suddenly seized in lightning-fast turbulence, Baphomet satellites and ships were hurled one after the other into that gaping maw where matter compressed to infinity and infinite depths.

On Baphom, the emperor, warned of the cataclysm, hastily embarked in vessels loaded with treasure which had been prepared to such an end, and the foul lords tried to take to space and flee.

Unhappily, their ships, slowed by their heavy load, could not get far enough fast enough. Already the dark mass, momentarily surrounded by incandescing clouds and lightnings, was rushing down on them.

William, who had followed near the whirlpool, watched the end of the enemies of the human race.

Then the malefic object struck the surface of Baphom. A cyclone devastated the neighboring countryside, while at the antipodes, a similar phenomenon was in action.

Now the black micropoint, restrained by its traverse of the planet, had clearly slowed, and was traveling less swiftly than a ship.

In the command station of the flagship, the Templars were ecstatic. Against all hope, the Lord had decided to save them! It was a miracle like that at St. John at Acre. When they were about to go under, Almighty God had helped them.

They all looked toward William of Beaujeu. On him devolved the glory of the victory.

Suddenly the rough soldiers blanched. The Grand Master had vanished.

A telltale winked on the control panel, revealing the terrible truth at once. The brave Templar, his mission accomplished in this lower world, had taken his place in a lifeboat and was headed right for the maelstrom.

All appeals were vain. The ship's communications were disconnected by William, who was relentlessly set on his fate.

The screens showed him in his mad course, looking with a gaze of ecstasy on the clouds which still surrounded the black hole. A few shining atoms whirled in a dance before falling forever into the abyss.

The nightmared eyes of the hero's faithful stared also at the strangely twisting clouds.

Then for a brief moment, they had a fantastic vision, as a cross of light shone out in space.

It vanished so fast they all wondered if they had been dreaming. William had seen it before dying. For him it was a sign: his sins were forgiven. An expression of peace touched his face before he vanished forever.

The dark meteor quite swiftly departed the area and vanished into the infinities of the heavens.

The surviving Templars, assisted by the Hospitalers and the Teutons, quickly destroyed the few enemy forces remaining in space.

Thibaud Gaudin, accompanied by John of Villiers and Conrad von Thierberg, left his ship then on Baphom. The devastation the black hole had made was fortunately localized. Few of the slaves were dead, and Marco Polo and his companions had not suffered from the cyclone, for they had been sheltered in the palace, which remained intact.

Thibaud Gaudin solemnly took possession of Baphom in the name of the Order of the Temple and this time no one dared contest his decisions.

But John of Villiers and Conrad von Thierberg still had doubts about the death of their rival. Sonz assured them that the ship, though caught in the whirlpool, had escaped the deadly maelstrom: William might have survived. The Odeous thus proposed to guide them to the very place where, he said, they might find the Grand Master, shunted off in space.

The squadrons of the Hospitalers and the Teutons left Baphom. Before leaving, John of Villiers declared he would

soon see on this place the representatives of the Holy Inquisition.

Thibaud Gaudin had been astonished by Sonz' insistence, but he had not the technical knowledge of the Odeous and he dared not contradict him; since Sonz affirmed that William's lifeboat was still wandering in the void, he must be telling the truth. Thibaud accordingly sent a powerful squadron in pursuit of the Hospitalers and the Teutons.

The ships went off on the track of Sonz and his companions; suddenly they all vanished from the screens.

Thibaud Gaudin then understood the Odeous' stratagem. Devoted to freeing his people from the yoke of the Inquisition, he had led the torturers of his people right into the dark whirlpool.

The Chapter of Templars, reunited sometime afterward, confirmed Thibaud Gaudin as successor of William, and the new Grand Master made some important decisions.

The Templars had finished their crusade. The foul enemy had been destroyed.

On all the freed worlds, the tribunals of the Inquisition were abolished. Odeous, Ethir, Orpheds and Lyzogans recovered their ancient liberties.

The Tibetans, the papal legate, the Hospitalers and the surviving Teutons were brought back to Earth, where they were traded for imprisoned Templars, and then the ships left again for Baphom.

On that return, Thibaud Gaudin took with him all his ships. He directed them into the shape of a cross around the Baussant flagship and the squadrons disappeared into the infinite heavens.

On board echoed a chorus of deep voices. "*Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed Nomini tuo, da gloriam . . .*"



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