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THE FALL OF CHRONOPOLIS BARRINGTON J. BAYLEY

The Last and First Days of the Chronotic Empire



TIME IS UNDER ATTACK

The Commander stared at Aton incredulously. "So you really think the empire can be brought down! Why, the empire's resources are inexhaustible! Other powers in time have at the best but one node to draw on. The empire has seven! That means seven times the industrial might and seven times the manpower of any enemy we might face. And our strength will grow."

He shook his head. "No, the empire cannot be defeated."

"You speak of orthogonal time," replied Aton. "I have seen the strat. You have not. All we have can be wiped away in the blink of an eye."



Barrington J. Bayley

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Chapter One

WITH a hollow booming sound the Third Time Fleet materialized on the windswept plain. Fifty ships of the line, the pride of the empire and every one built in the huge yards at Chronopolis, were suddenly arrayed on the dank savanna as if a small city had sprung abruptly into being in the wilderness. The impression was increased by the lights that shone within the ships, outlining their ranks of square windows in the dusk. A few fat drops of rain spattered on the scene; the atmosphere was moody, clouds were gathering in the racing sky, and soon there would be a storm.

Half an hour passed before a large porchlike door swung open at the base of the flagship and three men stepped onto the turf. Two were burly men in stiff maroon uniforms, displaying badges of rank on chest, sleeves, and hat. The third was a shriveled, defeated figure who walked with eyes downcast, occasionally flicking a disinterested glance around him.

The trio paused on a small knoll a hundred yards from the nearest timeship. Commander Haight looked about him, taking pride in the sight. The ships were suggestive of two disparate forms: basically they looked like long office blocks built on a rectilinear plan, but the crude streamlining that helped them cruise through time meant that the stories were arranged in steps, high at the stern and low at the bows. To the commander this was reminiscent of another, more ancient type of vessel: the hulls of wind-driven galleons that once—far beyond the empire's pastward frontier—had sailed Earth's seas.

"Good to get in the open air," he muttered. "It gets damned claustrophobic in the strat."

"Yes, sir.", Colonel Anamander looked uncomfortable. He

always hated this part of the proceedings. Usually he had the job of seeing to the disposal of the corpse and was spared the task today only because Haight felt like taking a walk outside.

Mixing with the erratic wind came a low-pitched whine from the surrounding timeships. That was the sound of their engines holding them steady in orthogonal time. Suddenly came a louder, skirling noise. The engineers were carrying out the repairs for which the fleet had made the stop.

What a desolate spot, Anamander thought. In this region of history the timeships always chose, if possible, an uninhabited region in which to beach themselves. The mutability of time was not something to be taken lightly.

The courier lifted his dispirited eyes to the face of the commander. He spoke in a hesitant, empty voice.

"Shall I die now?"

Haight nodded, his expression contemptuous and remote.

"You have performed your duty," he intoned formally.

The courier's self-execution was a simple affair. It relied on the vagus nerve, by means of which the brain could signal the heart to stop. This nerve, aimed at the heart like a cocked gun, was the stock explanation of death by fright, grief, or depression, as well as by suggestion through a shaman or witch doctor. In his final briefing the courier had been trained to use this nerve voluntarily so as to carry out the order to kill himself once his task was done—an order that, in point of fact, could be said to be superfluous. The two officers watched now as he closed his eyes and mentally pronounced the hypnotically implanted trigger words. A spasm crossed his face. He doubled up, gasping, then collapsed limply to the ground.

Anamander moved a deferential foot or two away from the corpse. "An unusually honored courier, sir. Not many carry messages of such import."

"Indeed not."

Commander Haight continued to gaze on his fleet. "This will be a testing time for us, Colonel. It looks like the beginning of a full-scale attack—perhaps even of an invasion. The empire will stand or fall by the efforts of men such as ourselves."

"Strange that even his type should play a part in it," Anamander mused, indicating the corpse. "Somehow I can never avoid feeling sorry for them."

"Don't waste your sympathy," Haight told him. "They are

all criminals, condemned murderers and the like. They should be grateful for a last chance to serve the empire."

"I wonder what they go through to make them so willing

to die."

Haight laughed humorlessly. "As for that, it appears there's only one way to find out, and as you can see it's not a procedure to be recommended. Several times I've asked them, but they don't tell you anything that makes sense. In fact, they seem to lose the power of rational speech, more or less. You know, Colonel, I'm in a somewhat privileged position as regards these couriers. Until I speak the phrase releasing them from their hypnotic block they're unable to pronounce the key words triggering the nerve. What if I were to— I confess I've been tempted to keep one alive to see what would happen to him. He might come to his senses and be able to talk about it. Still, orders are orders."

"There must be a reason for the procedure, apart from their being condemned anyway."

"Quite so. Have you ever seen the strat with your naked eyes, Colonel?"

Anamander was startled. "No, sir!"

"I did once—just a glimpse. Not enough to derange the senses—just the briefest glimpse. It was years ago. I was on the bridge when our main engine cut out for a moment after— Well, never mind about all that. But there it is: I saw it, or almost saw it. Yet to this day I couldn't tell either you or myself exactly what it was I saw."

"I've heard it leaves a mark on a man."

"Yes, Colonel, it does. Don't ask me what sort of mark."
Haight sniffed the air, then shivered slightly. The rain was falling faster.

"Let's get inside. We'll be drenched here."

They crossed the turf and disappeared into the towering flagship. Half an hour later the whole fleet disappeared with a hollow boom that echoed around the empty plain. Shortly there came a crash of thunder and tumultuous rain soaked the savanna, pouring over the body of the courier who had died six centuries from home.

COLONEL ANAMANDER felt reassured with the thrum of the time-drive under his feet. They were building up speed, heading back into the past and traversing the planet's time-axis to

bring them to the right location in both space and time: the continent of Amerik, Node 5.

As it moved, the fleet sprayed beta rays all around it into the temporal substratum—the strat, as chronmen called it. Electromagnetic energy could not travel through the strat, rendering communication difficult. The answer for short-range purposes was beta radiation, consisting of relativistic electrons moving slower than light. They did not penetrate far, but they sufficed for the timeships to keep contact with one another while in formation, as well as to maintain a limited radar watch.

Haight's orders were explicit. The hunt was on for the war craft that had violated the Imperial Millennium.

The foray was well planned, as was evidenced by the failure of the Third Time Fleet to learn of it until the attackers had already passed to its rear. They had come in from the future at high speed, too fast for defensive time-blocks to be set up, and had only been detected by ground-based stations deep in historical territory. If the target was to alter past events—the usual strategy in a time-war—then the empire's chroncontinuity could be significantly interfered with.

It looked to Haight as if the assault could signal the beginning of the full-scale war with the Hegemony which the High Command believed to be inevitable. The Hegemony, existing futureward of the Age of Desolation, had long been the chief threat to the Chronotic Empire, and it was almost certain that the raiders had been dispatched from that quarter.

If their intention was to test out the empire's ability to defend itself, then Haight promised himself forcefully that they would be disappointed in the result. Like all chronmen he was fanatical in regard to his duty; service to the empire was the chronman's creed. He felt personally affronted, not only by the intrusion into imperial territory, but also by the attempt to alter the relationship of the past to the future, a right that belonged to no one but their Chronotic Majesties the Imperial Family of the House of Ixian.

Commander Haight mulled the matter over while keeping one eye on the scan screens. The bridge, as it was called by convention, was a large, elongated hemi-ellipsoid. The controllers sat elbow to elbow along its curved walls, the pilot section being situated in the nose of the ellipsoid whereas another line of manned consoles ran along its middle axis. At the moment, the size-contraction effect caused by the flag-

ship's velocity through the strat was not pronounced enough to be noticeably dramatic. At top speed it would become so intense at the forward end of the ship that the pilots in the nose would be reduced to a height of inches, whereas the men in the rear would retain their normal size—an effect that gave the bridge a false impression of being drastically foreshortened.

The bridge crew numbered thirty-two men in all, not counting the cowled priest who moved among them dispensing prebattle blessings and sprinkling holy wine. Commander Haight looked over the scene from the raised desk he shared with Colonel Anamander at the rear of the bridge. It had often amused Haight to think that, with the flagship undergoing full-speed test trials, a pilot who happened to glance back saw his commander as a massive titan hovering over him like an avenging angel.

A gong sounded. A scanman called out to him.

"We have a track, sir!"

"Follow it," rumbled Haight.

There was a slight sense of nausea as the flagship, the whole fleet following suit, shifted direction in the multidimensional strat. It was succeeded by a series of sensations felt only in the gut, as if one were trapped in a system of high-speed elevators. Traveling through the strat was sometimes like riding a crazy, oscillating switchback. Geodesic eddies and undulations, which time-traveling vehicles were obliged to follow, were apt to occur in it.

Haight and Anamander both watched the big monitor screen. The representation of the strat it was bringing them was roiling and curling as they rode through the disturbed region (Haight knew that such a region often spelled danger for imperial stability: it could mean that an established sequence in orthologonal time was undergoing mutation). Then, slowly, it smoothed out and the sick feelings no longer assailed their guts.

A blurred formation of foreign timeships hove into view.

There were three of them on the screen, held unsteadily by the scattered light of beta radiation. They were recognizably ships of the Hegemony: inelegantly tall, wedge-shaped structures traveling edge-on.

The images flickered and then yawed, swinging around and changing shape like a moving display of geometric

variations. The scope was picking up four-dimensional images

of the ships as they altered direction.

"Projected destination?" barked Haight.

A voice answered him. "Prior to course change, heading towards Node Seven, bearing seven-oh-three on vertical axis."

"Fire torps."

Down below, gunnery released a standard set of five tor-pedoes, and they saw them flickering away on the screen. There was little hope of any of them making a strike. Strat torpedoes were heavy, clumsy weapons whose light-duty timedrives gave them little speed and little range.

"Shall we offer battle, sir?" Anamander asked in a low

voice.

Haight pondered briefly and shook his head. "They are on a homeward flight path after having completed their work. We need to find them on the ingoing flight before they've reached their target."

The torpedoes faded away, lost in the strat. The Hegemonic warships eventually receded from view.

Haight gave the order to proceed pastward, traversing across the vertical time-axis. A hundred and fifty years deeper into historic territory he ordered the fleet to stand by; the flagship phased briefly into orthogonal time.

They hovered over a sunlit landscape. Down below, roads

and rivers made a meandering pattern among the towns and villages that were dotted here and there across the patchwork of fields. The flagship's computer library was busy comparing the scene with the official encyclopedia, but neither Haight nor Anamander needed its report to know the worst. The geography of the place simply did not correspond to the official record. In particular, the sizable city of Gerread was completely absent.

In orthogonal time the Hegemonic attack had already

been successful.

Haight inspected the landscape carefully, looking for signs of recent devastation. There was none: it did not seem that

Gerread had been removed by bomb or plague.

Instead, the Hegemonics must have used their most terrible weapon, of which the High Command had obtained some information but which they had never been absolutely sure existed: a time-distorter, capable of altering the fabric of time directly. Gerread had been simply . . . annulled. All trace of it, past and future, had vanished. It was a sobering thought that in all probability no one except those aboard the ships maneuvering in the strat, and those in the special Achronal Archives at Chronopolis, had even heard of Gerread anymore. Once again Haight experienced the familiar burden: the terrible responsibility of being a chronman.

The priest, having finished his asperges, retired to the rear of the bridge, where he learned the dreadful facts confronting Haight and Anamander. He began to pray in a sonorous, desperate mutter. The two officers shared his feeling of horror: Gerread and all its inhabitants had been swallowed, foundering like a ship, by the infinity of nonactual, merely potential time. That, at least, was how it was described technically. In church language it was the Gulf of Lost Souls.

Leaving behind it a clap of air, the flagship rephased into the substratum. Haight recalled the region of turbulence they had recently passed through. That, no doubt, had been connected with the new distortion in the orthogonal time-flow. But the battle was not yet lost. There was still strat time, and in strat time events did not vanish, once having taken place, but linegered for hours, days, sometimes months of subjective personal time. Nothing was irreversible.

They might yet snatch back those lost souls from perdition. The fleet continued its traverse. This, Haight reminded himself, was but a preliminary exercise in how the coming timewar would be fought. Always the object would be to alter the adversary's history: reaching back and further back into the murky tale of mutated events, answering every move with a canceling countermove. And final victory would be achieved only when the history of one side was so completely distorted that the existential support for its fleets of timeships was removed. Even then they would continue to fight for a while, ghosts moving through the strat, never having been manufactured, manned by crews that had never been born. Then they would fade, sinking into nonactual, potential existence.

But it was some time before the warning gong sounded again and the Hegemonic ships came up once more on the scope screen.

"Heading for Node Five," the scanman informed him.

They counted the ships as they appeared blurrily on the screen. There were twelve.

"This is it," Haight said. "This is their incoming path. Get ready."

CAPTAIN MOND ATON, officer commanding the Smasher of Enemies, had seen the Hegemonics' outgoing flight path on the scope screen of his own ship and had fully expected to enter battle. Only later, when the order to hold came from the flagship, did he realize that he had been impetuous. The homeward-bound ships would probably have refused to fight; even if defeated, their destruction would solve nothing.

His own bridge was a miniature of Commander Haight's; it was manned by only seven men. Unlike the bigger, heavier ships that doubled as battleships and troop carriers, the Smasher of Enemies was a maneuverable, lightly manned, heavily armed destroyer. It had the speed to pursue, and elaborate chronphase equipment for accurate microsecond broadsides.

"Breaks your heart to see them go," said the scanman, looking up from the screen, "doesn't it, sir?"

Aton nodded. "They haven't escaped us yet, Scanman. Those ships we see are already ghosts, though they don't know it."

The wedge-shaped Hegemonics faded. Aton did not think too deeply about the paradoxes involved in what he had said. In the strat paradoxes were commonplace. And not only in the strat, either: since the rise of the Chronotic Empire every lowly citizen had been made aware of how contingent his existence was on the fickle mutability of time. Many were the millions who, having existed once (once, if that word were to be given a meaning outside time altogether), now ceased ever to have existed. Outside, that is, the roll of nonexisting citizens in the Achronal Archives, which contained more history that had disappeared than it did extant history.

Unless the Hegemonic attack could be stopped, many millions more would be added to that roll.

Aton turned to Lieutenant Krish.

"Hold the bridge for me. I'm going to make a quick check."

As he left the bridge and walked through the galleries he could feel the tension building up in the ship. This would be his third sizable engagement and on each of the others he had liked to visit each section under his command beforehand. It gave him a feeling of integrating the vessel into a tight fighting unit. And it would be a good half-hour, he told himself, before the fleet found its quarry.

He visited the gunnery room, where tension was, of course, at the highest pitch—and no wonder. His glance swept around the computer terminals, of which the men themselves were in a sense mere appendages. In some ships gunnery was on the bridge itself, which at first sight seemed a logical arrangement, if cumbersome. But Aton preferred it this way, although he knew some captains did not.

After a few words of encouragement to his gunners he

went deeper into the ship to the drive room.

He paused outside the door at the sound of voices, then smiled to himself. Ensign Lankar, a keen young engineer but newly inducted into the Imperial Time Service, was loudly displaying his knowledge to a drive-room assistant in his

charge.

"The time-drive is really based on the good old massenergy equation." Lankas was saving. "E equals MC squared. Let's take one of the factors on the right-hand side of this equation: C squared. That's where time comes in. C is the velocity of light—the distance per time of an otherwise massless particle. So energy is really mass multiplied by time squared. But we can also write the equation this way: M equals E over C squared. This shows us that mass is a relationship between energy and time. So now we're getting somewhere: what happens if we disturb this relationship? We do this by forcing energetic particles to travel faster than light. And now we find that the equation doesn't balance anymore: energy divided by the velocity of light squared no longer adds up to rest mass. But the equation must balance it's a fundamental physical law. So what happens? The equation keeps the scales even by moving rest mass through time, to the same extent that the time factor is transgressed on the right-hand side."

"But where does the strat come in, Ensign?"

"The strat is what time is made of, lad. If you move through time, that's what you have to move through."

Ensign Lankar thumped the steel casings that bulged into the drive room. "And here's where it's all done. This is where we accelerate pi-mesons to anything between C and C squared. It's the most important part of the whole ship, and don't you forget it."

Lankar's voice sounded incongruously young as he talked self-consciously down to his underling. "M equals E over C squared," he repeated. "Notice that time is involved in both elements on the right-hand side. That's why pure energy can't be transmitted through the strat, only mass. So we have no radio communication with the High Command and have to use the couriers, poor devils."

Both young men jumped up with embarrassment and saluted hastily as Aton entered. They had been seated on wooden benches well away from the main control desk, where the drive room's senior staff were too busy for such idle talk.

"Everything in order?" Aton called gruffly, speaking over the high-pitched whine that always infected the drive room.

The chief engineer looked up from his work. "No problems. sir."

Aton inspected the flickering dials briefly and went on his way. He paced the short galleries and corridors, speaking to a man here, an officer there. He was about to ascend a long ladder that would take him back to the bridge, passing by the gunnery room, when a drone of voices caused him to pull up sharp.

It came from a nearby storeroom and had the sound of chanting. Aton felt himself stiffen. Then, dreading what he might find, he unfastened the clamps on the door and eased it quietly open.

The chanting came louder and he was able to distinguish some of the words. "Lord of all the deep, if this be our moment for darkness... sear our souls with thy vengeance..."

He peered within. Six figures occupied the cell-like store-room, having made space for themselves among the crates of chronphase spares. By the look of things this was their regular meeting place—the crates had been arranged to leave a neat cubbyhole that had a much-used appearance. All six wore normal uniforms, except that their caps had been replaced by black cloths that hung down over their ears. Five men were on their knees, heads bent and faces hidden in their arms, and they had their backs to Aton. The sixth stood before them leading the chant, a gold medallion hung about his neck, a black book in his hand. Aton recognized him as Sergeant Quelle, of gunnery. His lean sharp face bore the look of desperate rapture Aton would have expected from such a rite as this.

In the same moment that the startled Sergeant Quelle saw him, Aton pulled his pistol from his shoulder holster and flung the door wide open. He slammed a com switch on the corridor wall and bellowed for the ship guard. Then he moved into the confined space, lowering over the kneeling figures, the heavy beam pistol sweeping over them all warningly.

White faces, shocked and guilty, turned to look at him. Sergeant Quelle backed away, slamming shut his book. He bore the look of a trapped rat.

"Traumatics!"

Aton spat out the word. The outlawed sect was known to have adherents in the Time Service—chronmen were, in fact, unusually prone to be affected by its heresies, for obvious reasons—but Aton had never dreamed he would find aboard his own ship not one heretic but a whole congregation. He felt shaken.

Booted, running feet rang on the metal decks. The com speaker on the wall outside the storeroom crackled.

"Are you all right, Captain?"

"Yes, Lieutenant," he replied, recognizing the voice from the bridge. "Better send down Comforter Fegele."

The guards clattered to the scene. Aton let them stare at it for a few moments. There was a strained silence.

"Better not do anything to us, Captain," Quelle said in an impulsive, frightened voice. "Your soul will go to the deep if you do!"

"Silence!" Aton was affronted by the continued blasphemy.

The ship's priest, Comforter Fegele, arrived, pushing his way through the guards. As he saw the evidence before him, the six men standing half-sheepishly, half-defiantly, a gasp came from deep within his cowl. He swiftly made the sign of the circle, then raised his hand palm outward.

"Depart, Prince of Abominations," he muttered in a hurried, feverish voice. "Depart into the deeps of time, plague no more the servants of the Lord."

The Traumatics immediately turned to him and made a curious sign with the fingers of their right hands, as though warding off a curse.

Quelle laughed fiercely. "Don't you plague us with your exorcisms, priest!" But Comforter Fegele was already beginning an incantation of sacred names, at the same time producing a vaselike chalice from within the folds of his robe.

"Get them out of here and lock them in the cells!" ordered Aton angrily. "Commander Haight can decide whether to charge them fleetside or back in Chronopolis."

The guards hustled the heretics from the room, while the

priest splashed consecrated wine everywhere, on the wor-shipers, on the crates, on the floor of the cubbyhole.

At that moment a deep-toned gong rang through the ship. Lieutenant Hurse spoke from the bridge through the wall com. "Message from the flagship, Captain. Enemy located on

target-bound path." "I'll be with you presently," Aton returned.

He made for the ladder, but suddenly Sergeant Quelle, who with the others was in the process of being handcuffed,

burst free and lunged supplicatingly toward him.
"You need us, Captain. You need me, especially. Nobody

can handle a gunnery comp like I do."

Comforter Fegele hurled a handful of wine in his face. "You have lent yourself to foul crimes and flaunted God's commandments. . . ."

Quelle appealed again to Aton. "Let me do my duty, Captain. This is no time to cut down the ship's fighting power. Let me handle my comp." He cringed. "I don't want to sink into the strat . . . without . . ."

Suddenly Aton understood. The Traumatics believed that a certain ceremony could—or at least might—protect a soul if it was plunged naked into the strat, as, for instance, should the Smasher of Enemies be destroyed in the coming fight. That had no doubt been the purpose of the rite Aton had interrupted. It was all nonsense, of course, fanatical superstition; but Quelle, robbed of his imagined precaution, wanted to fight for his life and not sit out the battle helplessly.

And he was right about one thing. Quelle was an excellent gunner, the best the ship had. Without him the gunnery room would be fighting below maximum efficiency.

Aton looked at the sergeant with open contempt. "Very well. For the duration of the engagement."

He glanced over the faces of the other prisoners and pointed to two others he recognized as also belonging to the gunnery crew. "Release Sergeant Quelle and those two. They are to be rearrested once the invaders have been dealt with."

Closely followed by Comforter Fegele, Aton turned from the scene and acsended the ladder to the bridge. The Hegemonic ships were already showing on the scope screen, relayed from the flagship's powerful beta scanners.

"We're closing, sir," the scanman informed him.

It would not be long now.

But for the time being a lull fell over the proceedings, a

lull during which the flagship was frantically busy assessing the situation, but in which the periphery ships, consisting in the main of destroyers like the Smasher of Enemies, were passive.

Aton waited for his orders, trying to fight down the feelings of shame that assaulted him. This was no time for emotion, but nevertheless that emotion was there.

Standing across the desk from him was Comforter Fegele (it was Church policy for the ship's priest to be present on the bridge during an action, ever ready to give moral support). The priest looked into the brooding face of the young officer. "You are troubled." he murmured.

Aton had been gazing at his own reflection in the metal of his desk. His even features, with their clear gray eyes and straight, finely chiseled nose, were distorted by the metal and seemed to stare back at him across tortured eons.

"How long has this been going on aboard my ship?" he wondered quietly. "Had you any intimation of it?"

"No. The Traumatic sect is notoriously good at keeping its presence secret. It disturbs you, no doubt, to discover such perversions."

"I do find it hard to understand," Aton admitted. "Every man on board has sworn the same oath I have sworn. And that oath is to defend not only the empire but also the true faith. How can such men turn beretic?"

"The ways of religious delusion are indeed strange."
"I confess, Comforter, that I am questioning my own judgment in permitting Sergeant Quelle and his co-conspirators to take part in this action. How can one trust heretics and

traitors?²
"The odd thing is," said the priest slowly, "that their perversion is probably of a spiritual character only. It has been found that heretic chromen are nevertheless loyal to the Time Service. That part of their oath remains sacred to them."

A signal sounded on Aton's desk. A burry voice spoke from the annunciator.

"The following vessels will break off and engage the enemy. Exorcist, Smasher of Enemies, Emperor's Fist, Incalculable..." Alon counted twelve names in all, the same number that made up the enemy's squadron. This was necessary, probably, if the Hegemonics were to be persuaded to stand and fight rather than to flee home without accomplishing their

mission.

The Smasher of Enemies swung away from formation. The Hegemonics disappeared from the scope screen, then came back after a brief interval, even more blurrily, as the destroyer picked them up on her own less powerful radar. The established procedures of attack swung into action.

The established procedures of attack swung into action. One of the bridge controllers was getting in touch with the rest of the attack squadron. At the same time beta contact beams sped ahead of their flight path, seeking out the enemy and offering negotiation.

Comforter Fegele retreated to one side and was heard muttering prayers and blessings, dipping his hand into his chalice occasionally and sprinkling a token amount of wine

onto the deck.

As soon as they became aware of their pursuers the Hegemonics put on speed and went into evasion maneuvers. The wedge-shaped ships, five times taller than they were broad or long, multiplied into a series of fading prismatic images, like a multiple exposure, as they changed direction. The pilot of the Smasher of Enemies, snuggled into the nose of the bridge, also put on a surge of velocity, taking them close to the maximum. Before Aton's eyes the forward end of the bridge diminished in size; the pilot became a midget, a boylie figure, then a puppet no more than six inches high. The flight of the Hegemonics failed to outdistance the ships

The light of the Hegemonics failed to outdistance the ships of the Chronotic Empire, each of which were now picking out an adversary. The Smasher of Enemies vectored in on a dancing wedge. It was difficult, sometimes, to sort out the flickering image from the wavering curves of the strat as they

also showed up on the scope screen, but Aton never lost sight of it entirely. He issued a clipped order to the pilot.

The destroyer plunged forward in a new burst of speed until she overtook the Hegemonic craft and swung around to place herself directly in its path. The pilot rushed the ship back and forth, veering in close to the enemy and setting up a wash of discomfiting strat waves. In answer the Hegemonic darted away and tried to weave a path past the obstacle, but the pilot stuck close.

The beta operator depressed a switch and leaned forward to speak into a microphone. "Hello, gunnery. You have contact."

The tense voice of Sergeant Quelle sounded on the bridge

and was relayed by beta ray to his counterpart on the Hegemonic war craft.

"Stand and fight; stand and fight," he ground out in a gravelly tone. "Here is our proposed location." He repeated his words in the Hegemonic language, while at the same time

a string of recorded coordinates was beeping out on the beta beam. After a delay of only seconds came a terse answer: "Agreed."

The two ships sped away on nearly parallel courses, slowly diverging until they were both faint on each other's scopes. The front of the bridge ballooned in size as they slowed

down. The pilot leaned back, his hands lifting from the controls: the steering board was now under the control of gun-

A curious but necessary tradition of collaboration existed among warring timeships. The self-powered torpedoes they carried, though deployed as a matter of course, were so slow and cumbersome, so much at the mercy of strat disturbances, as to be nearly useless. To be effective a warship needed to employ its heavy-duty beamers.

But because no pure energy could travel in the strat this meant phasing into orthogonal time. A timeship that stayed in its natural medium could neither fire on, nor be fired on by, another timeship. For that reason ships willing to join battle agreed on a rendezvous where each, by leaving the strat, made itself vulnerable to the other.

The tryst (as it was dubbed) had to be both precise and momentary: a point in time without duration. How long a warship lingered beyond that instant in passing time was entirely a matter of discretion, comprising a ratio between estimated survival time and the minimum time needed to locate the enemy and focus weapons upon him. The tendency was toward microseconds, during which each combatant discharged a massive broadside. That, very often, was the end of the battle. A heavily damaged ship would be reluctant to emerge again from the protection of the strat but would try to return home.

All of which explained the crucial importance of the gunnery crew, who made these calculations.

On his desk Captain Aton watched the countdown to emergence in orthogonal time. The suspense was almost unbearable, yet in a way the battle was a nonevent—one could not keep track of it in time, since it was all over in a flash. There was only the aftermath, either triumphant or dreadful.

While the minutes and seconds ticked off, the gunnery crew would be priming their comps for those vital microseconds. The battle bracket itself, too small for human consciousness, would be handled by the comps. Afterward would come the frantic damage assessment by the bridge, reports, if available, on damage inflicted on the enemy, and a decision as to whether or not to offer a second tryst.

Gunnery made an announcement: "Entering ortho five seconds from now."

The whole bridge waited in tense silence.

Then the Smasher of Enemies shook violently, reeled, and swayed as if spinning. Even without studying the damage board closely, Aton could see that something searing had penetrated her vitals.

He glanced up at the scope screen. The Hegemonic ship had reappeared there and was executing a peculiar-looking sidewise maneuver. Its nearer wall was stained and bubbling.

Gunnery had scored a hit.

Voices came babbling into the bridge. Then, to his surprise, Aton glimpsed a second wedge shape hovering some distance away on the edge of the screen.

Sergeant Quelle's hoarse voice came through to him on his desk com. "They tricked us, Captain! We were fired on by two ships together—caught in between 'em!"

Aton cursed. "Evidently a new tactic," he said wryly to Quelle. And a treacherous one: this sort of conduct was con-

trary to the unstated rules of temporal war.

He turned to listen to the damage reports. An energy beam had struck the destroyer's flank, penetrated its inner armor, and burned a swathe reaching as far as the drive room. Luckily the damage in the latter was less than total: the drive was still operating, though the orthogonal field that maintained normal time inside the ship while it traveled the strat was weakened.

Next he turned his attention to news of the rest of the battle. About half the Chronotic timeships had so far engaged the enemy. On balance, events seemed to be going their way. Two Hegemonics had already been destroyed.

His lieutenant leaned toward him. "It would be risky going into ortho again, Captain."

Aton nodded, feeling the weight of responsibility. This was more than a skirmish: the existence of the city of Gerread depended on it, as well as the Chronotic control of a whole segment of history.

"I'm afraid we shall have to take that risk, Lieutenant.

Those ships have to be stopped."

His voice rose. "Scanman, there are two enemy vessels in our vicinity. Range them both for gunnery."

He contemplated how to take on two heavily armed Hegemonics at the same time. Somewhere there must be a member of his own squadron without an adversary. Or had the Hegemonics adopted some complex chesslike formation in which their ships all covered one another?

A hint of a shudder passed through his mind at the thought that he might be seeing the first stage of a large, relentlessly

unfolding Hegemonic plan.

He was about to speak to Sergeant Quelle again when a sudden movement on the scope screen attracted his attention. Among the wavering lines by which the screen represented the strat an indistinct shape was expanding swiftly.

A moment later the screen itself went blank and at the same time a horrifying explosion tore through the *Smasher of Enemies*. The destroyer shuddered for a second time. The nose tipped sharply downward and the bridge caved in.

Before he deserted his desk Captain Aton verified that all com lines to the bridge were dead. Amid a hail of collapsing metal he fled from the room with the rest of his staff, helping them through the disintegrating door and leaving himself last of all.

He knew without any doubt what had happened. The flitting shape on the scope screen had been a strat torpedo which by a hundred-to-one chance had struck home. It was the sort of bad luck no chronman liked to think about.

By the look of things the torp could have hit the destroyer close to the impact point of the earlier Hegemonic energy beam. At any rate it appeared to have exploded inside the inner armor—within the ship herself—and had caused severe structural damage.

In short, the Smasher of Enemies was breaking up.

A frightening, tortured creaking sound came from all directions. Aton glanced around him at the twisted, heaving corridors. He grabbed the arm of his lieutenant.

"Get to the com room. If the beta transmitters are still functioning try to raise the fleet and request help."

The lieutenant went off at a lope. Behind him, what was left of the bridge folded up like a tin can in response to the pressures of the ship's shifting girder frame. Its erstwhile crew moved closer to Aton as if for comfort. Up the corridor came the sound of shouting and a distant, pained groan.

Another, worse danger had occurred to Aton. It was possible that the *Smasher of Enemies* was now helpless; if so, one or both of the Hegemonic destroyers could move in close enough to fire more torpedoes at point-blank range. He seized another officer.

"See if you can get to the torp section. Tell them to fire on the standard pattern, once every two minutes."

For the moment there was no knowing, of course, if the torp section had even survived the explosion. There was no knowing if any system in the stricken ship was still operational—except that there was obviously still some power flowing: the lights still burned.

Comforter Fegele was on his knees, praying for the survival of the ship—and, Aton thought cynically, of himself. Irreligiously he yanked the priest to his feet.

"The Lord's vengeance has fallen on our vessel," Fegele babbled. "This is the price of heresy."

Aton pushed him away and pointed to a white-faced young ensign. "Vuger, you come with me. The rest of you—get some rescue work organized." He spoke harshly, aware that morale was dropping. "There are bound to be a number of wounded. I want the situation stabilized for when we're ready to move." With a last glance at Fegele he added, "The souls of the dying need your ministrations, Comforter."

He went scrambling down the twisted ladder toward the drive room, with Ensign Vuger stepping down hastily above his head. As they went deep into the ship the evidence of the destroyer's own destruction became even more evident: walls that had bulged, then broken open like paper bags, lines and conduits that spewed everywhere like raveled string.

But as they reached the bottom of the ladder and picked

But as they reached the bottom of the ladder and picked their way through the wreckage the lights dimmed momentarily and then burned more brightly than before. At the same time a nearby com speaker crackled. Aton mentally congratulated the repair crews; they had lost no time.

He paused by a speaker and managed to get through to

gunnery. The voice that answered was not Quelle's or the gunnery officer's, but that of an ordinary crewman.

"We're blind, sir. And three of our beamers gone."

"Where's Sergeant Quelle?" Aton demanded.

There was silence. Then, in a strangled voice, the crewman said, "Deserted his post, sir."

Aton left the com and pressed forward, motioning Ensign Vuger to follow.

They stepped over the bodies of two dead crewmen and into a scorched area where smoke drifted and the smell of hot metal was in the air. The bulkhead separating the drive room from the rest of the ship seemed to have melted and only now had solidified. Within the drive room itself there was fair calm, despite the destruction that had been wreaked. Aton saw the body of Ensign Lankar, who a short time before had been proudly displaying his knowledge of the time-drive, laid out neatly alongside one wall with several others.

To the searing effects of the Hegemonic energy beam had been added the punishment of the torpedo explosion. A gyro was stuttering and giving off a deep tremoring hum from behind the thick steel casings. Aton understood at once that the situation was very bad.

"Are we able to move?" he asked.

A young officer, saluting hastily, shook his head. "No chance, sir. It's as much as we can do to maintain ship's field."

"What chance of phasing into ortho?"

The other looked doubtful. "Perhaps. Do you want us to

try?"

"No," said Aton. It would do no good. Even if they managed to escape from the ship, without the requisite equipment to keep them phased most of the crew would be thrown back into the strat after a short period of time. And there was clearly no possibility of cruising to the nearest node, where orthophasing could be made natural and permanent.

So it all depended on someone coming to their rescue. How was Lieutenant Krish getting on in the com room?

He looked around for a com, found one that worked, and dialed. The com speaker crackled. A voice spoke through faintly, unintelligibly.

And then the floor rose under his feet. There was a whoomph, followed by a noise that vibrated on his eardrums to such an extent that he had the momentary impression of

existing inside a deep, solid silence. Flung against the opposite wall, dazed, he watched in fascination as the floor and ceiling strained toward each other with a grating sound that made him think of giant bones breaking.

The blast of the explosion seemed to continue in a prolonged smashing and cracking. The collapse of the already weakened ship's skeleton—and timeships always suffered a good deal of physical stress in the strat—was accelerating.

Lieutenant Krish crawled toward him and helped him to his feet. "Another torpedo," Aton said breathlessly. "I'm

afraid we're finished."

The movement of the ceiling toward the deck had ceased for the moment, but he did not think the drive room would be habitable for long. He staggered to the instrument boards. An engineer joined him and they stared together at the flickering dials.

The engineer hammered his fist on the board in frustration. "The ship field is breaking down," he declared woodenly.

"How long will it hold?"

"I wouldn't give it another ten minutes."

Aton went immediately to the com set and dialed a general alert. In a loud, firm voice he announced, "This is the captain speaking. Take to the rafts. This is the captain speaking. Take to the rafts."

He repeated the message several times, then turned to the stricken faces of the surviving drive-room crew. "The ranking engineer will stay to do what he can to hold the field steady," he ordered. The engineer nodded, and Aton told him, "I will relieve you in five to ten minutes. The rest of you, get to a raft."

Aton already knew that his own life was lost, but that hardly seemed to matter. It was his duty, now, to see that everyone left alive aboard the Smasher of Enemies made it to a life raft.

Before the ortho field failed. An almost impossible job.

The party advanced through the warped corridors, exploring the various departments and pulling survivors from the weckage. The wounded they helped along or else carried on improvised stretchers. Aton knew that time was fast running out—even discounting yet a third torpedo strike, which, considering the evident helplessness of the vessel, seemed all too distinct a possibility.

When they came near to one of the ship's six life-raft sta-

tions Aton took Lieutenant Krish with him and set off toward the stern. There was no certainty that his order to abandon ship had reached all sections; he decided he would make one swift reconnaissance to ensure that the order was being carried out in a disciplined fashion, then return to the drive room and take over there, giving the engineer a chance to reach the nearest raft.

Near Station 3 they heard a commotion that sounded even over the loud creakings of the tortured girder frame. Aton drew his beamer, signaling to Krish to do the same. They rounded a corner.

Sergeant Quelle, wearing one of the ship's only two protective suits, strode resolutely along the corridor. Behind him, like a swarm of bubbles in his wake, the heretics of the Traumatic sect ran in a chattering, terrified crowd.

Even through the suit's obscuring visor, designed to opaque itself once in the strat, Quelle's bulbous face displayed his determination to live at all costs. The gleaming brass armor totally encased his body; even if the ship field failed altogether the suit would keep him safe for a short while, maintaining a weak ortho field while its power pack lasted—long enough, in fact, to enable him to reach a life raft.

Aton and Krish straddled the corridor, blocking the Traumatics' path. "Where are you going, Sergeant?" Aton demanded harshly.

Quelle's answer was a muffled growl. His followers, of whom he clearly did not regard himself as any kind of leader, clustered around him, eyeing Aton speculatively.

Quelle carried a crowbar with which, Aton guessed, he intended to smash the cage where the raft was kept. Aton fired a warning shot over their heads.

"Sergeant Quelle deserted his post and has stolen a protective suit. Get out of that suit, Sergeant. You'll take your turn like all the rest."

And then, for the third, terrible time, an explosion smashed into the destroyer, hurling them all sideways. An ear-splitting rending noise told Aton that the stern of the ship was breaking away entirely.

Quelle, with what must have been desperate strength, was the first to recover, brass suit or no. His crowbar swung down on Aton's head. Encumbered as he was, the blow was clumsyand partly absorbed by Aton's uniform hat; nevertheless Aton slumped to the floor, barely conscious. Quelle aimed another blow at Lieutenant Krish, missed, then swept hastily on. followed by the mob.

Krish draped his captain's arm around his own shoulders and hauled him to his feet. "Get to the drive room, Lieutenant," Aton mumbled, "Relieve the engineer."

"It's too late, sir. Can't you see what's happening? The field is already breaking up."

Aton, fighting to remain aware, saw that he was right. A foglike flickering was in the air. An almost overpowering vertigo assailed them both, and the walls—in fact everything solid—seemed to spin on themselves endlessly. All these signs were sure indications of an ortho field going bust.

Krish half-carried Aton along the corridor. The lights went out as the power finally failed, then the emergency lighting faithfully came on to replace them, each strip drawing on its own power pack to provide a dimmer, yellow glow.

And then, through everything, Aton heard horrifying screams. His ship was foundering, sinking into the depths of the strat. He was hearing the screams of men who were drowning in the Gulf of Lost Souls.

Like men plunged from air into the sea, these men were being plunged from their natural, rational time and into a medium that no man could experience and stay sane.

After a few yards Aton steadied himself and, though still groggy, disengaged himself from Krish's support. He leaned weakly against the wall.

"Leave me here, Lieutenant, Continue . . . do what you

Krish took his arm again, but Aton drew away.

"You must let me help you, sir. There may be only seconds—"

"Surely you realize that I cannot leave the ship. Save yourself . . . and whomever else you can." Seeing Krish's indecision, his tone hardened. "That's an order, Lieutenant." He waved his pistol. "I have my own protection . . . against the strat."

"Yes, sir." Krish stiffened. He stepped back, clearly affected, then snapped off a salute that Aton returned perfunctorily.

Then he turned on his heel and strode away.

Moments after he had gone the wavering ortho field deserted the stretch of corridor where Captain Aton was standing. The pistol, with which he had been meaning to shoot himself, dropped from his fingers. In a little over a second the field swayed back again, but in that second Aton saw it.

The strat. The temporal substratum.

The Gulf of Potential Time.

It was only a glimpse, but even a glimpse is too much. Fortunately, or perhaps not so, the returning ortho field saved him—saved him, among other things, from remaining conscious, for exposure to the strat does not bring merciful oblivion. But with the return of passing time the glimpse of eternity became a mental shock of pathological proportions. Aton instantly fell unconscious.

At almost the same time two noncom chronmen, running desperately for the life raft, saw their captain lying there in the corridor. Without even thinking about it they each seized an arm and lugged him at speed toward Station 3.

WHEN a field of orthogonal time (that is, of time as it can be understood by the human intellect) breaks down, it does not collapse all at once. Bubbles and fragments of it cling, eddying and drifting, for anything up to ten minutes.

One such bubble had attached itself to Station 3.

The scene at Station 3 was one of turmoil. Discipline had broken down in the face of horror, and about thirty men were fighting to get aboard the raft—even though, with an orderly embarkation, room could have been found for them all. On his arrival Lieutenant Krish tried to impose a sense of command. He was cut down by Sergeant Quelle, who had found a pistol beamer and held it awkwardly in his brass-suit's mechanical claw.

Quelle had good reason for shooting the lieutenant. He was anxious that no one who knew his guilty secret, apart from his fellow Traumatics, should board the raft with him. He ensured that the Traumatics went aboard first, then entered the raft himself preparatory to casting off.

But among those who boarded in the final rush were the two noncoms carrying the unconscious form of Captain Aton. They themselves were not so lucky. They dropped Aton to the floor, then bravely left the raft to assist some wounded men. Quelle indignantly clanked forward to rid himself of his potential accuser, but he was too late. In that moment others in the raft decided that they had lingered long enough and activated the escape sequence. The gates closed and the hum of the raft's own emergency ortho field filled the dim interior.

The last wisps of the ship field were now dissipating, and the shattered destroyer was wholly saturated by the strat. It ceased, in one sense, to have any material existence at all: matter cannot retain its properties without the vector of time to give it substance. As such, the life raft magically passed unimpeded through several walls and floated free.

It was the only raft to leave the Smasher of Enemies. All the others either were too damaged or else failed to energize in time. The survivors switched on the small scope and saw, by the light of the raft's feeble beta projector, the vague image of a tall Hegemonic warship looming over them. They cowered, fearing, but eventually the ship turned and receded beyond the scope's range.

Still wearing the protective suit, Sergeant Quelle fretted. He had felt it reasonably safe to kill in the confusion at Station 3, but here there would be witnesses who could not be silenced and bodies that could not be disposed of. He sweated inside the suit, glancing at Aton and hoping he would not recover.

The raft was transmitting, as a beacon, a rotating beta beam. Otherwise there was nothing they could do. They settled down and waited, for life or a fate worse than death.

Chapter Two

Node One: Chronopolis, mistress of the Chronotic Empire, seat of the Imperial Government of His Chronotic Majesty Philipium Ixian I, and the location of that repository of imperial wisdom, the *Imperator*.

Chronopolis was complex and sprawling. In the morning light (the sun had risen to that angle which most accentuated the city's panoply of splendor) her towers, arches, and minarets sparkled and flashed, casting long shadows that fell sharply across the various quarters housing her polygot population—across the Hevenian quarter, with its characteristically arcaded architecture; across the more rigidly styled Barek quarter; and so on. For people of every nation and of every period in the mighty time-spanning empire flocked to Chronopolis.

The incredibly massive, intricate palace that occupied the center of the eternal city was well placed, for both practical and aesthetic reasons. Like a spider at the center of a vast web, it cast out tentacles in all directions so that it was hard to say where it left off and the rest of the city began. This enmeshment was functional as well as descriptive: the palace merged gradually into the city in the form of government departments, military offices, and church institutions—the three pillars of any state. The residence of His Eminence the Arch-Cardinal Reamoir also lay within the palace grounds, so that all strands, spiritual as well as political, were drawn into the hands of His Chronotic Majesty. And visible from the upper reaches of the palace, from where one could overlook the entire city, were the massive shipyards beyond the outskirts of Chronopolis, busy now as never before.

On this day of Imdara in the fifth month of year 204 (as

measured from the pastward buffer known as the Stop Barrier—the zero point in imperial reckoning) the activities proceeding in the imperial palace were too numerous to list. The business of attending to the affairs of the thousand-year imperium went on—all under the gaze, if they so desired, of those members of the Ixian dynasty who were domiciled there—in the thousands of chambers, halls, lecture rooms, salons, and chapels. As they did on every other day, except for the specified holy days of observance.

Of these activities, not least in importance was the education of the next generation of rulers. In one of the domestic wings Brother Mundan, one of a dozen appointed tutors, wrestled with the problem of steeping a class of young Ixians—some of them quite closely related to the emperor—in the traditions of the dynasty.

Even his brown cassock and curtailed cowl, even all the majesty of the Church that lay behind him (the Church, of course, accepting the responsibility for all serious education) was sometimes insufficient to curb the irreverence of these youngsters, who were apt to place themselves above normal values even in matters of religion. Luckily the Church placed great reliance on repetition as a method of teaching, and this generally enabled Brother Mundan to bludgeon his charges into submission. Indeed, it would have been difficult to instill the present lesson "The Foundation of Empire," with its mixture of history, abstract physics, and religious dogma, by any other means. Brother Mundan was repeating it to the present class for at least the twelfth time.

"And to what," he intoned, "do we owe the existence of the empire?"

After a pause Prince Kir, cousin to the emperor, rose. "To the intervention of God. Brother."

Mundan nodded. "Correct, Your Highness. Once, time stretched unchanging from the interminable past to the interminable future, or at least it changed only slowly due to natural movements in the temporal substratum or to timestorms. There was no empire and no true religion. There was religion, of a sort, but it was superstition, such as some of the futureward heathens hold to. Then God acted so as to redeem mankind. At what is now called Node Six, in the city of Umbul, capital of the present province of Revere, he chose as his appointed messenger San Hevatar, a scientist working

in the laboratories of the ruling Ixian family—of your family, Highnesses."

Mundan's gaze settled on one who, instead of attending closely, was more interested in exchanging whispers with a neighbor.

"Princess Nulea, who are the three things that God revealed to San Heyatar?"

The girl started and jumped up. With glazed eyes she chanted the answers she had long learned by rote.

"One: the mutability of time, Brother Mundan. Two: the means of traveling through time. Three: the nature of the soul."

"Thank you, that is correct. Through His messenger, San Hevatar, God has taught us that time is mutable. He has taught us how to travel through time. And He has taught us that the nature of the soul is to persist in eternity."

He rapped the lectern to pique their interest. "The first of these truths shows us the possibility of the Church's mission. The second truth shows us how the mission may be accomplished. And the third truth shows us why it should be accomplished."

His voice became challenging. "And why should the Church work to accomplish its mission under the protection and banner of the Chronotic Empire?" Brother Mundan's dark eyes flashed. This point in the lesson touched the fires in his own breast.

Once again Prince Kir proved the most apt of his pupils. "Because time does not die, Brother Mundan. Because the soul cannot leave the body."

"Yes, Highness, that is so," Mundan said with a slight frown. The answer was probably lost on the densest of those present. "The Church works to bring the true faith to all men, past, present, and future—to establish God's kingdom on Earth. Even though we die we continue to exist in the past, because the past does not vanish. The Church seeks to transform our past lives and bring God into our souls.

"Let us take in turn each of the three truths revealed by San Hevatar. First: that time is mutable. This means simply that even the past may be changed because in absolute terms there is no past, just as there is no unique present. Orthogonal time is but the surface of the bottomless ocean of potential time, or the temporal substratum: the hidden dimension of eternity in which all things coexist without progression from

past to future. Prior to the foundation of the empire the past could change without man's knowledge or will, due to time-storms or natural mutations, just as the wind can change direction. Now, thanks to the grace of God, the past and the future can be controlled and altered by conscious intervention."

This intervention took the form, of course, of the Historical Office, which undertook to edit and restructure history by manipulation of key events, and of the imperial time-fleets, which in the last resort enforced the imperial writ. To Brother Mundan this seemed entirely proper and right.

He proceeded to the second God-given truth, writing some equations on the blackboard.

"These equations describe the operation of moving mass through time. You should already be familiar with them from your physics lessons, so here we will concern ourselves with the structure of orthogonal time, which is of great importance to the stability of the empire.

"Time is composed of a wave structure. The nodes of the waves travel at intervals of approximately one hundred and seventy years and are of crucial importance for the business of time-travel since they comprise 'rest points' in the tensioning of the Chronotic energy field. This of interest only to a time-traveler, because matter can be transported from one node to another and remain there without further expenditure of energy, while matter cannot be transported to a time between nodes, or be taken from there to somewhere else, and remain there without a continuous expenditure of energy, usually accomplished by a device called an orthophase. This is the reason why nearly all Chronotic intercourse takes place from node to node. The seven nodes covered by the span of the empire form, as it were, the seven continents or provinces of the empire, while the intervening periods comprise a series of hinterlands, benevolently governed but rarely seeing a timeship except in time of rebellion or by order of the Historical Office."

"Why are there nodes, Brother Mundan?" asked Prince Kir seriously.

Mundan frowned again. "We may take it as part of God's wisdom, Highness, though technically it is, as I say, the wave structure of time. The nodes give the empire an absolute standard of time-measurement—for the movement of the nodes is absolute, not relative. We are fortunate enough to

live in Node One. Today, for instance, is Imdara of the fifth month, and tomorrow will be Juno of the fifth month. When tomorrow comes it would be possible for us to travel back in a time-machine to today, Imdara—but Node One will not be here. It will have moved on, to Juno. Thus nodal time, as apart from historical time, is the time the empire uses to conduct its business. The clocks of the time-fleets measure nodal time.

"Imagine what chaos would reign if we tried to govern a time-traveling empire where time was uniform, not gathered into nodes. If it were a simple matter—say, for a man to travel into tomorrow and meet himself there—why, antinomies and paradoxes would abound in such confusion that no order could survive. Time itself, perhaps, would break down and the whole world would sink into the substratum. That is why God, in His great wisdom, has so arranged the universe that the natural period between nodes is greater than the span of a man's life, so that he will not meet himself. And it is to prevent the harmful accumulation of paradoxes that it is forbidden to travel into internodal time, except in the emperor's name."

Princess Nulea giggled. "Narcis doesn't think so!"

"Silence!" Brother Mundan's face became an angry red. He was well aware that certain members of the imperial household did not consider themselves bound by the laws that restrained the rest of society. But he would brook no mention of Prince Narcis' unspeakable perversion here.

Princess Nulea lowered her eyes. "Sorry, Brother Mundan,"

she murmured, smirking.

"I have a question, Brother Mundan," another young prince interrupted. "What happens to a timeship if it phases into orthogonal time between nodes, but has a malfunctioning orthophase or runs out of power?"

Mundan had been asked that question before by this very class. He was convinced the questioner was doing it because

he knew it distressed him.

"In that case," he said, fighting to keep his voice calm, "the ship will remain in phase for a short time. Then it will outphase automatically and sink into the substratum, together with every soul on board."

He turned, as much so as to hide his face as anything, and wrote on the blackboard the additional formulas which, together with the derivations from the mass-energy equation,

described the nodal system associated with time's forward momentum.

Then, once he was sure he had recovered his composure, he faced the class again.

"Now we come to the question of the soul," he said quietly. "The empire itself, if bereft of religion, could subsist on the first two truths alone, though it would not be the empire we know. Knowledge of the soul is the empire's spiritual meaning, as expressed by Holy Church."

He paused to bring home the seriousness of the third truth, almost daring them to cheek him further. But they did not. They knew that on this subject he was fanatical. Any jeering concerning the existence of the soul would be reported straight to Arch-Cardinal Reamoir.

"Prior to the revelations received by San Hevatar it was even possible for atheists to deny that the soul exists at all. Once time-travel had been demonstrated, however, the existence of the soul became indisputable.

"Why? Because time-travel proved that the past does not vanish when our awareness leaves it; the past continues to exist. And that raises the following question: what of that awareness? Must that not also continue to exist in the past even though, paradoxically, we are not 'aware' of it? And what happens to that consciousness of ours at death? It cannot be extinguished—for otherwise the past would vanish.

"There is only one way to resolve the riddle, and it is this: the soul experiences itself as a moving moment of time beginning with conception and ending with death. At death the soul travels back in time to the moment of conception to live its life through again exactly as before. This repetition continues eternally; thus is a man's past kept alive.

"From this proposition the existence of the soul is proved.

"This means that we have sat here in this room, hearing this lecture at this moment of time, countless times before, and will do so countless times again."

With a sense of dignity Brother Mundan opened a book of Holy Scripture and began to read the words written by none other than San Hevatar.

"'There is the body and there is the soul. The body belongs to orthogonal time. But the soul, being spiritual, is eternal; yet it does not persist beyond its appointed period in time. On meeting the end of that period it travels back to the

beginning, and experiences its life anew. Thus the soul has the God-given power to travel through time.

"'And why does the soul not remember the life it has already lived? It is because of death trauma, which wipes clean all the soul's memories ...'"

It sometimes seemed to Chief Archivist Illus Ton Mayar that the Achronal Archives, which he administered, had taken on an existence all of their own and had begun to separate from the rest of the universe. Many of the staff no longer ventured into the outside world. Mayar understood their feelings: men whose working hours were spent in cataloging time's mutations were apt to feel that the world was insubstantial. Here, in this subterranean cluster of vaults and bunkers, could be found a refuge from Chronotic instability.

The Achronal Archives were, in essence, a record of deleted time. Whenever an event was altered—whether by natural causes, or by order of the Historical Office, or by act of war—the consequences spread all up and down historical time making the adjustment complete in all directions. Only the existence of the archives made such changes detectable. Protected by powerful time-buffers, the vaults were impenetrable to the powerful rectifying vibrations that echoed through the strat. Thus the records that were kept on every facet of the empire remained intact and could be compared with time as it currently stood.

It was a record of ghosts. Millions of men, women, and children, entire cities, nations, and cultures, that now had never existed, were stored in the archival computers. Research into these vanished communities could be a fascinating experience, but to undertake it one had to be a staff member. Not even the universities were allowed such information—there was a theory that it would weaken the fabric of time, and besides, it might reflect on the permanence of the empire.

And there were times when Archivist Mayar himself wished that he did not have to know.

In the sepulchral dimness of Vault 5 the humming note of the computer was almost menacing. The bank of winking indicator lights seemed to be spelling out a mocking message of doom.

The operator's voice was somber as he handed Mayar a thick print-out sheaf. "The results have been double-checked,

sir. There isn't any doubt about it—we knew almost straight-away."

The section had been carrying out what was known as an Anomalous Population Check. The Archives' Current State Bank was continuously matched, as a matter of course, with a similar information bank—unprotected by time-buffers—on the surface. When they failed to match, an Anomalous Population Check was immediately undertaken so as to map out any unauthorized changes in time.

Mayar barely glanced at the print-out before handing it back. "I shall have to inform the emperor," he said heavily. That meant a visit to the palace—never a prospect he relished.

As if to accentuate the blow, Mayar had that morning received indirect confirmation from another source. Units of the Third Time Fleet had arrived in the capital, badly damaged from an engagement with the enemy. Mayar had heard that the Third Time Fleet had been beaten and forced to withdraw, and he was willing to bet that the consequence of that battle was staring at him now. Gerread, a city of some importance in Node 5 (it had been a fair-sized town even in Node 4), had been elided from history, and the souls of its inhabitants (as theory would have it) dispersed into the formless dimensions of the strat like drops of rain in the ocean.

At least they had not suffered the fate of chronmen who, when their ships were destroyed, sank as conscious entities down into the gulf.

Without another word he left the operator and went through a double door leading to a long, low corridor. From all around him as he walked up the corridor came the muted sound of work going on in the surrounding chambers. Once, he passed another archivist, garbed in a white smock like himself, and muttered a perfunctory greeting. He avoided meeting the fellow's eyes, for the stricken look he knew he was apt to find there was becoming more pronounced among his staff lately. He was becoming concerned to know which way the growing cult of despairing isolationism in the archives would turn.

Once in his own quarters, he discarded his white gown and took the hundred-foot elevator to the surface.

As he passed through the shaded frontage of the surface building the bright sunlight hit him like a staggering blow, making him slightly dizzy. He entered the emblazoned coach that was waiting and instructed the chauffeur to take him to the palace.

The sights and sounds of Chronopolis washed over him as they drove through the streets. It all seemed slightly unreal. Did any of this really exist? Could anything that was liable to vanish from time be said to have substance? The familiar dreamlike sensation all achronal archivists were prone to came over him and he found himself wishing he were back in his quiet, cool vaults.

Once, to get some fresh air, he opened one of the coach windows, but instantly he was invaded by a low-key roaring that hung over this part of the city. Glancing overhead, he saw a drifting pall of smoke. Both the noise and the smoke came from the shipyards some miles away, where the tremendous armada that was to conquer the Hegemony was now nearing completion.

With a frown of distaste he closed the window again.

The coach traveled through the great arcaded entrance of the towering palace. Mayar was met in the reception chambers by Commander Trevurm, one of the emperor's select team of aides and advisers.

Calmly he gave him the news. Trevurm listened with head bent, then nodded.

"We already know of it. Commander Haight is here. He came in with ships of the Third Fleet this morning. They fought the Hegemonic raiders who did this." He paused. "How far does the mutation extend? Have you carried out a mapping?"

"We have, Commander. The elision covers everything related to the founding and sustaining of the city that was

known as Gerread. There is no replacement."

"No alternative city?"

"None."

Trevurm sighed. "This kind of thing is hard to grasp. You come and tell me there was a city called Gerread, which I have never heard of, and I have to believe you."

"Before it was eliminated you had heard of it," Mayar said, feeling how inadequate words were to express time's mysterious movements. "Only last month you and I were speaking to its governor... or rather... I was speaking..."

"I cannot recall it."

"Naturally not. It never happened. The meeting vanished along with the city, along with its governor." And yet I am

here and I met Governor Kerrebad and I remember it, Mayar thought wildly.

He turned his mind to more practical considerations. "Has

the emperor been told?" he asked.

Trevurm shook his head. "Not yet. But it cannot be delayed further."

He rose to his feet. "I would prefer it if the news came from you," he said. "Commander Haight's interview with His Majesty will no doubt be uncomfortable enough without having to bear the tidings as well."

Mayar acquiesced and followed the commander deeper into the gorgeous palace. They passed through executive sections, through social sections where nobles and their guests relaxed with their various expensive entertainments. Finally they were in the inner sanctum. Mayar was obliged to wait while Commander Trevurm disappeared for a few minutes, after which they were admitted into the presence.

In a modestly sized room whose walls were of paneled, dark oak carved into curious patterns, His Majesty the Emperor Philipium I sat at one end of a long gleaming table of

polished mahogany.

He was not an imposing figure: merely a tired old man sitting hunched and shriveled at the corner of a table. His eyes had a deadness to them such as is brought on by continual fatigue or by a too-prolonged effort. The only touch of distinction to his gray face was a short pointed beard that was much faded. His costume, too, was modest and unregal: a tunic and breeches that were colorless and shiny with much use.

The two who entered bowed low. They could not help but notice that the emperor's right arm shook visibly. He suffered from the trembling palsy, which Mayar knew to be due to degenerative changes in the ganglia at the base of the cerebrum. The disease was incurable and grew chronic with advanced age.

They then turned to bow, less deferentially, to the second occupant of the room, who hovered like a shadow in the corner. In contrast to His Majesty, Arch-Cardinal Reamoir wore the most sumptuous of ecclesiastical garments. His floorlength cope was trimmed with purple fur and boasted orphreys richly patterned in gold and variously dyed tussore silk. Spun gold figured, too, in the coif which covered his head and which was decorated with the symbols of the Church.

The aloof prelate accepted their bow with a casual blessing. "And what is this bad news I have been warned to expect?" the emperor inquired in a dry voice.

Briefly and concisely, Mayar gave him the facts. The old man's face sagged. At the same time, a look of puzzlement crossed his features.

Mayar knew that look. It happened every time someone was told of events or things that had been removed from the stream of time. Automatically one tried to remember what had gone, however much one knew that it was impossible.

With the emperor, puzzlement was soon replaced by muted rage at the realization that an ungodly enemy had succeeded in altering even his memories. "This is bad," he said shakily. "This is very bad."

Arch-Cardinal Reamoir moved forward silently. A hand stole from beneath his cope and comfortably squeezed the emperor's shoulder. Philipium reached up and patted the hand.

"Your Majesty will recall," Mayar continued, "that this is the second such attack. The first was not entirely successful, for it only modified the history of the coastal port of Marsel, and that not seriously. This, however, is an unmitigated disaster. We must presume that the enemy has now perfected his new weapon."

"Yes! The time-distorter!" The emperor's face clearly showed his distress. "Why does the Hegemony have such a device and we do not have it?" His right arm trembled more markedly, as it usually did under stress. And indeed, the enemy's possession of the time-distorter was frightening. When the Historical Office decided to change some aspect of history, months or years of preparation were needed to select some key event or combination of events whose alteration would produce the desired result. A big operation was usually required, entailing a staff of thousands to carry out the alteration.

Yet apparently the distorter could mutate history simply by focusing some sort of energy that acted on the underlying temporal substratum. The threat to the empire was real and disturbing.

"God is testing us," murmured Arch-Cardinal Reamoir smoothly.

"As always, you know best, old friend." The emperor seemed to draw courage from anything Reamoir said. God

forgive him for the thought, but Mayar simply could not see the arch-cardinal's inuflence as a healthy one.

"These indignities will cease once my invincible armada sets forth," the emperor said, glancing up at Reamoir. "The Hegemony will be part of the empire. The distorter will be ours."

"Your Majesty," Mayar said diffidently, "a weapon as effective as the time-distorter must seriously be taken into account. There is very little defense against it, once its carrier ship has broken through into historical territory. I would go so far as to say that it is capable of destroying the empire itself."

"Archivist Mayar!" Reamoir thundered, his face suddenly blazing. "Take a care what you say!"

"I said only that it is capable of destroying the empire," Mayar replied defensively. "I did not say that such an event could come about." And if he did openly say it, he would be in serious trouble. The Two Things That God Will Not Do were as important a part of religious dogma as the Three Revelations of San Hevatar. The Two Things That God Will Not Do were that, once having given it, He would not take away the secret of time-travel from mankind and that He would not allow the Chronotic Empire ever to perish.

It was dangerous to argue with the head of the Church. But Mayar, fearful of the calamity he saw hovering over them all, pressed on.

"What I say, Your Majesty, Your Éminence, is this: God has promised that the empire will not fall or be removed, but He has not promised that it will not meet with misfortune or be defeated in war. As Your Eminence will tell us"—he bowed his head again toward the arch-cardinal—"the doctrine of free will means that even the mission of the Church may fail. God has left such matters in our hands, and we are fallible."

He licked his lips and continued hurriedly. "As chief archivist I am familiar with the changes of time. I know that their consequences can be dismaying and unexpected, and that precautions taken against them can prove to be futile. I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that the archives perform a function fundamental to the integrity of the empire. And I fear the distorter. I ask myself what degree of change the archives can accommodate. I believe they will break down altogether under the impact of the weapon."

"And what do you propose we should do?" Philipium's eyes had lost their deadness now. They were glittering.

"It occurs to me that the Hegemony is carrying out these attacks because it feels itself threatened by us, Your Majesty. In my opinion we should seek a truce and abandon our plans for conquest—at least until we know more about the time-distorter."

The emperor turned beady eyes on Commander Trevurm. "And what is your opinion?"

Trevurm stroked his chin and sighed. "There is much sense in what our friend says," he admitted. "The time-distorter brings an unknown factor into the equation."

"So you both advise caution?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Have you both forgotten the mission of Holy Church?" said the arch-cardinal to Trevurm and Mayar, affecting a shocked tone. "Your Majesty, we are doing God's bidding. The armada must do its work. The heathen must be converted by its power."

"But at the risk of wreaking havoc with the structure of time?" Mayar protested.

Reamoir turned and spoke for the benefit of Philipium alone. "What else should we do? Have we not tried to convert the Hegemony by peaceful persuasion? Our missionaries have gone forward in time, not only to the Hegemony but even beyond, to little avail. Many have been spurned and ejected back to their own time. Some have even been martyred. The pride and stubbornness of the future people is displeasing to God; only force remains. God will go with our armada; He is on our side. All will be well."

"All will be well," echoed Philipium, his voice hollow-sounding. He rose from his chair and reached out to clutch at Mayar, holding up his trembling right arm. "My hand, see how it shakes," he said. "Listen, I had a vision in a dream. God told me that if the Hegemony is subdued my affliction will vanish."

"That will indeed be a miracle, sir."

"The armada must proceed. All will be well. The only question to be answered is when. And that is a matter for the Military Council, not for amateurs." He gestured irritably.

"I understand, Your Majesty," Mayar said, feeling defeated.
"God's message is clear. And yet your forebodings are not without substance. Archivist. We are merely human and can

err. Even I am merely emperor, not Imperator. Come, we will consult a wiser being."

Philipium tottered toward the door. Outside, attendants were waiting and accompanied them through the cloistered passages of the inner sanctum. From ahead came cheerful noises of talk and laughter, growing steadily louder until eventually a pair of large doors, quilted and padded with stuffed satin, drew open to admit them.

They entered the main inner chamber of the court.

Strictly speaking it was more than a chamber, being the size of a ballroom. Tastefully arranged here and there were couches, tables, and chairs. The arched recesses that skirted its circumference formed a motif that was repeated in the ribbed and curved formation of the ceiling. All in all, the effect was most pleasing and restful to the eye.

The court chamber had a relaxed air and was a favorite meeting place. Through the several entrances came and went the nobles and privileged personages who had access to it, hailing from all parts and nodes of the empire. The Ixian family was, of course, predominant, and its members too came from all periods of history—though in their case the description was superfluous. The Ixian dynasty was fully mobile through time, being the only family permitted to intermarry with its ancestors and descendants.

One end of the court chamber was kept clear. Emperor Philipium I made toward it with tottering step, followed by the arch-cardinal, Mayar, and Commander Trevurm. A hush fell over the scene as his presence was noted, but then the chatter started up again.

One of his young daughters, Princess Mayora, approached him with a smile, but he brushed her aside and stood before the great panel, featureless and of a dull gold color, that occupied that entire end of the chamber.

"Imperator," he called in a weak husky voice, "grant us an audience!"

After a pause the gold panel rumbled up to reveal a square-cut cavity. There was the whine of motors.

The machine they knew as the *Imperator* slid out on giant castors and stood in the vacant space as though surveying the chamber. A deep hum issued from within its body.

Even though he had seen it several times before, Mayar still could not prevent a sensation of awe as he beheld the huge machine. It towered over them like a miniature castle,

with its odd crenellated towers at each corner, its walls plated with matt grayish-black metal. It had a distinctly regal appearance entirely in keeping with its function. For though the *Imperator* was a machine—admittedly much more advanced and mysterious than a common computer—it was also, in some indefinable way, alive.

More than that, it was in principle the true titular head of the empire. Emperor Philipium I—like any emperor before or after him—held his position by proxy, as it were. The rationale behind this system was quite clear: the *Imperator* contained the distillation of the minds of all the Chronotic emperors, of whom there had been five before Philipium, as well as of many other members of the imperial dynasty whose wisdom seemed to merit it, this distillation being accomplished by a transfusion from the memory centers of their brains after death.

Not that the *Imperator* was merely a receptacle of their dead intelligences; it was much more. No one quite knew what went on inside the *Imperator*, what it did with these borrowed personalities. They never emerged, that was certain; the *Imperator* had a nature of its own.

The origin of the machine was equally obscure to the outside world, being a state secret. San Hevatar was reputed, by legend, to have had a hand in its manufacture. Mayar, however—he was not privy to this state secret either—had received a very good indication from a member of the Ixian family itself that there was no secret, that no one, not even the emperor, knew where the Imperator came from or how long it had been there.

The hum from within the machine grew deeper and the *Imperator* spoke in a full-bodied baritone that thrilled the hearer with its presence.

"You have summoned me?"

Philipium nodded, leaning on an attendant. "Advise us on the matter we have been discussing."

There was no need to explain further. Every room in the palace, as well as every department of government, was wired for sound for the *Imperator's* benefit. No one felt embarrassed by this state of affairs, since the machine had never been known to repeat anything it had heard.

The humming faded almost to inaudibility before the *Imperator* spoke again.

"What has been will be."

The machine rolled back on its castors, disappearing into its private chamber. The gold panel slid down into place.

Mayar had expected nothing better from the interview. The *Imperator* undertook no executive function. While it was consulted occasionally, the cryptic nature of its pronouncements rendered it more in the style of an oracle. More than one emperor had spent days trying to puzzle out the meaning of its statements, only to have to ignore them in the end.

"What has been will be," Philipium muttered feverishly.

"How do you interpret those words, Reamoir?"

"The *Imperator* understands the mysteries of time," the arch-cardinal replied smoothly. "It intimates that the victory of our invincible armada is foreordained."

The emperor gave a grunt of satisfaction. "The enterprise against the Hegemony must go ahead . . . all must be prepared to satisfaction." He lifted a shaking hand to his attendant. "To my quarters. I must rest. Later I will receive Commander Haight."

He moved off. Commander Trevurm bade Mayar good day and went about his business. The arch-cardinal, disdaining

civilities, also drifted off.

Mayar allowed his gaze to wander over the court chamber. He was feeling dismal. He was about to make his way back to the archives when Princess Mayora rushed up to him.

"Chief Archivist, it is so long since we saw you here."

Mayar smiled politely. "Regretfully my stay must be short, Your Highness. I must return to the vaults."

"Oh, nonsense. You can easily spare an hour or so. Come over here." She seized him by the arm and led him toward a couch.

Disarmed by the young woman's charm, Mayar obeyed. Once seated, she turned and faced him directly.

"So what have you been talking to Father about?" she said breezily.

Mayar was embarrassed. "With all respect, Your Highness-"

"Oh, yes, I know," she interrupted with an impatient wave of her hand. "State confidence. Still, I know what it was all about. Daddy's enterprise against the heathen." She leaned closer, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Will there be great battles in the substratum? Awful mutations in time?"

"I fear there will, Your Highness," Mayar said heavily. She drew back in an expostulation of surprise. "Well, don't sound so gloomy about it. Look over there—that's Captain Vrin." She pointed out a tall chron officer in full dress uniform—resplendent tunic, plumed hat, and waist-high boots belled at the top—who was talking animatedly surrounded by spellbound young women. "He's in the Third Fleet. He's just come back from a battle at Node Five. Isn't it exciting?"

Mayar turned his head away, feeling that if he tried to speak his voice would choke him.

Noticing his reaction, Princess Mayora pouted in disappointment. "Well, if you're going to be so serious about it you might as well go and talk to my brother Philipium," she said. "There he is over there."

Mayar followed her gaze and located Philipium, the eldest of the emperor's sizable brood. Aged about forty, he had already begun to resemble his father and sported the same type of beard. He was destined to become Emperor Philipium II, although the date of his coronation was not permitted to be made known to anyone in Node 1, particularly not to the present emperor. Gazing upon him, Mayar allowed his thoughts to dwell for a few moments on the perplexing intricacies of time such a situation presented. Futureward of Node 1—in the internodal hinterland—was a Philipium the Younger who was not emperor but who remained until his dying day merely the son of the emperor. Yet eventually Node 1 would travel onward, past the death of Philipium I, and Philipium II would become emperor. The soul of Philipium the Elder would travel back in time to be reborn; but in that cycle of his eternally recurring life, the cycle succeeding the current one, he would not be emperor but merely the father of Emperor Philipium II.

Likewise Mayar, in the next cycle of his recurrent life would find himself living in the internodal hinterland that Node 1 had left behind. He would be removed from the center of the empire and so, he hoped, would find life a good deal more peaceful.

The eternally repeated rebirth of the soul into the same life was one of the few dogmas of the Church that had been scientifically proved. That, together with the nodal structure of time, provided the empire with a form of passing time that, so to speak, transcended ordinary sequential time. At the same time the system of nodes was extremely convenient for the average mind, such as that of Princess Mayora, who

sat with him now. She was happily able to ignore the enigmas and paradoxes that time-travel entailed, leaving such trouble-some matters to the theoreticians of the Historical Office, of the Church's Order of Chronotic Casuistry, and of Mayar's own Achronal Archives.

Did these people surrounding Mayar have any idea what the mutability of time meant? It was quite obvious that Princess Mayora did not. Like nearly everyone else, she regarded the gorgeous palace in which she lived as permanent, secure, and unalterable. The Chronotic wars were centuries away. Mayar glanced despairingly at the ingeniously vaulted and domed ceiling. If only they could realize, he thought, that all this could be magicked away, could never have been.

Princess Mayora giggled. "Oh, look! Here's Narcis!"

Into the chamber strolled two identical youths, their arms fondly about each other's necks. Looking closely at them, one could see them for Ixians. One could see in them, perhaps, what their father the emperor might have been in his youth: the oval face, the straight, poetical nose. Here, however, their lithe upright bearing, their unblemished skin, turned Philipium's tottering figure into a travesty.

On looking even closer, one might discern that one of these apparently identical twins was in fact a few years older than the other. Their story needed no explication to Mayar. Narcis, youngest son of the emperor, a strange, wayward homosexual, had in defiance of all the laws of the empire traveled a few years into the future where he had met and fallen in love with himself. He had, moreover, persuaded his future self to return to Node 1 with him. The two now spent their time mooning about the palace together, flaunting their forbidden love for all to see.

Arch-Cardinal Reamoir, whenever he chanced to come upon them, would give them the sign of the curse, whereupon the two young Narcises would laugh with glee. But in the atmosphere of the Ixian dynasty their love affair was not nearly as shocking as it would have sounded outside. Ixians married only Ixians, to keep the imperial line pure. At first this had meant marriages that spanned centuries, a man marrying, perhaps, his great-great-grandniece. But gradually all distinctions became blurred. Marriages between brother and sister, parent and child, were no longer frowned on. The blood was what mattered.

And as for the crime of "going double"-of consorting

with one's future self—in a world where it was forbidden even to tell a man what lay in his future, well, young Ixians did not feel that Chronotic laws were made to be obeyed.

Princess Mayora waved to her double-brother. The Prin-

ces Narcis came toward them.

"Good day, Chief Archivist." Narcis, greeted him with a smile.

"Good day to you, Your Highness." As they came close Mayar could hear the faint whine of the orthophase that Narcis₂ wore on a belt at his waist to enable him to live outside his own time.

"Come and talk to the archivist," Princess Mayora de-

manded. "He appears to need cheering up."

Narcis₁ gazed at Mayar with dreamy eyes while fondling the back of his double's neck. "He is too old," he said bluntly. "Old people talk only of dreary things, of war and politics and religion. We live for love, do we not, Narcis?"

"Yes, Narcis."

Smiling together, the two wandered away.

MEANTIME in another part of the palace's inner sanctum Narcis' other brother, Prince Vro Ixian, was busy receiving the report of Perlo Rolce, owner of the Rolce Detective

Agency.

Prince Vro's apartments were gloomily lit and carelessly furnished. The cleaning staff was rarely allowed in and dust lay everywhere. To remind him of his great sorrow, one wall of the main room was taken up with a tridimensional hologram screen that gave a direct view into a mausoleum about a mile distant so that it seemed an extension of Vro's dwelling. The sarcophagus occupying the center of the burial chamber gaped open, empty.

The burly detective sat stiffly in a straight-backed chair facing the prince, who stood in a curious stance at the other end of the room, head cocked and one hand resting negligently on a table. Three or four years older than Narcis, he had the same cast of face, but his eyes were more penetrating.

Rolce was used to Ixian peculiarities. This was not the first time he had been engaged by a member of the imperial household. He spoke directly, without prevarication.

"Your Highness, since our last meeting I have followed up the evidence suggesting that the Traumatic sect might have been involved in the affair. I can now confirm that categorically: it was the Traumatic sect who stole the body of Princess Veaa from its resting place."

Vro looked pleadingly at the empty sarcophagus. "But for what purpose?"

Rolce coughed before continuing. "The motives for the crime are far from pleasant, Your Highness. The Traumatic sect, as you must know, is prone to bizarre practices. Rejecting the teachings of the Church, its members worship a god they call Hulmu and whom they deem to dwell in the uttermost depths of the strat. Hulmu, by their doctrines, feeds on the trauma that the soul experiences on separating from the body at death, but is usually robbed of his pleasure because the soul passes back in time and finds refuge in its body again. Therefore the sect practices certain rites, ending in human sacrifice, that they claim give the victim's soul to Hulmu."

"What has this to do with my beloved Veaa?" said Vro harshly. "She is dead already."

"Your sister died of a brain hemorrhage, and later was embalmed by the Murkesen process, which leaves all the vital tissues intact," the detective explained. "Someone in the Traumatic sect apparently believes that these two factors together have left her soul in a state of suspension. It has not departed into the past."

"You mean she is still alive?" Prince Vro asked in a shocked tone.

. "No, Your Highness," Rolce replied hurriedly. "One should not pay heed to heretical theories." Then, seeing Prince Vro's lips curl, he added, "Even according to the Traumatics your sister is deceased. It is merely that her soul is believed to be still accessible to Hulmu. They hoped, by means of rites or medical experiments, to release her soul from its latent state and offer it to Hulmu. A personage of such exalted rank was, of course, a great prize to them."

A low moan escaped Prince Vro's lips and his face expressed ashen horror. Then he turned away and began to give vent to strangled sobs, while Rolce sat impassively and stared at the nearby wall.

The private detective came across many weird situations in the course of his work and the predicament of Prince Vro aroused no comment in his mind.

The prince had been desperately enamored of his sister Princess Veaa. The emperor had even indicated that he would consent to a marriage between them. And then had come her sudden death. In an orgy of mourning Prince Vro had designed her mausoleum personally, placed her embalmed body in the sarcophagus with his own hands, and installed the direct-wire hologram to his private apartment so that he would never forget her.

Sadly, his misfortunes had increased still further. The embalmed body had been stolen from the mausoleum, for no explicable reason. Exhaustive police investigations had proved fruitless. Eventually Vro had called upon Rolce's services.

Rolce wondered why the prince had not followed the example of his brother Narcis and traveled back in time to when Veaa was still alive (though that might, he reflected, entail complications of a personal nature). But the speculation was sterile. Vro seemed as deeply in love with her corpse as he had been with the living woman.

With difficulty the prince recovered his composure. "And what has become of her now?"

Rolce frowned. "At this point the affair becomes perplexing. I gained most of my information so far by infiltrating one of my men into a secret Traumatic cell. Unfortunately his guise was eventually penetrated and the fellow murdered. I then used more direct methods to track down the cor— to track down the princess, and ascertained that she had been removed from Node One on an internodal liner. However—"

"They can do that?"

The detective nodded. "The sect is very resourceful. It has good contacts in the internodal travel services."

"I see," muttered Vro. "And how soon before my beloved Veaa is found?"

The other gave a worried sigh. "The trail has petered out, Your Highness. Quite frankly I do not understand it. I have never come up against such a blank wall before. Even if the body had been disposed of in some way—and I seriously doubt that it has—the methods I have used should have given me some information about it. Everything that happens leaves a trace that a trained investigator can pick up."

"What are you babbling about, Rolce?" Vro swung around and confronted the older man, hands on his hips. "You are not doing your job! Is your fee not inducement enough?"

"It is not that, Your Highness!" the investigator protested. "My entire agency—which is an organization to be reckoned with—is engaged solely upon this one assignment. We have

never failed yet. But something odd seems to have happened."

For the first time Perlo Rolce displayed a degree of discom-

fiture. He shifted uneasily in his chair.

"At my headquarters we have the man who shipped out the body of Princess Veaa," he said. "We are certain we have not mistaken his identity. Earlier we picked up his thoughts on the subject with a field-effect device.

"And?"

"He does not know anything about it. He does not remember leaving Chronopolis on the requisite date."

"His mind has been tampered with."

"That might be the explanation if we relied on physical persuasion alone. He knows nothing of Princess Veaa, except vaguely as a onetime member of the imperial family. Yet we know for a fact that he had custody of the body for a considerable period of time."

"Just what are you suggesting?"

"We live in unsettled times, Your Highness. Time can play tricks. . . ."

"Rolce, what are you suggesting?"

The investigator looked, briefly, straight into Vro's eyes, something he had never done before. "I do not know, Your Highness. I am a detective, not a Chronotician. But I am beginning to get the feeling that something outside my control has closed off the investigation."

He hesitated before going on. "The phenomenon is not unknown to me. Of late, there have been a number of such cases. Odd details that do not mesh together—a cause not producing the usual effect, or an effect not preceded by the usual cause. Only someone like myself, trained to notice details, would pick them up. In my belief the war with the Hegemony is beginning to touch us, even here at Node One. Time is under strain."

The prince brooded on his words. "It almost sounds as though you were looking for excuses," he said in a surly tone.

"Your Highness, I assure you of my sincerity."

"Well, are you implying you wish to leave off the assignment?"

"The Rolce Agency does not abandon assignments," Rolce told him. "There is one move still left to us. We have procured an orthophase and I am negotiating for the clandestine use of a time-travel unit."

"I could have arranged that for you," Vro interrupted in a mutter.

Rolce shrugged. "One of my agents will phase himself into the past and carry out a surveillance of our prisoner at the time he hid and transported the body of Princess Veaa. If we find that he did not commit these acts—as we know he did—then it will demonstrate that time has mutated in some peculiar way, leaving loose ends."

"In a very peculiar way," Prince Vro agreed huffily. "Are you not aware that a time-mutation leaves no loose ends and

is generally undetectable after the event?"

"I am aware of it, Your Highness, but I must deal in facts." He rose and handed the prince an envelope. "Here is my written report of all information to date."

"Thank you, my good fellow. Come and see me again

soon."

After the detective had gone the young prince stood for a long time with the envelope unopened in his hand, staring into space.

DEFEAT is never a pleasant thing to have to recount to one's master. Commander Haight's large, rugged face was stonily impassive as he answered the emperor's probing questions concerning the attempt to save Gerread.

At length Philipium I uttered a deep trembling sigh. "No blame," he said, to Haight's relief. "The action was gallantly fought. Tonight the Military Council meets. We shall be discussing what action to take between now and the launching of the armada. There will be some, no doubt, who wish to abandon the enterprise and make peace overtures with the Hegemony." He looked closely at the commander. "How do you read the situation?"

"The armada must be launched as soon as possible, Your Majesty—much sooner than was originally planned. The time-distorter is a terrible weapon. I cannot guarantee the ability of the defensive forces to ward off every attack that might be made."

"Can we not set up time-blocks?"

"Time-blocks cannot be kept in continuous operation without years of preparation, Your Majesty. And I am advised that the rearward Stop Barrier already consumes one-third of the imperial budget. Our only safeguard is to overwhelm the Hegemony without delay. Otherwise I can foresee disaster." The emperor grunted contemptuously. "Don't tell me you're another who thinks the empire can fall."

"Naturally not, Your Majesty," replied Haight, taken aback by the suggestion. "But serious damage can be wrought from which it would take centuries to recover. More to the point, the Hegemonics must know of the armada we have in preparation. It will form a prime target for their attentions. They will certainly try to destroy it before it is completed."

This time it was the emperor's turn to be startled. "They

could penetrate even this far-to Node One?"

"Even that cannot be discounted, though it's unlikely in my view. They will try to attack it indirectly by wreaking such changes in our future that the effects will reach far back in time, delaying or preventing the construction of the armada in the first place. It could be done if their knowledge of Chronotic history is detailed enough."

"And it probably is," Philipium confirmed in a worried tone. "I have heard there has been some intercourse between agents of the Hegemony and a dissident religious sect known as the Traumatics." He shook his head in exasperation. His

right hand began to tremble more noticeably.

"The assembling of the armada simply cannot be hastened," he informed Haight. "The project is already at full stretch; there are no more resources that can be put into it."

"Your Majesty, if we leave matters as they stand at the

moment, there is no saying how things will end."

"You speak as though you were one of my ministers, instead of merely a commander in the Time Service," Philipium said with a warning note of reproof.

"I beg Your Majesty's pardon. It is my concern over the

situation that prompts me to speak so."

"Everyone, it seems, has decided to be impudent today. Still, you have seen action at first hand. You know how things look at the frontier. What suggestions have you for strengthening the forward watch? We could," he added as an afterthought, "release some ships completed for the armada for that purpose."

"That would help, Your Majesy, but the first priority must be to gain parity with the enemy over the matter of his new weapon. To that end I advocate a raid into Hegemonic territory with a force strong enough to overcome any local resistance, in an effort to capture a sample distorter."

"Do you think that is a feasible operation?"

"Yes, if we have agents who can find out where a distorter is kept, so as to give us a target point. The Hegemony consists of one node only, which makes the matter simpler."

The emperor opened a lacquered box and sniffed at a pinch of the reddish powder it contained. He was thoughtful. "We do have agents in the Hegemony. Mostly among those whom our early missionaries converted to the true faith. Needless to say they are already at work on the business of the distorter, but messages are slow to reach us due to the inability to transmit through time."

He inhaled more snuff. "You will attend the meeting of the Military Council tonight. We will discuss this."

"With great pleasure. Your Majesty."

In the event Illus Ton Mayar delayed his departure from the palace for an hour or two. Princess Mayora was an insistent host, and despite his gloomy manner, she continued to inveigle him into conversation with the socialites who flitted in and out of the court chamber. He even spoke with Captain Vrin and heard from him a firsthand account of his part in the recent battle for Gerread—an account, he suspected, already polished with much retelling, even though the battle-damaged timeships had arrived only a little before dawn.

But his nagging desire to return to his underground vaults eventually overcame the pleasure of social life. He was about to tender his farewells to the princess when a liveried servant approached him.

i'His Highness the Prince Vro would speak with you, Archivist, if it is convenient," the servant informed him.

Although couched in the politest terms, coming from a prince the message was an order. Puzzled, Mayar followed the servant and shortly came to Vro's morbid quarters.

The prince leaped up with alacrity when he entered. "Ah," he greeted, "I tried to contact you at the archives, but they said you were here at the palace."

Mayar glanced surreptitiously around the place, trying not to seem inquisitive. "An audience with His Majesty your father," he explained diffidently.

"More mutations, eh?" Vro gave him a querying, penetrating look.

"I'm afraid so."

He relaxed a little. Prince Vro had always struck him as being the most intelligent of the imperial family. The business with the body of Princess Veaa was known to Mayar, of course . . . but that was entirely a personal affair.

He tried to keep his eyes away from the wall-wide holocast of the vacant mausoleum. "How may I serve Your Highness?" he asked.

"Ah, you come straight to the point. A man after my own heart."

Holding nothing back, Prince Vro told him how he had hired the Rolce Detective Agency to hunt down Princess Veaa's body. He recounted, as well as he could, the conversation he had held with Rolce an hour before. When he came to speak of the peculiar difficulties and anomalies Rolce had been encountering, Mayar grew more and more agitated.

"Could time become dislocated in the way Rolce suspects?"

he asked Mayar.

"From natural mutations—no," Mayar told him. "The natural movements of the substratum always smooth out cause-and-effect relationships in both directions. But in principle there's nothing to prevent dislocated phenomena arising through some sort of artificially applied distortion. Excuse me, sir, but may I be permitted to sit?"

Prince Vro nodded sympathetically. Mayar edged himself to the straight-backed chair Perlo Rolce had recently occu-

pied. He felt weak and dizzy.

"A detective agency—of course!" he exclaimed, his voice hoarse with sudden understanding. "It's logical. They are the only people who would notice details on so small a scale. Even the Achronal Archives cannot keep track of everyday events."

"But what does it all mean?"

"It means what Rolce says it means. That the war with the Hegemony is going badly. It's that damned distorter of theirs. Cracks are appearing in the order of things—little cracks, at first. Eventually they'll get bigger."

"What an amusing prospect." Mayar looked at him sharply.

"Well, you might as well get used to the idea, Archivist. It's got to happen. Nothing can stop the war now. You have observed, of course, that my father the emperor is a religious maniac. Aided and abetted by that incredible bigot Reamoir, he is determined to hurl his armada at our descendants in the far future. I am even expected to command one of its squadrons myself!" Vro's lips twisted cynically. He moved

away to gaze into the mausoleum. "No doubt all will shortly come crashing about our ears. But all of this means nothing to me. I care only for saving my beloved Veaa."

Mayar scarcely heard his last words. He passed a hand wearily across his brow. "We are living in a dream," he said in an exhausted voice. "This world—it is all an illusion. Only the strat is real..."

"An interesting point of view." Prince Vro turned to face him again.

"In my archives are records of nations, cultures, whole civilizations that have been removed from time," Mayar said. "Millions of people—mere figments, of whom we have a record only by a technical trick. How can something that vanishes and changes be real? That is why I say only the strat is real—and even then, what is the strat? We do not know. This time-travel: it is merely a way of moving from one part of a dream to another."

"Your view of life comes close to my own," Prince Vro told him softly. "Nothing is real; no matter is of more significance than any other. That is what I tell myself whenever my intellect chides me for my obsession with my beloved Veaa."

The prince handed Mayar a thick envelope. "Since you are able to take Rolce's suspicions seriously, I want you to do some work for me. This is his report. I'll send him to you tomorrow to explain it personally."

"Work, Your Highness?" Mayar accepted the envelope

gingerly.

Vro nodded. "With his investigations and the contents of your files, it should be possible to carry out a—what do you call it—a mapping, should it not? I want you to help Rolce locate the princess. If detective work in orthogonal time is not enough, then perhaps you can turn something up in strat time."

WHEN Mayar left Prince Vro and made to leave the palace, clutching the private investigator's report, his mind feverish, he chanced to pass by the audience chamber where he had earlier spoken with the emperor.

The huge frame of Commander Haight emerged from the chamber. Grim-faced, he swept by Mayar without a word.

After him came the emperor, leaning on the arm of an

attendant. He stopped when he caught sight of Mayar, who bowed low.

"Still here, Archivist?"

"Your Majesty, there is a recommendation I would make."
The notion had been in his mind for some months, but in the last half-hour it had jelled into a firm desire. Philipium frowned, not liking to be accosted so, but he signaled Mayar to continue.

"I am becoming increasingly concerned for the safety of the archives, Your Majesty. I have come to the conclusion that the present arrangements are unsatisfactory."

Now Philipium became displeased. "The time-buffers surrounding your vaults were installed at colossal expense," he admonished. "You approved them at the time. Now you tell me they are no good."

"I feel that the situation is changing rapidly, Your Majesty. My new proposal will entail less expense. The buffers are satisfactory up to a point—but if the enemy should succeed in getting behind us, as it were, and attacking the year in which the buffers were erected, then they could be obliviated and the archives would be rendered useless for their purpose."

Philipium's gray face lost its anger as, with eyes downcast, he considered the point. "So?"

"The only really foolproof way of making the archives safe from orthogonal mutations is to locate them in the strat. This could not be done before due to the communications problem—it's necessary to have continuous computer contact with the records of the Imperial Register, so as to detect anomalies, and there was no way to do this. The technical problem has now been solved. We can float at anchor in the strat while connected by cable to the offices of the registrar."

"By cable?"

"The technique is a new one known as graduated phasing, Your Majesty. The Achronal Archives should then be proof against any orthogonal changes."

"Very well, I approve. I will issue an authorization."

The secretary in the emperor's retinue immediately made a note of the proceedings. Mayar bowed low and left.

Philipium retired to his private quarters, dismissed the retinue except one personal servant, and sent for his favorite comforter. With a hoarse, deep-seated sigh he sank into a comfortable couch and accepted a dose of the medicine that quieted his shaking a little.

The comforter arrived. This was Philipium's favorite relaxation. An atmosphere of peace and silence, the lights shaded to rest his aching eyes.

The comforter sat to one side of the emperor so as to be out of his line of vision. He opened the book he carried and

in a gentle, soothing voice began to read.

"There is the body, and there is the soul. The body belongs to orthogonal time. But the soul, being spiritual, is eternal; yet it does not persist beyond its appointed period in time . . ."

ELSEWHERE Narcis₁ and Narcis₂ disported on a couch that was more luxurious than their father's and surrounded by orchids, while the atmosphere of the boudoir was pervaded by sweet perfumes.

They looked into each other's eyes, smiling and sated. "One day soon something strange will happen," Narcis₂ said in a sad, dreamy voice. "Something very, very melancholy."

"What is that, dearest?" Narcis, murmured.

"He will come and steal you from me. Like a thief in the

night. The third one."

Briefly there dawned in Narcis₁'s eyes the realization of what the other was talking about—the day, barely a year ahead, when by natural aging they would reach the date when he had secretly appeared in his future self's bedroom and seduced him. It was a paradox he had never really bothered to work out for himself.

"Yes, I shall have a visitor," he said wonderingly. "He will

enchant me and entice me away. Away into the past!"

"Don't talk like that! I shall be left all alone!" Narcis₂ covered his face with his hands. "Oh, I hate him! I hate him!" Narcis₁ gazed at him with teasing, imagining eyes.

Chapter Three

THE SEEKERS, the Pointers, the Pursuers, all were present. The Choosing could go ahead.

The ceremony was in the apartment of a rich member of the sect. One of the elegant rooms had been converted into a temple. The altar, containing the representation of the Impossible Shape (an abstract of warped planes, said to echo the form of Hulmu), was lit by shaded cressets.

All knelt, the ceremonial black cloths draped over their heads, save the vicar, who stood facing the assembly, wearing the Medallion of Projection, which showed a gold miniature of a holocast projector. On his head was a low flat-topped hat. Upon this hat he placed the black Book of Hulmu to allow the vibrations of its words to flow down into him.

The orisons began. "Lord of all the deep, perceive us and

know that we thy servants act out our parts : . ."

The chanting grew louder. The vicar feverishly muttered the incantation, known only to sect members of his own rank, which acted on a hypnotically planted subconscious command. Almost immediately he went into a trance.

He spoke with the voice of Hulmu.

It was a harsh, twanging voice, quite unlike his own or that of any other human being.

"Are my Seekers present?"

"We are present, Lord!" cried one section of the congregation.

"Are my Pointers present?"

"We are present, Lord!" chanted another group.

"Are my Pursuers present?"

The remainder of the gathering spoke up. "We are present, Lord!"

"Then let my Pointers choose."

Abruptly the glazed, empty look went out of the vicar's eyes. He removed the black book from his head.

"All right, let's get on with it," he said conversationally in his normal tone.

The tension went out of the meeting. They removed their black headcloths. The gathering was suddenly informal.

The Pointers huddled together. One of them pulled a cord. A curtain swished aside, revealing a complete set of Chronopolis' massive street directory.

A sect member with a self-absorbed face thoughtfully selected a volume.

Another snatched it from him, bent back the covers, and flung the book to the floor so that it splayed its leaves on the tiles.

Yet another picked it up and smoothed out the page that fortune, through this procedure, had selected. He stared at the ceiling while allowing his fingers to roam at random over the paper.

Everyone watched in silence as his fingers slowed to a stop. "Eighty-nine Kell Street," he read out. "Precinct E-Fourteen. Inpriss Sorce, female."

"Inpriss Sorce," someone said, savoring the name. They all started wondering what she was like: young or old, pretty or plain; what her fear index was.

"The Pursuer team will begin operations tomorrow at nine," the vicar intoned.

"Inpriss Sorce." All the Pursuers began murmuring the name to themselves with a growing sense of pleasure.

They were glad the victim was a woman.

INPRISS SORCE was thirty years old. She had a neat, slightly melancholy face with light-brown eyes, and an average figure. She lived in a two-room apartment and worked as a clerk for Noble Cryonics, a firm that did a great deal of work for the government.

Once she had held a better-paid job with the Historical Office, but had lost it when a jealous comforter cast aspersions on her piety. The post she held now, though it reduced her station in life, did not require vetting by the Church. It did, however, entail living in a poorer part of the city. Also, most of her friends from the Historical Office now wanted little to do with her, so she was, for the time being, lonely.

She had come home from work and was wondering what to do with the evening when the Pursuers paid their call.

The casers had already been at work some hours before. One of them met Rol Stryne and Fee Velen as they arrived at the entrance to the apartment block. Briefly he explained the layout of Inpriss Sorce's small dwelling. The window in the living room gave access to a fire escape.

"Very good," said Stryne. "Give us half an hour."

Velen carried a large toolbox which he lugged awkwardly as they mounted the stairs. On the third floor Stryne found the right door and knocked on it. When it opened, they both pushed their way inside.

Inpriss Sorce was carried back by their onrush. "What-

what do you want?" she demanded shrilly.

Their eyes flicked around the small apartment. Stryne looked at Inpriss, studying her face, his gaze roving up and down her body. He liked what he saw and was feeling a warm glow of anticipation.

Hulmu had chosen well. It was going to be good: Hulmu

would be entertained.

The girl retreated to the far wall and put her hand to her throat. "What do you want?" she repeated in a whisper. She had seen the expression in their eyes. "Just tell me what you want."

"This is the most important day of your life, lady," Stryne told her. "You're going to experience . . . what you never experienced before."

They both took the black cloths from their pockets and

draped them over their skulls.

Inpriss shrank back in horror. "Oh, God! No! No!" She let out a weak scream, but before she could finish it they had seized her and Velen had clapped a hand over her mouth. She was trembling and almost unresisting as they carried her to a table from which Stryne swept cups and books. They placed her on it. Stryne took stout cord which he looped around the legs of the table and, using specially prescribed knots, caught her wrists and ankles.

When Velen took his hand from her mouth she no longer screamed. They rarely did; the appearance of the infamous Traumatic sect was calculated to inspire helpless terror. Instead she began to pray in a trembling, sobbing voice.

"It's no good praying to your God like that," Stryne said

conversationally. "He doesn't exist, it's all a con. Before we've

finished here you'll be praying to Hulmu, the authentic god who created us by projecting us on to the screen of reality." He liked to engage the sacrificial victims in a dialog, to establish a rapport with them.

Humming meditatively—a nervous habit that came over him at moments like this—he noted her carrying satchel lying on a chair. Caressingly he opened it and inspected the contents. Small personal effects, identification papers, a voucher for a bank account, money, and a few letters.

He placed the satchel on a ledge near the window.

They opened the toolbox and began taking out their equipment.

The girl ceased praying and lay gasping with fright. Stryne waved a meter near her head. Her fear index was high—nearly eighty. That was good.

"How are you going to do it?" she asked them. "Please

tell me how you're going to do it!"

"Mmmmmm. . . . There are so many ways. The knife, inserted slowly? The Terrible Vibrator? The Exit by Burning?" He showed her the various instruments one by one.

Her head had raised itself off the tabletop, straining, to look. Now it sank back again. Her face collapsed into despair.

Velen set up a hologram screen and a laser projector. The screen hovered slantwise over the girl like a descending wing. Velen flicked a switch; the screen came to life, The Impossible Shape of Hulmu gyrated and twisted hypnotically against a background of shifting moiré patterns. Stryne and Velen knelt on either side of the girl, watching her face, their backs to the screen.

"Hearken to Hulmu!" declaimed Stryne.

And the first of the ceremonies began.

Inpriss went into a slight trance brought on by the holo projection. In this state the words and responses from Stryne and Velen penetrated deep into her consciousness.

"You are to be sacrificed to Hulmu," Stryne told her. "Your soul will not return through time to your body; you will never live again, as others do. You will belong to Hulmu. He will take you with him deep into the strat."

"Hulmu will take you with him," reiterated Velen in a

singsong voice.

"You must pray to Hulmu," Stryne whispered in her ear. "You belong to him now."

While they intoned the rituals Velen switched on more of

their apparatus. Devices gave out strange buzzes and clicks that grated on the nerves; alien whines filled the air. Stryne applied a prong to the girl's body and began delivering pain in intermittent, increasing amounts. Everything was designed so as to enhance the trauma, and Inpriss Sorce was now catalytic with terror.

Stryne climbed to his feet and clicked his fingers in her face. She came out of the trance with a start and he let her see the Exit by Burning device ready for use in his hands. Her eyes widened and her face sagged. Her mouth opened but her voice was too paralyzed to scream.

There came a knock on the outer door.

Stryne and Velen looked at each other. "We'd better see what it is," Stryne said.

They left the room, closing the door behind them, and paused. Stryne opened the door to the corridor.

The caser was there. "You timed it nicely," Stryne said to him.

They stood there, not speaking. Stryne bent his ear to the inner door. There was a scuffling from inside. Then he heard the window open.

A minute later they entered the room. Inpriss Sorce was gone. She had slipped the special knots Stryne had tied and escaped by the fire escape. With satisfaction he saw that she had shown the presence of mind to snatch up her satchel so that she would not be without resources.

"We made a good start," he breathed.

The pursuit was in progress.

Chapter Four

For some weeks Captain Aton had been forced to wear military prison garb. Now, on the day that his court-martial was due, the guards brought him his full duty uniform. He dressed slowly and carefully, but had no mirror in which to

check his appearance.

The walls of his cell were made of gray metal, which reminded him of the starkly functional interior of the destroyer class of timeship in which he had served prior to his arrest. He missed the deep vibration of the time-drive, and even more so the sense of discipline and purpose that went with active service. Instead, his solitude was broken only by the shouts and clangings that made up the daily life of the prison. It depressed him to know that he was in company with deserters and various other malefactors. Occupying cells in his block were some religious offenders—members of the Traumatic sect—and Aton would hear their calls to Hulmu echoing through the night.

The Traumatic sect. That struck a chord in Aton's mind. A puzzled frown crossed his face as he tried to recollect why,

but the answer eluded him.

He heard footsteps. The door of the cell grated open to reveal two burly guards and his defense counsel, a nervous young lieutenant.

Aton was already on his feet. At a signal from one of the guards he stepped into the passage.

"The court is convened, Captain," the lieutenant said with a diffident cough. "Shall we?"

They walked toward the court block ahead of the guards. Despite his predicament, Aton found time to feel some

sympathy for his counsel, who was embarrassed at being in the company of a doomed man.

"We might have a chance," the lieutenant said. "The field-effect reading is in our favor. I shall argue incapacity."

Aton nodded, but he knew that the hearing would go the same way that the earlier investigation had.

Gates swung and clanged as they were let out of the penitentiary area of the prison. An elevator took them farther up the buildings and without further preamble they were admitted into the courtroom.

Aton was to be judged by a tribunal of three retired commanders. One glance at their seamed faces told him that they felt about the matter much as he would in their place: that there was no excuse for cowardice.

The prosecutor, an older and more practiced man than Aton's counsel, turned suavely to regard the accused before reading out the charge.

"Captain Mond Aton, serving in His Chronotic Majesty's Third Time Fleet under Commander Veel Ark Haight, it is laid against you that on the eleventh day of cycle four-eightfive, fleet-time, you were guilty of cowardice and gross dereliction of duty in that, the vessel under your command being crippled by enemy action, you abandoned your ship the Smasher of Enemies ahead of your men; and further that you fought with the men under your command so as to board a life raft, thus saving yourself at their expense. How do you plead?"

The young lieutenant stepped forward. "Sirs, I wish to tender that Captain Aton is unfit to plead, being the victim of amnesia."

"I plead not guilty," Aton contradicted firmly. "I do not believe I am capable of the acts described."

A faint sneer came to the prosecutor's lips. "He does not believe he is capable!"

With a despairing shrug the counsel for the defense stepped back to his place.

Inexorably the prosecution proceeded to call witnesses. And so Aton was forced to experience what he had already experienced at the preliminary hearings. First to be called was Sergeant Quelle, his chief gunnery noncom. With blank bemusement he heard him recount how he, Aton, a beamer in each hand, had killed all who stood in his way in his haste to leave the foundering Smasher of Enemies. Occasionally

Quelle glanced his way with what seemed to him a spiteful, fearful look. At those moments a double image flashed into Aton's mind: he seemed to see Quelle's face distended and made bulbous as if seen through a magnifying glass or through the visor of a strat suit. But the picture faded as soon as it was born, and he put it down to imagination.

Seven other witnesses, all crewmen from the Smasher of Enemies, followed Quelle. All repeated his tale, pausing sometimes to glare accusingly at their captain. They named the men and officers they had seen Aton gun down, and told how they had succeeded in disarming him only once the life raft was floating free in the strat and the Smasher of Enemies had broken up. Then, after an agonizing delay, they had eventually been located and picked up by the flagship. Aton had been arrested and sent to Chronopolis.

Of all this Aton remembered practically nothing. He could recall some details of the battle with the Hegemonics, in a confused kind of way, but it all had the aspects of a dream. As for the events Quelle and the others spoke of, it was just a blank to him. The only thing he could remember was coming to and finding that life raft 3 was being hauled inboard the Lamp of Faith, Commander Haight's flagship.

Could he really have murdered, among others, Lieutenant Krish? Could he have fallen prey to such animal panic, in the grip of some mental derangement, perhaps? If so, the derangement was still affecting him, for everything seemed still possessed of a dreamlike quality. He simply could not reconcile what was happening with his own image of himself, with his love of the Time Service, and with his loyalty to the empire.

The prosecutor conceded the floor to the defense. The young lieutenant called his one and only witness.

"Major Batol," he said to the slim officer who entered, "what is your function in the Time Service?"

"I am a doctor and surgeon."

"Do you recognize the accused?"

The major eyed Aton briefly and nodded.

"Will you please tell us the result of your examination of Captain Aton earlier."

Major Batol turned to the tribunal. "I examined the captain with a field-effect device. This is a device that responds to the 'field effect,' that is to say the electrostatic nimbus that surrounds the human body and brain. By its means it is pos-

sible to ascertain a person's mental state and even what he is thinking, since thoughts and emotions leak into the field. The technique may be likened to eavesdropping on the operation of a computer by picking up its incidental electromagnetic transmissions—"

"Yes, you may spare us the explanations," the head of the tribunal said sourly. "Come to the point."

"Captain Aton has total amnesia of the period under question," Major Batol informed them.

"And what would be a likely cause of such amnesia?" asked the defense counsel.

"It is almost certainly traumatic in origin," the major said. "Remember that the destroyer was foundering into the strat. Anyone who happened, for only a moment, to see the strat with his bare eyes would undergo trauma sufficient to account for amnesia of this type."

"Thank you, Major."

The prosecutor was quick to come forward. "Major Batol, would you say that a man suffering from the trauma you describe would be capable of purposeful action, such as fighting his way aboard a life raft?"

"It is highly unlikely that he would be capable of any action whatsoever, certainly not of an integrated kind."

"And is there any evidence to say at what point in the proceedings this experience of Captain Aton's took place? Ten minutes before he entered the life raft? Five minutes before? Or only a moment before?"

"None. Traumatic amnesia can obliterate the events leading up to the trauma as well as those following it."

"Thank you very much, Major."

When the time came for him to sum up his case, Aton's counsel did the best he could. He began by speaking of Aton's excellent service record and of his three previous engagements for one of which he had received a commendation. He stressed the fact of Aton's amnesia, trying to suggest that this threw something of a mystery over the whole affair.

"It is odd," he said, "that Captain Aton should be unable to make any reply to the accusations that are made against him. Finally"—he confronted the tribunal, his face white—"I request that the witnesses for the prosecution should themselves undergo a field-effect test!"

The prosecutor jumped to his feet. "The prosecution ob-

jects to that remark! The defense is imputing perjury in my witnesses!"

The tribunal head shifted in his seat and looked grim. "The field-effect device is not recognized in civil law, and this tribunal takes its cue from the civil establishment where the laws of evidence are concerned. Although we were prepared to listen to the opinion of Major Batol, in law the amnesia of your client has not itself been established. Your request is denied."

That, Aton knew, had been the counsel's last desperate fling. The tribunal spent little time deliberating its decision. When the commanders returned from the inner chamber, the tribunal head looked at Aton with no hint of compassion.

"Captain Mond Aton, we find you guilty. The evidence of eight independent witnesses can hardly be gainsaid. As for the effort by the defense to suggest that your actions were the result of a personality change, and thereby to mitigate your guilt, that argument cannot be accepted. Even if true, it remains that an officer named Captain Aton committed the offenses, and an officer named Captain Aton stands before us now. Personality changes are not admitted in an officer of the Time Service."

He paused before coming to his grave conclusion. "Your sentence is the only one that can be expected. From here you will be taken to the laboratories of the Courier Department, where you will perform your last service to the empire. And may God restore your soul."

As he was led away Aton passed by Sergeant Quelle, together with the others who had given evidence against him, sitting in the anteroom. They all—Quelle especially—looked at him with glittering eyes. They could not hide their triumph.

"Most unusual," murmured the technician.

He was sitting casually across from Aton in the briefing room. "I think this is the first time I've had to deal with someone of your calibre," he said. "Mostly we get common murderers, thieves, petty traitors—scum like that."

He eyed Aton with unveiled curiosity. His manner was relaxed and he seemed to think of his job as a mildly interesting technical exercise instead of as the bizarre method of execution which it was to be for Aton.

"I'm supposed to teach you as much as you need to know to perform your task properly," the technician resumed, "but

as a chronman vourself you hardly need to be told very much, of course."

"All chronmen fear the strat," Aton said emptily. "It surrounds us. We never forget that."

"Are you afraid?"

"Yes."

The other nodded. "You're right to be. It is fearful. This business is worse for you than it is for some criminal of low intelligence. I can see that, Still, we all have our job to do."

He doesn't pity me, Aton thought. He has no sympathy for me at all. He's probably processed hundreds of men-it

doesn't mean anything to him any more.

The technician came around the table and placed a headset over Aton's cranium. He felt electrodes prodding his scalp. The other retreated back to his chair and glanced at tracer

dials, making entries on a sheet of paper.

"Good," he announced. "Your cephalic responses are adequate—we'd expect them to be, wouldn't we? Some of the dimmer types get out of this business by not having the alertness to be able to target themselves once we put them through. So it's the gas chamber for them."

"How soon?" grated Aton.

"Hm?"

"When do I go through?"

"Oh"—the technician glanced at his watch—"in about an hour."

Aton steeled his nerves to face the coming ordeal. He had been languishing for nearly a week since his trial, waiting for his name to be called. Despite that the department dispatched a daily stream of messages to the distant time-fleets it never seemed to run short of couriers.

He reminded himself that he had been in the strat beforemillions of times, in fact. Everybody had. Only nobody remembered it. When the body died, the soul, robbed of the body's existential support, found itself in the strat. That was what caused death trauma—the bedazzlement of the soul when faced by potential time. But because it had nowhere to exist apart from the body, and even though shock reduced it to a state midway between unconsciousness and a dreamlike trance, it hurried back along its time-track, experiencing its life in reverse at a tremendously speeded-up rate like a videotape on rewind, until it reached the moment of conception. At which point it began to live again.

Thus Aton's imminent punishment would be something like the experience of death, except that not simply his soul but his body too was to be catapulted into the strat, and except that he would be pumped full of drugs to keep him conscious even under the impact of unspeakable trauma. An unconscious courier would be no good; he would not be able to guide himself toward his destination.

While the technician continued marking his papers, Aton

began to speak in a low, haunted tone.

"Scientists have debated whether the strat really exists as an independent continuum," he murmured, "or whether it is only an apparency our own machines have created; merely the result of that crucial act of accelerating pi-mesons faster than light. In the Time Service we are accustomed to thinking of the strat as an ocean, with orthogonal time as its surface . . . but perhaps the strat is only the world itself, scrambled and twisted because one no longer obeys its laws."

The other man looked up, fascinated to hear this talk from one of the couriers. It was an unusual reaction; commonly

three men or more were needed to hold them down.

"The Church has an answer to that, at any rate," he pointed out to Aton. "The strat is real, but not as real as the world of actual time."

"Yes... the Church has an answer for everything," Aton replied, only slightly cynically. "The strat is the Holy Ghost, connecting God with the world. In the Time Service one inclines to take a more pragmatic view. Now that I am to be exposed unprotected to what chronmen fear most, it's not surprising if my mind dwells on what it's true nature might be."

"Your collected state of mind is, if I may say so, admirable," the technician admitted. "In your place, however, I would not be disposed to take the teachings of the Church so lightly. A comforter will be at hand at your dispatch to offer final consolation. Need I point out that the view you have just put forward—that the strat does not exist apart from the visible world—denies the Holy Ghost and is tantamount to materialistic atheism?"

A mocking smile played around the technician's mouth and Aton realized the man was toying with him. He remained silent.

"In any case," the technician continued after a pause, "the strat would appear to be what you called it just now: an

ocean of potential time. For one thing, it has depth. It's some years since the Church forbade any further deep-diving expeditions, but no doubt you know what happened to the earlier ones. The pressure of potential time gets stronger the deeper you go. Some of the ships had their ortho fields crushed."

Aton shuddered slightly.

"Do you resent what's happening to you?" the technician asked.

Aton shook his head, shrugging. "They say that I am a coward and a murderer. I don't know if it's true or not his if it is, then this is just... for an officer." If he truly thought that he had committed those crimes, then he would almost have welcomed the punishment as a chance to redeem himself

The technician rose, "Over here, please."

A high-backed chair with dangling straps stood on the other side of the room. The two guards pinned Aton's arms to his sides and forced him into it. The straps passed across his chest and over his thighs and forearms.

"When your mission is accomplished you are instructed to die," the technician said softly. "The method will be the simple and direct one of vagal inhibition. To that end we will now implant a trigger word with which, at the appropriate time, you can excite your own vagus nerve and stop your heart."

A needle pricked Aton's arm. A colored disk began to rotate in front of his eyes, attracting his gaze and holding it even against his will. A voice murmured soothingly in his ear.

Presently Aton fell asleep.

VOM.

When he awoke the word lay somewhere in his mind like dead weight. He was vaguely aware of it, but he was unable to speak it, either aloud or mentally. That would not be possible until a certain phrase, spoken by a voice he would recognize when he heard it, released the word from its confinement.

The colored disk was wheeled away. In its place was put a more elaborate piece of apparatus that included, on the end of a flexible cable, what looked like the helmet of a diving suit without a faceplate.

The technician glanced at his watch again and became more animated. "Time presses on. The dispatches you are to carry have already arrived. Now then. There are two reasons why we have to use live couriers to communicate with the timefleets, and why those couriers have to be expendable. In the early days we tried other means-fast launches and one-man boats. But the time-drive is too bulky and expensive for such an application, especially if it is to have sufficient speed. So we evolved the method that will propel you. A massive generator will build up tremendous potential; that energy will be used to catapult you through the strat at high speed-much faster even than a battleship can move-and will give you sufficient momentum to reach your destination.

"At first this method was tried out on unmanned missiles and even men in strat suits, but they would not do. The missiles got lost without a hand to guide them through the strat's turbulence. A strat suit falls down on several counts: it's bulky and so raises the energy requirement, its batteries would be able to maintain an ortho field only over short journeys anyway, and in any case using a strat suit defeats the whole object of the exercise because a courier needs to see the strat with his own eyes. It might work if we could include a scan screen such as a timeship has, but the weight of that would be prohibitive.

"You will have some equipment with you, which will help you steer yourself toward your target. But what all this means is that for a while you're going not just to see but to live in nonsequential strat time: in four-dimensional and five-dimensional time. No one can tell you what that will be like, Nevertheless we have to train you as well as we can so you'll be able to carry out your task."

The diving helmet was lifted over his head and rested on his shoulders on a harness of foam rubber. Aton was in darkness. The technician's voice came to him again, tinnily through

tiny earphones.

"The aim of this purpose is to familiarize you, however inadequately, with what you will see immediately on entering the strat. It's a mock-up, of course, since we cannot reproduce the real thing. The important thing for you to learn is how to keep your direction. Remember that reaching your destination is the only way you can ever leave the strat, and therefore the only way you can ever die. This, I assure you, will become your most vital concern."

Suddenly Aton was assailed by an explosion of sense impressions. So meaningless were they that they seemed to be pulling each of his eyes in separate directions. He closed his eyes for a few moments, but when he opened them again the barrage had increased in intensity.

A steady bleeping sound was in his ears.

He felt as though he was swaying back and forth.

Eventually he began to glimpse recognizable shapes that emerged out of the welter of images and just as quickly vanished again. At this point the technician's voice entered again

ished again. At this point the technician's voice entered again and in persuasive tones provided a running commentary.

The ordeal continued for about half an hour. The technician taught him how to know when he had changed direction from his appointed course and how to correct it with the

equipment he would be given. At last the helmet was lifted from his head and the restricting straps unfastened. Somewhat disoriented, Aton rose. "Well, you seem to have got the hang of it." the technician

"Well, you seem to have got the hang of it," the technician announced.

"Half an hour's training? You really think that is enough?"

Aton asked in a blurred voice.

"Perfectly. Your mission is not too difficult.' Merely harrowing."

Aton was trying to form an idea that had just occurred to him. "Why . . . do we have to die?"

The other looked at him puzzled. "You are condemned men."

"I know that. But why such an elaborate method? Oh, I know the practical reason for the hypnotic conditioning: men of the Time Service should not have to dirty their hands by executing condemned criminals. So the criminals have to do it themselves. But why are you so careful to ensure that the couriers should die after only one trip? Why not use them again? It seems to me that their usefulness is not finished."

The technician looked thoughtful and withdrawn. "There is, no doubt, a reason," he murmured. "Frankly, I do not know what it is. But everything has a reason. I never heard

of anyone going into the strat twice."

"The fleet commanders have strict orders not to allow a courier to live after arrival, not even for a few hours. Why? What would be the harm?"

"An act of mercy, perhaps." The technician glanced up at a winking light on the wall. "It's time to fit you out."

A section of wall slid aside. Aton, the two guards at his back, followed the technician into a narrow circular tunnel

that sloped sharply downward. They emerged after a few minutes into a place totally unlike the clinical briefing room Aton had just left. It was a large area with walls of flat, gray metal. A heavy droning hum came from an incredible array of equipment that took up the farther end of the space.

The power of the droning sound struck right into Aton's bones. He gazed briefly at a large circular metal hatch that was clamped to the far wall with bolts and fitted with view windows. Then he was being tugged to one side where white-

coated men eyed him speculatively.

A hoarse shout made him look up. A figure, bizarrely accoutered, was being dragged struggling toward the metal hatch. The man wore what appeared to be a tray, or small control board, extending outward from his waist. His face was obscured by a rubber breathing mask and his body was crisscrossed with straps.

The muffled shouts grew more desperate as the disk of steel swung open. With practiced skill the courier was eased inside and the hatch bolts screwed tight.

"That's more commonly the manner of their exit," the technician remarked to Aton. "I may say I find it a pleasure to be dealing with someone who has more nerve."

to be dealing with someone who has more nerve."

Aton ignored the praise. The humming sound swelled, grew to climactic proportions, then ended in a noise like a prolonged lightning strike, accompanied by a vivid flash from

within the dispatch chamber.

A singing silence followed. For some moments the air was

charged with energy.

The technicians began to equip Aton for his journey. First

the dispatch case was strapped to his chest. Then came the traylike control panel, fastened around his waist so as to bring its known within new rough of his bandwist.

bring its knobs within easy reach of his hands.

During the session under the simulator Aton had been told

Duning the season under the simulator Axon had been tool that he would be aware of his proper course by reason of something mysteriously described as "like a wind blowing in your face." This wind represented his initial momentum. The control tray was a device acting like a rudder; it would enable him to guide himself along his course like a speedboat.

He felt the prick of hypodermic needles as stimulative drugs were pumped into his veins. An oxygen mask and earphones were added.

He was ready.

The steel hatch swung open.

As he was propelled unresistingly toward it and glimpsed the narrow rivet-studded chamber it guarded, a fog seemed to dissipate from his mind. Suddenly, and for the first time, he understood clearly and vividly just what was happening to him.

And he understood why!

His amnesia lifted like a curtain. He recalled the terrible events on board the *Smasher of Enemies:* his discovery of heresy within his command, the repeated savage hammer blows sustained by the ship, and Sergeant Quelle in a strat suit striding along surrounded by fellow heretics.

The rest was plain. Who had put Aton aboard the life raft he did not know—his memory ended some time before that—but evidently the heretics had reached the raft too. They must have suffered agony to realize that once they were rescued Aton could denounce them, and his subsequent amnesia must have seemed almost miraculous to them. They had taken full advantage of it, bringing their false charges against him so as to rid themselves of a potential accuser. A desperate, daring maneuver.

And what had caused Aton's loss of memory? A glimpse of the strat.

Would he recognize it a second time?

He turned, about to say something even as he realized that it was too late now to offer the truth. But he was given no time to speak. They bundled him through the circular hatch and swiftly screwed it up behind him.

He stood in a replica of the standard octagonal execution chamber. Death seemed to seep visibly into the cramped space from the leaden walls, which gave the appearance of being several feet thick. There was a peculiar tension in the air he had experienced only once before: when he had helped to remove the protective shields from an operating time drive to effect emergency repairs.

A face peered in at him through the view window, distorted and blurred by the immensely thick plate. As the powerful generators swung into action a drumming noise assailed Aton, making the walls vibrate. The noise built up, deafening him. Despite the oxygen mask a feeling of suffocation seized him. He felt as though he had been seized by a giant hand that squeezed, squeezed, squeezed—

And then a numbing blow hit him on all sides at once and the chamber vanished. He had the impression of being shot forward at tremendous speed as though out of the mouth of a cannon.

Utter darkness. Blinding light. Which was it?

It was neither. It was whirlpools of the inconceivable. It was visions which the eye accepted but which the brain found uncognizable: reality without the sanity that made reality real. The brain reacted to these visions with terror and dwindled in on itself to seek refuge in death or unconsciousness. Such sanctuary was denied Aton, however. The drugs that coursed in his blood preempted the closing down of the mind and condemned it to full alertness.

Yet alongside this jarring shock was a start of recognition. He remembered it now. This was what he had seen for a bare instant aboard the Smasher of Enemies.

Aton went reeling and spinning on a five-dimensional geodesic. There was no point of comparison to the space or time that he knew. The wind of the strat blew against his face like a cloying mist composed of ghostly pseudo-events, and whenever it ceased or lessened, his hands went instinctively to the control knobs at his waist.

But this phase, in which his mind still clung to its allegiance to passing time, lasted only seconds. Then the continuum of the strat seeped into his every cell and time ceased.

Eternity began, and Aton's sanity disintegrated.

Luckily one did not need to be sane to accomplish one's mission. One needed to know that there was an escape, that one could die. One needed to know that failure would mean to sink endlessly into the strat.

Therein lay the cunning of the courier system. Neither the senses nor the intellect could understand the environment in which they found themselves, but some primeval instinct enabled the mind to find a direction. The courier strove with all his being to reach the distant receiving station where he would be permitted to stop his heart.

Until that goal was attained, Aton lived in a world that was timeless. He could not measure the duration of his journey either in seconds or in centuries, because there was no duration. There could be no such thing as duration without a before and an after, and in this state nothing preceded and nothing followed. He skirled and spun. He went through titanic processes where five-dimensional objects menaced him as though they were living beings, but nothing began and nothing ended.

After a while his brain seemed to revive and to attempt to recover its old mode of perception. It was, he realized, beginning to come to terms with the five-dimensional strat and to abstract three-dimensional worlds from it.

Captain Mond Aton lived his life over again, beginning with conception and ending with his being sealed into the dispatch chamber at Chronopolis. After that, everything was just a vague shadow.

The illusion—could it be called an illusion?—was absolutely real. Every incident, every pleasure, every pain, and every effort exercised his soul anew. And not merely once. His life became like a filmstrip and was run through hundreds, thousands, millions of times over. The continued, reiterated experience became unbearable.

Interspersed with this continual reenactment were other experiences that were more or less intelligible. At first he thought he had somehow been dumped back into orthogonal time in a different body and a different life. But soon he realized that the dreamlike episodes that so much resembled events in the real world were phantoms: mock-ups located in the strat. The strat was eternity. And eternity, as he had learned at training college, was the storehouse of potentialities. Somewhere in this vast insubstantial ocean were mock-ups of everything existing in orthogonal time, as well as of every fictitious variation of what existed. And also there were mock-ups of that which did not exist but which could be thrown up into the world like flotsam on a beach by some convulsion of the strat.

After enduring all this for millennia, or microseconds, an odd feeling of strength came over Aton. The strat was no longer so strange to him. It was as if he himself was transforming into a five-dimensional being. He was able to look down on his life as an entirety and give his attention to any part of it.

Sequential time would seem, after this, flat and narrow. But his fingers still moved over the steering controls. His mind still strove to release itself in the only way possible.

His target, a fleet of timeships, loomed ahead of him. Protected by their own orthogonal time-fields they stood out clearly as glowing solid bodies surrounded by the swirling strat. Aton's earphones were beeping as he came within range of the homing signal.

Then he swirled around as something darted in suddenly

from one side. It was the image of a man, which he saw sometimes as a three-dimensional figure and sometimes as a four-dimensional extension. The man was burly, bedecked like a stage magician in a flowing cloak and colored hose. In place of eyes his sockets were filled with glittering, flashing jewels. He grinned wolfishly at Aton, at the same time directing at him a bazookalike tube from which issued a billowing exudation.

The purple mist struck Aton like a physical force. He felt his whole body vibrate; he veered aside to avoid the attack.

The intruder lunged at him again. Hissing, the bazooka tube went into action for a second time, and Aton saw that what it actually did was to distort the substance of the strat. With alarm he felt himself being sucked into the turbulence; he worked his rudder controls frantically.

Then both the apparition and the strat fled. He stood limply in a steel-clad chamber identical to the one he had left an eternity ago, and a loud humming noise filled his ears.

Just before the grinning jewel-eyed man pounced Aton had recognized the galleonlike battle wagon that was to receive him. As irony would have it, the ship was Commander Haight's Lamp of Faith.

Chapter Five

EXHAUSTED with fear and fatigue, Inpriss Sorce collapsed with a sigh on to a rickety couch. She pushed straggled hair out of her eyes and looked around the cheap, dismal room she had just rented.

The two weeks since she had escaped from Chronopolis had nearly driven her insane.

It was lucky she had taken the satchel containing money and bank cards from her apartment in Kell Street, otherwise she would have been completely helpless. Her one thought had been to flee as far away as possible. Everyone knew that once the Traumatic sect had chosen someone for sacrifice they would do everything possible to track the victim down and complete the rite.

Briefly it had occurred to her to go to the police with her story, but she had heard of people who had done that . . . only to be sacrificed by Traumatics inside the police force once they were taken into protective custody. The vision of some stone cell from which she could not escape filled her with claustrophobic panic.

No. The only answer was flight. To hide, to become too small to be noticed.

Only it was so difficult! This was already her third hiding place since quitting the eternal city, and the third time she had changed her name. The first move had been to a town barely fifty miles from Chronopolis, and for a few hours her eagerness to be safe had fooled her into thinking that she was safe. Then, coming home to her new apartment, she had spotted the two men who had tortured her, walking down the street and glancing up at the houses one by one.

And so she had had to leave, after only one day. But that

had not been the end of it. She had left Amerik and gone to Affra, but they had followed. By good chance she had caught glimpses of them several times and so had been warned—in the jetliner passenger lounge and hanging around the transit and accommodation centers. And so finally, not caring about the expense, she had taken several jetliner trips in quick succession, zigzagging about the globe to shake off pursuit before retreating here to an old, out-of-the-way city in the middle of Worldmass.

Besides the two men she knew—Stryne and Velen, they had called each other—how many others she would not recognize had kept watch for her and hunted her down using all the methods that could be used to find a person? By now she had become afraid of everyone and everything.

She wondered if it was possible to live with terror indefi-

nitely.

Idly her thoughts turned to the Church. Could a comforter help her? But churches would be dangerous places to approach. The sect could be watching. As it was, for the first time she felt some relief. Virov was well off the main routes and this tiny room, in a back street away from the main thoroughfares, had a closed-in, cupboardlike feeling. The narrow window admitted no direct sunlight at any time of the day and that, too, gave her a perverse feeling of safety, as if it was a room the world could not see.

She would get a job, would survive somehow. She would make no friends for years to come.

She opened the window and relaxed with the sound of the breeze and with Virov's quaint, well-melded odors.

Then she heard a nervous, tuneless humming from the other side of the door.

Mmmmmmmm . . .

With a fear-stricken cry she flung herself against the door, trying with her body to hold it closed. Her slight frame was far from sufficient to resist the force that pushed it open from the other side.

The feral-faced Stryne moved into the room, followed by Velen.

"Nice to see you, Inpriss. Let's carry on where we left off, shall we?"

For an hour they enjoyed themselves with her, going through the ceremonies slowly. The hologram screen pounded

out a sensuous, sinister mood, showing Hulmu in a playful aspect and filling the room with weird light. They went through the litanies that reminded Inpriss Sorce of what awaited her soul in the depths of the strat, where Hulmu would use her for his own purposes, and they urged her to forsake and vilify the false god of the Church.

After the Sporting of Shocks, where mild electric currents were applied to various parts of the body at random, they decided to carry out the Ritual of Mounting. First Stryne had intercourse with her and then Velen, while they both chanted the Offering of Orgasm.

Panting and sighing with satisfaction, they paused for a

while, looking down at the glazy-eyed woman.
"That's enough for here," Stryne said. "They want to finish the rituals in the local temple."

"We have to move her?"

Stryne nodded.

Velen frowned petulantly. "Why didn't you tell me before? I thought this was going to be our show."

Stryne shrugged. "They have some special equipment they want to use. It will be spicy. Come on, help me get her ready."

"Now listen, lady," Stryne said when they had dressed her and put her on her feet, "we're going to take a short walk. Act normal and don't try to scream for help, because we'll only use a narco-spray on you and get you there anyway." He shoved her satchel into her hand. "Right, let's move."

Velen had finished packing their equipment into his toolbox. They went down the wooden stairs and out on to the street, which was overhung with tall silent houses and wound down a steep incline.

Inpriss walked as if in a dream. The air was heavy. Virov was a city totally unlike Chronopolis. Thick scents cloyed along its antique streets and alleys: the smell of coffee, of spices, of exotic blossoms. In other circumstances she would have liked it here.

Perhaps she could commit suicide, she thought wildly. Killing herself would be one way of saving herself from whatever horrible thing it was the Traumatics would do to her soul at death. Would she have the opportunity? But then she remembered that if she succeeded in dying free from their attentions, her soul would travel back in time and she would live her life again.

Would it end with this same nightmare? A curious thought occurred to her. If the Traumatics gave her soul to Hulmu she would not repeat. Inpriss Sorce would vanish from ordinary time. Did that mean that the Traumatics had never before, in her previous repetitions, threatened her? She tried to imagine what kind of life stretched ahead of her without their intervention.

Or had they always chosen her for a victim? And had she always cheated them by committing suicide? The eternal recurrence of this nightmare was, in itself, a horrible thing to contemplate.

They emerged onto one of the town's main concourses, close to the bazaar, and walked past open-fronted shops, many of them selling handmade wares. The street was quite crowded. Stryne and Velen stuck close to her, one on each side. Stryne nudged her warningly whenever she faltered.

Suddenly a commotion erupted from a side street. A gang of brawling youths swayed and spilled onto the sidewalk. Inpriss felt herself jostled and pushed roughly aside. A bottle narrowly missed her face and thudded on the head of a ginger-haired young man who was punching someone else in the stomach.

Stryne clutched at her with a snarl, and then, with a feeling of wonderment, Inpriss realized that she had been separated from her captors. Bewildered, unable to make sense out of the noise and confusion, she struggled through a tangle of violent bodies. Something struck her a blow on the face.

Uncertainly she stood for a moment on the edge of the crowd. She caught a glimpse of Velen trying to ward off blows from an acned thug.

Then she ran and, unable to believe her freedom but exulting in it, ran and ran without pause.

THE INTERNODAL travel official was a pinch-faced man wearing a short peaked cap. He was circumspect when Inpriss tendered her application and read it slowly while rapping his fingers on the desk.

"The travel quotas have been cut down, citizeness," he told her coldly, "due to the hostilities." He peered closer at the form. "'Reason for journey: migration.' You intend to live in Revere?"

[&]quot;Yes."

[&]quot;Why?"

"I just—" Inpriss wrung her hands. She hadn't known it would be like this.

She had got out of Virov in disguise, buying a ticket on a charabanc, and had tried to settle in a smaller town a few hundred miles away. But the Traumatic sect had caught up with her again!

For the third time she had escaped, again by a lucky accident. Her tormentors hadn't known there was a back way out of the house, through a door hidden by a curtain. A few minutes after their arrival they had left her alone for a moment to carry in a box. She had slipped away.

To escape three times! It seemed miraculous to Inpriss. Perhaps God was helping her, she thought, but she couldn't depend on miracles. It had become plain that the Traumatics could find her in any part of the world. Only one other recourse was open: to flee into the future and hope that the Traumatics could not, or would not, pursue her down the centuries. She had returned to Chronopolis with the intention of boarding a chronliner.

But it was dangerous and more difficult than she had anticipated. To obtain a permit to leave Node 1 she had to use her real name. And the official was proving obstructive.

"I have to leave," she pleaded desperately. "There are some people I have to get away from!"

The official looked at her expectantly.

She fumbled in her satchel. "Look, this is all I have, except for the fare. Five hundred notes. I'll land in Revere with nothing."

She laid the money on his desk. The official coughed, then began shuffling his papers, tidying up the desk. When he had finished, the money had magically vanished.

"It's not really in order . . . but I think I can stretch a point for a charmer like you." He winked at her, his manner suddenly cheery and patronizing in a way that filled her with disgust.

He filled out her travel permit and she hurried to the offices of Buick Chronways, one of the three commercial enterprises that had imperial charters for internodal services. There was a chronliner due to leave in a few hours, and she spent the remaining time walking the streets, keeping always to busy places.

It was dark by the time she went to the big terminus. As she passed through the barriers and set off down the long

boarding ramp she could see the chronliner towering up out of its well. It had none of the gray-clad grimness of the military vessels of even greater size. Though of the same general design, it was covered with brightwork and along the flank of its upper story the name Buick stood out in flowing, graceful letters.

With a rush of hope, feeling the press of the crowd around her, she moved toward the humming timeship.

Chapter Six

THE CREW of the receiving chamber took Aton out of it quickly, silently, and efficiently.

They entered wearing strat suits, because the chamber was always partially energized in readiness for any couriers that might be en route. Once through the hatch Aton was relieved of his equipment: the traylike rudder control, the oxygen mask, and the earphones. The dispatch case they left strapped to him. No one could handle that but the commander whose duty it was to accept all messages from a courier personally.

Aton, meantime, stood staring blankly with arms akimbo,

not speaking, not moving.

Two ensigns came up to either side of him and took a light grip of his upper arms. A door slid open. They urged him forward. They were used to this detail. For a while newly arrived couriers were quite helpless, were scarcely able to keep their balance, bumped into walls, could not find their way through doors.

Dimly Aton sensed all around him the regular activity of the gigantic flagship, which was much bigger than the de-

stroyers he was familiar with.

Steadily they mounted through the pile of decks and stories, riding on elevators and moving corridors. The chronmen they passed flicked one glance at Aton, then looked away. Everyone was embarrassed to stare at a man who had just died, and was about to die again.

Aton's consciousness seemed to have retreated a long way from his perceptions, as though in using his senses he was looking the wrong way through a telescope. At the same time everything had a curiously flat, two-dimensional appearance to him. In the strat his mind had begun to accustom itself to

four-dimensional, even five-dimensional figures. By comparison the three-dimensional world was weirdly listless, a series of simplified cartoons drawn on paper. No depth. Sounds, too, were flat and empty, without resonance.

He was feeling an urge to leave this paper world. To complete the process that had begun with his being discharged from the dispatch chamber.

To die.

They came to the officers' quarters in the upper reaches of the timeship. Aton recognized hints of comfort that would have been out of place aboard his own *Smasher of Enemies* or even aboard most battleships. Then they went through some double doors into an area displaying real, though modest, luxury such as would not be found anywhere in the Time Service except in one of the great flagships.

It was Commander Haight's private suite. They halted before a walnut door carved with simple designs. The ensigns knocked, entered, saluted, and departed. Aton faced his former commanding officer.

Haight, sitting at a mahogany table, looked at him gloomily, broodingly. From a replayer in a corner came quiet, moody music, viols and trombones convoluting a web of melancholy calm.

Standing near Haight was a man Aton knew as Colonel Anamander. Like Haight he had the granite impassivity common to many senior offices in the Time Service, but his features were more amenable, slightly less uncompromising.

Haight lifted a hand in a halfhearted gesture. "Later, Colonel."

"Yes, sir." Anamander skirted around Aton and exited.

The commander rose and approached Aton, who stared straight ahead, the muscles of his face slack. As if he were an inanimate object Haight unstrapped the dispatch case from his chest and carried it to the table.

Before opening it he glanced up at Aton again and suddenly his eyes narrowed in recognition.

"Captain Aton, is it not?"

After a long pause Aton forced his larynx into action. "Sir." he croaked feebly.

"Captain Aton," Haight repeated sourly to himself. "An extraordinary case. One that surprised and distressed me a good deal. I have wondered if you would end up here."

Aton found his voice. "Am I to terminate my life now,

sir?" He waited expectantly for Haight to pronounce the releasing words.

"Wait until I am ready," snapped the commander. He eyed Aton calculatingly, then sat down and broke the seals on the dispatch case.

For what seemed like a long time he studied the papers he found within, and outwardly became oblivious of Aton's presence. The viols and trombones pursued each other unendingly through winding, cloying themes, and listening to the music, Aton found himself drifting back to a seemingly stratlike state. There was no before or after. The intricate melody hung on the air like a perfume and Aton stood stock-still in an eternal moment, unable to locate the transition between one note and another.

Commander Haight jutted out his lower lip as he finished studying the papers. He laid them aside, frowning. Then he leaned back in his chair. His gray eyes settled on Aton's face, concentrating there with an almost obsessive interest.

"The dispatches originate from the emperor himself," he announced gruffly. "The raid into Hegemonic territory is to take place. And the *Lamp of Faith*, no less, is to conduct the mission. That, surely, is a measure of its importance."

Aton said nothing and Haight continued, his eyes never leaving the other's face. "Do you realize how successful the Hegemonics' attacks have been over the past week or two? Cities and regions eliminated or mutated. At Node Five the entire continent of Australos was altered. It is now peopled by tribes of Stone Age aborigines. Even worse, there are numerous cases of causal discontinuity. You know what that can do to the fabric of time. The work of the Historical Office is being set at naught. And all due to the Hegemonics' new weapon, the time-distorter. Once our scientists had called such a device impossible. Now—" He spread his hands.

His gaze became heavy, penetrating. "Speak, Captain Aton," he said in a deep voice. "Tell me what it is like in the strat."

Aton blinked and stuttered. "It is-it is-"

He fell silent.

Haight nodded. "I know that it is beyond description. And yet something could be described. Words are never entirely useless. Try to collect your thoughts. To remember. Take possession of yourself once again. Speak, Captain."

Aton struggled, then said, "Sir, should I terminate my existence now?"

"Ah, you wish to obey your orders and escape this realm. And it is my beholden duty to see that you do. But I could not tell you how many times I have been tempted to forget my duty at these moments. There is a comforter at the Imperial Palace—Brother Mundan is his name—whose father fell into the strat some years ago, following a collision between timeships. Mundan cannot forget the strat since then. He dreams of it, has nightmares about it, tries to imagine what the Gulf of Lost Souls is like. After a lifetime in the service I am filled with a similar curiosity."

The drift of Haight's speech came through only faintly to Aton.

"Most of the couriers who stand before me are, of course, low types," the commander continued. "Mentally degenerate, hopeless cases. But you, I tell myself, are of different mettle. Despite your astonishing dereliction, you are presumably a disciplined officer. Given time, you might recover your senses. You might be able to answer my questions."

He lumbered to his feet, walked around the polished table, and stood close to Aton, peering straight into his eyes. "On this occasion I think I will commit a dereliction of my own. At such a time—for in my opinion the raid has little chance of succeeding, it is suicide—a small peccancy will go unnoticed. No, Captain Aton, you are not to die now. You are to live, to recover, and perhaps to tell me what you have experienced." He turned and pressed a button.

"This is Captain Aton," he said to the two batmen who entered at his summons. "See that he is made comfortable in the guest bedroom. But do not allow him to leave this suite."

Blood was pounding in Aton's veins as he was led away. This turn of events went entirely against his indoctrination. He felt his nerves falling apart as the death wish, thwarted of its expectation, began to burn up his brain.

PLANNING the raid occupied Commander Haight and his staff for a whole day.

The information contained in Aton's dispatch was less precise than might have been hoped for. The base from which the Hegemonics carried out their attacks using the distorter would be found there.

To raid an operational military base was a requirement of

no mean order, which was the reason why the Lamp of Faith had been selected even at the risk of losing the flagship. It had the speed, the firepower, and could carry a sufficient number of fighting men to hold the base for a short while.

For there was even more at stake than the increasingly unstable situation within the empire. The Historical Office was determined to acquire a sample of the time-distorter before the Hegemonics, overwhelmed by the might of the armada, decided to destroy it. Possession of the distorter, or rather of the principle by which it worked, opened up limitless possibilities for the easy restructuring of history.

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Aton, meanwhile, spent the time lying on his bed and staring at the ceiling. Gradually his mind bgean to clear. Little by little he felt as though he was being reinserted into the world of orthogonal time. But he still behaved like a robot or a zombie. The batmen brought him meals; he ate nothing. They asked if he wanted anything; he made no answer.

He felt as though his body was made of dead flesh, his minds of dead thoughts.

Eventually Commander Haight walked into his room unannounced. "Well, how are you feeling?" he demanded gruffly.

Aton was silent

Haight walked over to him and peered down. He poked Aton in the chest, as though making sure he was still alive. He grunted.

"I'm no psychologist. God knows what those hypnotic commands will do to you while I'm fouling up the program. Still, even that should be interesting to watch." Haight sighed. "You know, I'm curious to know why couriers have to die. Something of a mystery surrounds it. The instructions are very strict—I'll be in serious trouble if this business gets back to Chronopolis—but nobody will tell you the reason. As far as I'm able to ascertain, it's a Church secret."

He paused thoughtfully. "I'm tired of seeing you in that convict's garb. Let's go the whole hog." Turning his head he let out a bellow.

"Sturp!"

Instantly one of the batmen appeared. "Sir?"

"Go and find a captain's uniform somewhere, to fit Atonhere." He threw himself into a deep chair. "Maybe it will help you get your bearings," he remarked, "if the cloth of the

service doesn't unnerve you. Tell me, do you feel any disgrace over what you did?"

"Did?"

"Shooting down your own men! Deserting your ship!" Haight was in an aggressive mood. His face went slightly purple as he roared the accusations at Aton.

"No, sir." He strove to recall the events he should feel

ashamed of, but for the moment could not.

Haight leaned forward earnestly. "The strat," he urged. "Try to describe it now."

Aton looked up at the ceiling. His mouth opened and closed. He licked his lips.

"One sees one's life, not as a process, but as an object," he said. "Something that can be picked up, handled, remolded like a piece of clay."

Haight laughed shortly.

"Would you like to die?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"When you have lived through your life millions, billions of times in every detail, the purpose of living is exhausted. There is nothing left that's new. One wants only to forget, to find oblivion; that way, if one must live again, one will not realize it's for the billionth time. It will seem new."

"Death is the only positive experience remaining?"

"One has been cheated. Death is an event; once begun it should be completed. Mine was only partial death. It yearns to be complete. I must die naturally, so as to forget."

Haight mulled over his words. "Hm. It seems that our couriers are more fortunate, after all, than the poor chronmen who drown in eternity when their ships go down." He shot Aton a look of contempt. "What is the strat? How would you describe it?"

"It is a place of terror."

With a slightly bleary look Haight climbed to his feet. "Don't be too sure you've seen the last of it. We move out in an hour. I'm going to get some rest till then."

The big man padded away. Aton had remained motionless throughout the exchange. He continued to stare at the ceiling, where by some projective trick of the imagination various incidents of his life were being played out before his eyes.

Big as a city block, the step-storied Lamp of Faith moved

through the eternal geodesics of the strat like a flimmering shadow. Riding in support were three escort ships of the destroyer class, designated as expendable in Commander Haight's despairingly realistic battle plan.

Beyond Node 7 the formation hurtled into the no-man's-

land separating the empire from the Hegemony: a great uninhabited wilderness of over a hundred years' duration. Once the squadron was futureward of the imperial forward alert posts the destroyers shot ahead of the larger flagship. It was here, where the entire Earth was a radioactive desert. that the Hegemony's beta-radar stations would probably pick them up.

Given sufficient warning, the Hegemonics might try to set up time-blocks. These installations, though costly and requiring effort and skill, could bring a timeship traveling in excess of a certain velocity to a savage halt, precipitating it into orthogonal time where it was vulnerable. For this reason a timeship usually moved cautiously if it was suspected that a block was being attempted. Yet the Lamp of Faith needed to move fast to arrive at its target with any chance of success.

On the bridge, Commander Haight did not allow himself the luxury of personal feelings. His fatalistic gloom was relegated to the closed corners of his mind as he brought the full force of his attention to bear on the operation in hand.

He had already received the precombat blessings of the Church. The comforter still moved about the bridge asperging each man in turn. As he traversed the room from end to end his cowled figure changed size dramatically due to velocity contraction. In the nose of the ellipsoid he was barely a foot tall.

A gong sounded. The scanman spoke

"Enemy approaching. Two items."

Presently the louvered wedge shapes of the Hegemonic ships appeared on the skirling strat screen. They hovered and turned close by the flagship looking like prismatically cascading towers, showering images of themselves as they kept pace.

"Release torpedoes," ordered Haight automatically.

The torpedoes trundled away without hitting their targets. "They are offering tryst, sir," the beta operator informed him.

[&]quot;Ignore."

The second beta operator spoke up urgently. "Sir, I think Incalculable has gone ortho!"

"Full speed astern!" roared Haight.

Their stomachs lurched as the Lamp of Faith decelerated fiercely. The nose of the bridge ballooned in size; the pilot was near normal height.

The three destroyers had been strung out ahead of the flagship in a staggered echelon. *Incalculable*, the leading vessel, had clearly run into a time-block.

Despite that the destroyer had probably been annihilated by now in an instantly withering barrage of fire, the success of his ploy occasioned Commander Haight a grim satisfaction.

The two remaining destroyers—Song of Might and Infuriator—had, like the Lamp of Faith, managed to check their speed in time. Slowly the depleted formation cruised through the block region. Instruments on the bridge flicked and pinged as they registered the blocking field, which was designed to retard the c-plus velocity of pi-mesons in a moving ship's time-drive, thus preventing the passage of mass through time.

The steady thrum of the time-drive changed to a lower pitch. Even at their present speed, too slow for the block's relativistic field to be efficacious, it had a dampening effect.

Then they were suddenly through the block and picked up speed again.

And now they had passed beyond the Century of Waste and were into the territory of the Hegemony. Their journey now would be short. The Hegemony, unlike the empire, comprised only one node—did not extend over the entire Earth's surface, in fact. Indeed, as far as was known, only the empire imposed its authority on other centuries. No similar grand design had been detected anywhere in the future.

In terms of history, the Hegemony began at the fringes of the Century of Waste and continued for about a hundred years up to its domestic node, and for a similar period after that. By the time of the succeeding node (Node 10 by imperial reckoning) it appeared to have changed its political character and no longer called itself the Hegemony. What it would call itself after receiving the empire's attentions was, at this point, a matter for speculation.

"Several enemy vessels converging," said the scanman. "Ignore."

They would be subject to a considerable number of interception attempts from now on. The pilot was busy tracking

the Lamp of Faith through the multidimensional continuum in a preplanned zigzag. The maneuver had two purposes: to render more difficult any further stopping exercises by means of time-block and to disguise the ulitmate target.

The screen operator tried to get them a glimpse of what chronmen called "the surface"—the orthogonal time-scape they were invisibly skimming through. This was occasionally possible by adroit handling of the scanning equipment. But on this occasion the strat defeated him. The roiling, multi-dimensional geodesics, the rapid course changes, turned the surface of reality, even though he managed to focus the instruments in that direction, into a senseless collage without one recognizable shard.

More important was the abstract metering that told them where they were. In the bowels of the ship was a device of extraordinary subtlety: an inertial navigator capable of noting and computing shifts of position on a six-dimensional scale. Without this gadget to make a timeship free of reliance on surface-based reference points, the operation of warships would have been quite impracticable.

As the minutes ticked by tension in the bridge became almost unbearable. Haight accepted readiness reports from all sections. Gunnery, commando, technical teams, were all pent up and waiting to go.

Wedge ships flew around them thick and fast. By now the Hegemonics knew that something was up. The Time Service had already carried out a few retaliatory raids on their bases and cities, but generally had been too busy trying to defend imperial history. The appearance of the mighty battle-wagon flagship on their territory probably came as an unpleasant surprise.

And, the nature of the strat being what it was, they had little chance to prepare. Warnings could not go ahead of them any faster than the Lamp of Faith itself traveled; even if the Hegemony used the courier system, which was doubtful, they would not have installed the expensive catapult apparatus midway between nodes. And they could not attack the intruders until they emerged into ortho.

A thought occurred to Haight. From the defenders' point of view he was now traveling on the incoming, attacking flight path. If the raid was to be successful and the Lamp of Faith to return home again, then somewhere in the strat must already be the outgoing homeward flight path with the

flagship hurtling along it. That was one of the paradoxes of this business: that the strat contained every chronman's future, even though he himself could not determine what that future would be. Only in orthogonal time, and at the very nodes themselves, was time regarded as indeterminate.

"Base Ogop in scanner range!" announced the scanman excitedly.

Haight sounded the alerting klaxons. The elements of the operation were now coming to a climax. One of the beta operators, in touch, but barely, with the destroyer vanguard, was babbling reports and figures.

"Song of Might and Infuriator due for ortho in one minute five seconds. Our approach due in three minutes—"

Another operator broke into Haight's attention. "Twelve

Hegemonic ships harrassing formation."

Haight licked his lips. Down below the commandos and technical teams were pouring into their exit bays. The word for them to go would have to come from him. But first those ships, as well as Base Ogop's defensive armament, needed to be dealt with.

"How much weight have they got?"

The operator was studying his blips with a frown, glancing occasionally at the big strat screen. "Three at least are of the Hegemonic Tower class. Most of the others look like the Ranger class."

"Going ortho!" yelled the destroyers' linkman. The vicarious excitement of their exploit was upon him.

A sudden silence fell upon the bridge.

These were probably the most crucial few seconds of the whole enterprise. The destroyers Song of Might and Infuriator did have one advantage: they were not engaging in a tryst. They were emerging from the strat without warning and it would take the pursuing Hegemonic ships seconds or minutes to realize what had happened and follow suit. In that time the destroyers had to silence Base Ogop's guns, prevent any ships there from phasing into the strat, or at least do as much of all that as possible to soften up the approach for the Lamp of Faith.

"Report?" demanded Haight impatiently.

The linkman was intent upon his earphones. "Infuriator's drive crippled, severely holed, but armament intact. Song of Might undamaged." He strained to hear what was being said.

"Base defenses inoperable . . . five warships grounded . . . two got away."

It was much better than he had feared. He nodded brusquely. "Right. We're going in."

A minute later the great ship phased into materialization on the main yard of Base Ogop.

Every window on the exterior of the huge battle wagon tuned to transparency. The crew could see the shattered base all around them.

Haight surveyed the scene on the bridge's main monitor screen. They were parked on a yard perhaps half a mile in extent. Ringing it were buildings in a foreign, exotic style, some of them burning, others dashed to the ground. Nearer at hand were the wrecks of columnlike timeships, either tumbled across the concrete or sagging and smoking.

Towering above it all was the mighty Lamp of Faith, vaster and more powerful than any timeship the Hegemony had built. It had crushed smaller vessels, trucks, and machinery beneath it as it settled its full weight onto the yard. With its rows and tiers of windows it would have looked in place lining the street of any major city, except for its beam projectors and torpedo tubes.

Scanning the environs, Haight spotted the *Infuriator* lying, propped athwart a blockhouse, exactly like one building thrown on top of another. Further off, beyond the other side of the base, the *Song of Might* hovered in the air in a stand-off position so as to provide the flagship with covering fire.

Haight picked up a microphone and sent his voice haranguing throughout the ship. At ground level, the port porches opened. Combat chronmen and technicians surged through to take possession of Base Ogop, hurrying away from the timeship before the anticipated assault from the strat met it.

Less than half a minute later Hegemonic craft began to flick into existence. Within microseconds heavy-duty energy beams had been focused on them and they either exploded into flame or fled back into the strat to lick their wounds.

Colonel Anamander looked at the commander, his lips curling. A timeship standing in orthogonal time had every advantage over one trying to attack it from the strat. It was not a tryst situation where each party was prevented by the rules of war from phasing out of the strat earlier than his antagonist and so preempting the appointed moment. This was like shooting ducks out of the air. They had simply to

sit still and watch for ships to appear, focusing and firing before the enemy had a chance to do likewise.

Very soon the Hegemonics gave up the unequal fight. They were leaving it now for Base Ogop to be relieved by slower air and land forces.

Haight imagined those forces would start arriving in ten to twenty minutes. He reckoned on being able to hold the base for up to an hour. In that time the sample distorter would have to be found.

Reports began coming in. Fighting with the base staff. The technical teams going over the damaged ships, examining the workshops, questioning prisoners for some knowledge of the coveted weapon.

He controlled his impatience and sat stolidly, as if made of stone.

Fifteen minutes later radar reported strike aircraft converging from three directions. The Lamp of Faith lifted off the shipyard and hovered at two thousand feet. As the aircraft approached at supersonic speed their courses were tracked and plotted. At almost the same instant that the timeship released missiles to down them, the strike planes fired their own missiles. Those hurtling toward the Lamp of Faith were licked out of the sky by energy beams. The flagship's own projectiles found their targets. Somewhere beyond the horizon the attacking planes rained down in fragments.

There was a lull. Occasionally surveillance craft screamed overhead at a height of miles. Haight let them go. The timeship could stave off any amount of missile attack. The real fight would begin when the enemy brought in their own energy beamers.

So far the technical teams had discovered nothing. Haight was becoming worried. Half an hour after their landing, huge vehicles appeared over the horizon, moving swiftly forward on what was probably an air-cushion principle. Large-aperture beamer orifices were plainly visible. Behind them came troop carriers carrying, he estimated, thousands of men with full equipment.

He put the Lamp of Faith down on the ground again to lower its profile.

The blue flashes of high-energy beams began to crisscross one another like swords. Molten metal ran down the sides of the *Lamp of Faith* as the beams slowly ate into the structure of the ship.

Then the exchange died down as the flagship's weapons put the Hegemonic beams out of action. But the respite could be only temporary. More and more projectors would be brought up until the ship's resources—and those of the two destroyers—were beaten down.

As it was, the *Infuriator* had been silenced and the *Song* of *Might* had only one projector operating. Haight gave orders for any survivors on the grounded ship to come aboard the flagship. *Song* of *Might* he sent back into the strat for its own protection.

"If we stay any longer, sir," Colonel Anamander reminded him, "we may not get away."

He was referring to the possibility that the Hegemonics might be able to erect a time-block to prevent their escape pastward.

"My orders are perfectly explicit, Colonel," Haight told him. "We are to stay until the distorter is found, whatever that might mean."

"Even if it means losing the Lamp of Faith?" Anamander seemed to find the notion incredible.

But Haight merely shrugged sardonically. "Yes... so what if we do? We are all expendable." His gaze flicked around him, as though he was able to look through walls and see his command in all its entirety. "What of the Lamp of Faith? Do you imagine the empire can't manage without it? The Invincible Armada will include a thousand ships as good as this one."

The ship lifted off again and drifted beyond Base Ogop's boundary to attack a concentration of projectors that was building up there. But it was forced to retreat. So many of its own beams were out of action that it was being outgunned, and while it left its central position, Hegemonic troops poured into the base to fight it out with the chron commandos.

The officer in charge of the technical teams spoke to Haight over a vidcom. His face was haggard with desperation.

"There's no distorter on the base, sir. We've been through everything."

Haight cursed. "There has to be one!" he snarled. "Sir--"

The Lamp of Faith lurched. One corner of the ship hit the concrete with a huge crunching sound. Moments later the

whole mass slammed down as the lifting engines cut out and the great vessel rocked from side to side.

"Should we phase out, sir?" questioned Colonel Anaman-

der in a low voice.

"What did I just tell you, Colonel?" Haight growled. "We don't leave until we are successful, and that comes from the emperor himself."

CAPTAIN Mond Aton had been largely unaware of events taking place outside the small bedroom where he lay. But he felt the sudden lurch followed by the impact, and knew that the ship was losing power.

The knowledge provoked only slight interest in him. The batman had brought him a passably fitting uniform. He had donned it and inspected himself in a full-length mirror.

For a moment it had made him think he was back aboard the Smasher of Enemies. Things had started clicking into place in his mind.

The room shifted in perspective and suddenly acquired depth. It glowed with new color. He was no longer in an insubstantial two-dimensional world. He could understand his surroundings again.

Now he lay quietly, considering the remarkable situation he was in.

After a while other distant noises began to intrude into his consciousness. The hissing of energy beams biting deeper into the ship. The spit of beam pistols closer by.

He rose and went into the main lounge. As he did so, Commander Haight burst in and slammed the door behind him, a gun in his hand.

"What's happened?" Aton asked calmly.

Servants hurried into the room. Haight waved them away. Then he stepped to the large magohany table and opened a panel in its top, turning a diallike device this way and that.

He sat down at the table, his pistol pointing at the door,

his free hand near the device, toying with a switch.

"We couldn't find a distorter," he rumbled. "Now the Hegemonics are all around us. The power has failed and our beams are gone. There's fighting inside the ship."

"Is that a destruct device?" Aton asked, eyeing the switch. Haight nodded. "The one on the bridge doesn't work. A long time ago I had an additional one installed here."

"Then what are you waiting for?" Aton inquired pointedly.

The commander grunted. "The Hegemonics have offered a truce! It seems they want to talk to us, so I've agreed. Might as well hear what they have to say."

"They are coming here?"

"Where else?"

Aton took a seat at the other end of the room. For some minutes they waited in silence.

At length there was the sound of footsteps and the door opened. Colonel Anamander entered. He surveyed the room and raised his eyebrows at Haight. The commander nodded.

Into the room came two tall slim men. They wore brocaded garments of yellow cloth that accentuated their slimness and gave them a formal elegance. The most striking feature of their apparel was their headgear: cylindrical hats over a foot high, surmounted by curved lips that projected forward for several inches.

Commander Haight kept his gun trained on them. "Forgive me if I do not rise to make a proper greeting," he said in a gravelly tone. "Announce yourselves."

One of the two stepped forward. He looked at Haight with none of the rancor that was evident in his own expression.

"I am Minister Ortok Cray, and I am a member of the Ruling Council of Saleem, which is, as you know, the faction which has hegemony in the federation you know as the Hegemony. And this"—he gestured to his companion—"is Minister Wirith Freeling, of the same council."

Haight did not show his considerable surprise. "I am privileged indeed," he murmured. "I am Commander Haight, a loyal servant of His Chronotic Majesty Philipium the First."

Minister Ortok Cray glanced at Aton as if expecting to be introduced to him also. "I can assure you that there is no need to threaten us with your weapon," he told Haight. "It is not our intention to trick you or even to capture your ship. It is our wish that, after making the necessary repairs for which we shall offer every assistance, you should return to Chronopolis and convey our sentiments to your master."

The Hegemonic spoke with a drawling accent. Haight, however, used to the variegated dialects and languages of the empire, scarcely noticed its strangeness.

"Sentiments?"

Minister Wirith Freeling made an expansive gesture. "I don't know if you are aware of how difficult communication between our two civilizations is made by religious differences.

To a large extent our cultures are ignorant of each otherby far the greater ignorance, however, is on your side."

Commander Haight was proud of, rather than insulted by. this ignorance. "It is no part of our habits to pander to heathens "

Ortok Cray sighed. "But in present circumstances, surely some intercourse would be advisable? As it is, the empire appears not even to know the elementary facts of the Hegemony's history."

Commander Haight's opinion was that, once the Invincible Armada was launched, any conversation between the two would be extremely one-sided. It was true, of course, that no real study of Hegemonic culture had been undertaken, and such cultural contact as there had been had consisted of proselytizing Church missionaries. He could not see that it was in the least important. But he laid down his gun.

"Come to the point."

"We wish to end the war and come to an understanding based on coexistence."

"Hah! You fear the armada."

"Indeed. But do you not also have much to fear?" The mildness disappeared from Ortok Cray's face and Haight found himself confronting two men of steely determination.

"We have shown that we are ready to risk all to defend ourselves," the Hegemonic leader continued. "You know what the time-distorter can do. It is a weapon so terrible that, if it is employed without restraint, then the user stands in as much danger as the victim. That, no doubt, is why you have not made use of it against us. But our situation is so desperate that we will stop at nothing."

Aton spoke up from the other side of the room. "You had

expected us to use the distorter?"

Haight glared at him in displeasure for the interruption. Ortok Cray turned to regard the young captain.
"It is, after all, an invention of the Chronotic empire," he

said. "Our acquisition of it is quite recent."

"And just how did you acquire the distorter?" Haight grated. He and Anamander exchanged puzzled glances.

"That, naturally, I cannot tell you. The important thing is that we have it and will continue to use it. Furthermore, so far we have used it only at low power and with small aperture. If driven to it we will pull out all the stops. In no circumstances will we surrender. But we would prefer to live in

peace. Surely you can see that this struggle is going to be a calamity for us both?"

"And you, of course, try to place the blame for the conflict squarely on us. That, I'm afraid, won't do. Long before the armada was thought of the empire was suffering from your armed incursions, your attempts to interfere with imperial chron integrity—"

"And we were suffering from the impudence of your missionaries," retorted Wirith Freeling hotly. "You evidently do not appreciate what your religious aggressiveness means to us. And apart from that, there was always your patent desire to see us a part of your territories."

Haight shrugged gloomily. "Your intransigent attitude toward the true faith renders it a duty to bring you the light of the Church."

"We have our own religion, the religion of the Risen Christos! We want none of your—of your—" Freeling was sputtering with indignant rage.

Ortok Cray raised a hand. "Patience," he murmured to his colleague. "This is not the time for quarrels and recriminations. This is the time for explanation."

He turned to face Haight once more. "You complain of our earlier attempts to interfere with Chronotic history. But I wonder if you realize the reason behind those attempts? Our endeavors to make our case plain to your government at Chronopolis have always been thwarted, since your Church refuses to accept our representatives there."

"Well, now I am your prisoner and you can say what you like."

"Precisely. The point at issue concerns the Century of Waste. Our cultures are separated by a period of a hundred years when the Earth is uninhabitable. The origin of this is presumably known to you."

"Some war in the hinterland of Node Seven," said Haight reflectively. "Node Seven is the empire's frontier. We have not yet consolidated ourselves in the stretch of time succeeding it. Indeed, it may be left for that to be accomplished by the natural advance of the node."

"That's right: a war which left the Earth desolate. In point of fact this was established in orthogonal time well before time travel was introduced at what you call, I believe, Node Six. But you do not see what this means? During that war mankind was wiped out. History came to an end at that

point until, by some random movement in the strat, there was a historical mutation that led to the invention of time-travel. The future Earth was then colonized by migrants of the past. Thus it transpires that time-travel is the instrument of mankind's survival."

"So? All this is recognized. Time-travel came as a gift from God, to redeem mankind from his own destruction. That is the entire basis of the true faith and the justification for the Chronotic Empire. You have told me nothing new."

"Except that we do not regard the invention of time-travel as an act of God, but never mind about that. Do you not see the implications? The annihilation of mankind took place before the Chronotic Empire had begun to establish itself throughout time. The course of history was quite different then. The migrations to the future took place when the empire began to expand—and more particularly when the Church of San Hevatar established itself as the one true church. So you now see what I am getting at?"

Haight merely frowned, but the truth struck Aton forcibly.

"You are refugees!"

Ortok Cray nodded. "We, or rather our ancestors, were religious dissidents who were driven out of the empire in the early days. We established ourselves here, beyond the empire's reach—at that time. Hence our proud independence and our dislike of your church."

"None of this explains your impudent forays into our territory," complained Haight broodingly. "If you wished to be left alone, why did you draw yourselves to our attention?"
"Because the empire's hold on the structure of history is

increasing," Ortok Cray reminded him. "We have every reason to fear the Historical Office. If nothing is done now, then in about fifty years time the Hegemony will disappear from history?"

"How do you know that?" Aton said, puzzled, and ignoring his lack of entitlement to join in the discussion.

"Time is not static," pointed out the Hegemonic minister.
The nodes proceed forward at a steady rate, overtaking events that are already established in the future. If the node contains some Chronotic mutation or has been altered in some way, then events ahead of it will also change as it approaches. And this means that the Chronotic Empire, even while maintaining its fixed rear at the Stop Barrier, will continue to grow into the future—quite apart from further conquests by timeships. At the moment the events leading to the disastrous war that wiped out mankind are still intact. But Node Seven is already encroaching on them and eventually will overtake them. The Historical Office, naturally, will want to delete this war. There will be no general destruction, no Century of Waste."

"A change we should all applaud, surely," Aton commented. "To annul such a terrible happening does not seem at all had"

"We want the war to be fixed in time forever."

They were all taken aback by the ferocity of the minister's words.

"If there is no war," he continued quietly, "if the Earth is not depopulated, then the disciples of the Risen Christos can have found nowhere to settle themselves on fleeing the persecutions of your Church—or, at best, can only have been absorbed into a more friendly population, whatever that population might be. The future will have a new, completely different history. The Hegemony will never have come into existence at all."

Commander Haight came to his feet and paced the lounge, frowning. "Once time-travel becomes an established fact of life such temporal upheavals become inevitable," he commented. "Only the continued existence of the empire is absolutely guaranteed. Yes, I can see that you have good cause to fear us."

"We do not agree that the continued existence of the empire is a certainty," Wirith Freeling snapped. "The empire is contingent, like all other things existing in time. That time-travel cannot vanish, once having been invented, is true, no doubt, but not the empire. Time-travel came before the empire."

"The two are indissolubly linked."

"Let us not argue theology," Ortok Cray put in. "You have your religion, we have ours. We believe we can destroy your empire, even though we destroy ourselves in doing so. These are our demands: the Chronotic Empire must limit itself in time and must not intrude into the period containing the annihilatory war. You have a thousand years, be content with that. Let Node Seven continue without you, do not extend your authority beyond its current generation."

Haight stopped short and looked at the two Hegemonics

with controlled fury. "Do you expect His Chronotic Majesty to agree to terms like that?"

"We wish him to examine the situation and to recognize the delicacy of our own position. Also, that the present course will destroy us both."

"Then I will not answer you, since the answer belongs to His Majesty."

Minister Ortok Cray acknowledged this with an inclining of his head.

"We would welcome a meeting between our respective representatives," he said. "Some arrangement tolerable to us both would be better than total war. If your side is willing to take part in talks, send a timeship broadcasting an appropriate message."

"I will convey your requirements." Haight's tone was sardonic, almost sarcastic.

"Then we thank you. Please let us know if you need anything to make your ship timeworthy. I think we can expect you to be on your way in, let us say, ten hours?"

Haight nodded. Ministers Ortok Cray and Wirith Freeling made some parting gesture that was strange to him, and swept sedately from the room.

When they had gone, Commander Haight stroked his chin for a few moments, then looked thoughtfully at Aton.

"I can see allowing you to wear the emperor's uniform has done the trick," he said slowly. "You are a veritable model of rationality."

As Aton made no reply, he turned to Anamander. "Well, our enterprise has come to a surprising conclusion, eh, Colonel?"

Seating himself at the table, he carefully deactivated the Lamp of Faith's emergency self-destruct.

Chapter Seven

"Ir's hard to say what it is, or what it's like," Aton muttered. "There are really no words to describe it. All the words of our language refer to three-dimensional, orthogonal time." "Are the experiences still in your memory? Are they vivid?"

"Yes, but they tend to fade, to become . . . recast so as to resemble ordinary experiences. Such as what you might see

on a strat screen."

Commander Haight sighed deeply. "That figures. A strat screen interprets the substratum in terms of sensory criteria. One might well expect the brain's memory banks to the same."

They were heading back toward Chronopolis, Node 1,

accompanied by the Song of Might, and were already deep inside the empires historical territory. Haight had been kept busy, first attending to repairs to the Lamp of Faith and then negotiating a homeward course, the journey to the frontier being under escort by a squadron of Hegemonic Tower-class ships. But the moment he had been able to take a rest from his duties he had hurried to his quarters to question Aton closely on the nature of the strat.

"Nothing has a single nature," Aton said. "Everything merges into everything else; there are a billion aspects to everything. Nothing exists as an object; all is flux and motion."

"Hmm." Haight listened carefully to the words, fixing his gaze on Aton's face. It was as if he was trying to find in Aton's steady eyes some glimpse of what those eyes had seen.

He was somewhat disappointed by the results of his experiment. Aton's descriptions had been fairly lucid but resembled technical descriptions such as one might find in textbooks. They did not convey the essence of the experience.

Aton's return to normalcy was also something of a dis-

appointment to him. He turned, stretched his weary limbs, then stepped to the cocktail bar and poured himself a stiff slug of gin. After brief hesitation he poured one for Aton too and pushed it across to him.

"I have not had my money's worth," he said with a grim smile. "Interfering with your hypnotic instructions should at least, I would have thought, produced some interesting psychological disorder. But here you are as healthy as apple pie."
He reflected before knocking back his gin. "Perhaps next time I should try an ordinary criminal type who will have no mental discipline."

Aton had a question of his own. "Commander, do you think the representations the Hegemonics have made to us will influence policy in Chronopolis?" His face wore a worried frown

Haight looked at him in surprise. "Don't be a fool, Captain. The emperor's will is inviolable."

"But, sir-"

"I would probably not even bother to deliver such pathetic pleas," Haight told him irritably, "had not the Hegemonics inadvertently given us such valuable information at the same time. My orders were to seize the distorter or to sacrifice the mission in the attempt. But that business about its orgins is most peculiar, don't you think? One can only think that there is high treason in the realm. The historical background to the Hegemony, too, should prove most useful, though I should think the point about the advance of Node Seven is something the Historical Office is already alive to." He gave a loud, braying laugh. "See how invincible is the empire! No wonder the Hegemonics are in a panic. There's no way they can win!" "In that case, would it not be advisable to hold back the

armada and gain our ends by subtler means?"

"That would not end the provocations of the Hegemony, It would only give them more time to work their mischief. And besides, the Church has declared the enterprise a holy crusade. The Church being infallible, its edicts cannot be re-

versed " Aton became depressed as he realized the inevitability of

what Haight said. "I shall report the full conversation to the emperor personally," Haight mused. "It will make little difference. Of greater interest is the news that the Hegemonics spring from

our own dissidents. That, too, offers possibilities of eliminat-

ing the Hegemonics by tracking down these dissidents before they flee—though where time-travel's concerned such a course of action is not guaranteed to be effective. In any case I doubt that it will be considered."

"Why not?"

"The Church wants converted souls, not annihilated souls. The purpose of the armada is to save men, not to destroy them."

Aton brought himself to attention, aware of the import of what he was about to say.

"I agree with the Hegemonics, sir. The only important thing is that the war should be brought to a stop. We are headed on a course of mutual disaster."

Haight, in the act of filling his glass again, glanced up sharply. "You are way out of line, Captain. You have forgotten your role. You have performed your duty."

As he performed the trigger phrase lifting the hypnotic block on the implanted death urge, Aton went dizzy. Something inside his mind struggled madly for expression. But he clamped down on it. There was a mental convulsion, a struggle. Then calm.

"What happened?" asked Haight softly.

Aton had closed his eyes. He opened them. "You were supposed to keep me alive for not more than an hour. I've been here for more than three days. The death command has lost its force."

"A hypnotic command should be permanent."

"The hypnotic component is not a command, only a suggestion. It depends for its force on immersion in the strat. That experience is three days old."

Haight nodded. "I thought this might happen." He toyed with his tumbler, his expression becoming curious. "You know, men have been pulled out of the strat after falling into it, and they don't recover. Though there have been some cases I couldn't speak for, taken into the care of the Church to spend the rest of their days in monasteries. Poor devils."

"This is the second time I've been in the strat. I saw it for the first time when the Smasher of Enemies went down."

"You think that might have acclimatized you, eh?"

"Possibly, sir." Haight's obsession with the strat, Aton saw, was a growing one. For his part, he was eager to return to the former subject of conversation.

"Sir, we must try to make the emperor understand the

seriousness of the situation. The war must be brought to a stop."

"We must? Did you not just now hear me pronounce sentence of death on you? Or are you trying to save your skin?"

"I am not trying to save my skin. It is your doing that the normal procedure has . . . misfired. But I am still willing to submit to execution, if you will grant me one last wish." Aton spoke evenly, with increasing urgency.

"And what is that?"

"Let me be present at the interview with the emperor. Let me put the Hegemonics' case as they would wish it to be put. Frankly I do not think that you will do so."

"You accuse me of misrepresentation?"

"Sir, I believe the empire is in danger, deadly danger. You understand the havoc that can be wreaked by the time-distorter—and we have not even seen it used at full power yet!—but your instinct is that of a warrior: to fight, to defeat the enemy. But to take a detached view, the Hegemonic cause has some slight justice in it. The issues at stake are not worth the strain we will be putting on the structure of time."

Haight took a step toward Aton, dangerous emotions chasing themselves across his face. "You want to sell out to the enemy!"

"We must reach an accommodation with the Hegemonics! Or else the empire itself may be destroyed!"

The commander stared at him incredulously. "Hah! So you really think the empire can be brought down! Why, the empire's resources are inexhaustible! Other powers in time have at the best but one node to draw on. The empire has seven! That means seven times the industrial might and seven times the manpower of any enemy we might face. And our strength will grow." He shook his head. "No, the empire cannot be defeated."

"You speak of orthogonal time. I have seen the strat. You have not. All we have can be wiped away in the blink of an eye."

"You add heresy to your crimes," Haight said with increasing virulence.

Aton replied in a voice thick with disappointment. "With you for a messenger, the emperor can gain no clear idea of what the Hegemonics intend."

"Who are you to lecture me?" Haight retorted with a sneer, looking him up and down. "Your offers and arguments are all

tricks to help yourself. Let me tell you something—of service! Even emperors can make foolish mistakes. What is Philipium but a foolish old man? But surrounding the Ixians welding together the whole empire, is the ideal of service to the empire. Men give their lives to this ideal. It is the empire's main strength. And what are you? What do you understand of this strength? You are a traitor, a criminal, a coward!" Haight's voice rose to a furious roar. "But now you face me, a loyal servant of the empire!"

Aton stood pale-faced but erect while Haight glowered at him. "I had been undecided as to what to do with you," the commander said more quietly, "but now I think I will kill you anyway."

Aton skipped back. His hand darted into his tunic and came out with a small hand beamer he had found in Haight's stateroom.

"I am set upon a course, Commander. I will not give up, at least until I have spoken with Colonel Anamander. Perhaps he agrees with me."

"And perhaps he does not. It makes no difference, but in fact he does not." Haight stared contemptuously at the beamer.

Aton was pointing the gun uncertainly at Haight. "Keep your hands where I can see them, sir."

"I need no gun. I have a weapon pointed directly at your heart: your own vagus nerve."

Aton's eyes opened wide.

"Your information is probably incomplete," Haight continued. "You have conquered the compulsion to pronounce the trigger-word, evidently. But it is not necessary that you should pronounce it. It is only necessary that your nervous system should hear it. And I, as receiving officer, know what that word is."

Although his finger tightened on the stud of the beamer, Aton found that he could not, after all, fire on his commanding officer. He staggered back yet another step.

"Vom." The word dropped from Haight's lips like a dose of poison.

And Aton's nervous system reacted instantly. Brain cell after brain cell fired in response to the signal, spreading the message in a web of pending death. Aton sought to clamp down on the impulse, to dampen it before it could reach the vagus nerve, sometimes called the suicide nerve because of

its ability to initiate cardiac arrest on instructions from the brain:

His heart gave a convulsive leap and missed several beats. Aton staggered, the gun slipping from his fingers. He was vaguely aware of Haight looking on, half in satisfaction, half repelled.

Then the scene before him vanished. For a split second that was an eternity long he found himself back in the strat. He was experiencing its impossibilities all over again. But for once the immersion was less uncontrolled; it was almost voluntary.

When, almost immediately, he phased back into Haight's lounge the cabin bore its former flat, two-dimensional appearance. This time, however, he was not mentally incapacitated. He felt young, strong, and omnipotent, as if he could fly while others were earthbound.

Vom. The word had no danger in it now. Its fearful viru-

lence had been expunged from his mind.

"Wha- Did something happen just then?" Haight whispered. For a moment he had seemed to see Aton surrounded by an aura of near-invisible flame.

"Yes. Your word won's work against me either. I have rid

myself of it."

He paused. He still did not understand what was happening to him, at least not entirely. He only knew that it was surprising, incredible, and yet logical.

"Commander, you have wondered why the empire requires

a time courier to die. I thnk I can tell you."

"Oh? Why?"

"It is because he becomes like a god."
"A god." Haight chuckled derisively. "Well, you may have broken the psychological contitioning, but let's see how well you fare against hot energy."

He had unflapped his waist holster and drew his clumsylooking hand beamer, larger than the toylike weapon Aton had discarded. With slow deliberateness he clicked off the safety and aimed the orifice at Aton's chest.

Aton had time for a hasty valediction.

"Commander," he gasped, "I also am a loyal servant of the empire."

Then he seemed actually to see the dense microwave beam, made visible by its accompanying dull red tracer waves, advancing through space toward him.

And Commander Haight gave a hoarse cry. For Aton had vanished completely from his cabin. He had been plunged back into the strat.

As he fell through the unending plenum of potential time Aton wondered why—and how—his nervous system had rescued him. Had it been a survival response, an instinctive reaction against threatened death? Or had his subconscious mind, still obeying the suicide command in some perverse fashion, welcomed and anticipated that death, precipitating him into the strat through overeagerness?

As to how his body had gained this power, he could only guess. Presumably it was connected with the unique combination of his recent experiences. How it was accomplished, considering the heavy equipment and intense energy that was normally required, he could not say. But one thing was sure. He was no longer as others were. He was a four-dimensional man, able to transpose spontaneously through time.

And no longer was he a despairing mote tossed about by the currents of the strat. This time he was not robbed of the sense of sequential time that was his brain's birthright; he carried his own weak ortho field with him. Because of this his mind maintained its natural rationality. His perceptions had learned to handle the supernal contents of the strat in a way that did not cause his ego to blow a fuse.

Previously the strat had engulfed him, had half-drowned him. That was why his consciousness had taken refuge in experiencing his life over and over: it had been the only familiar element in his surroundings. He could, if he wished, choose this refuge again, but he did not, because this time his consciousness was not overwhelmed and his new condition, with his brain no longer scrambled by endless unintelligible monstrosities, the strat took on an entirely different appearance.

Fire. That was the nearest he could come to describing it. He was in an ocean of eternal fire, whose flames consisted of the myriad half-creatures whose existence was, as yet, only potential. The flames blasted and trembled, whirled and rolled, swelled and receded.

This, he knew, was not the strat as it was in reality; this was the interpretation his newly adjusted perceptions put upon it. The fire hurtled and withered everywhere; it was a

five-dimensional sea that could not be understood any other way.

If he turned in a certain direction he could see what appeared to be a vast leaden wall. Upon it, as upon a huge mural, ran scenes of an amazing variety and richness. It was the surface of the strat. The realm of existential, orthogonal moving time from which Aton came. The real, solid world. And if he wished he could gaze upon this world and see what took place there.

But instead he was hurtling pastward—pastward, that is, in orthogonal terms—at a terrific rate, bent upon a mission that was only gradually becoming clear to him.

His trajectory, however, was to be interrupted. Suddenly, looming ahead of him, he saw a form that did not belong here. Like himself, it moved in a bubble of orthogonal time, but it was larger than he was. Much larger.

Briefly he recognized it as it swept past him: a step-tiered office block traveling taller end sternward, the company name *Buick* written hugely along its side in graceful silver script. It was an internodal chronliner.

He would have passed it by, but apparently the section of his nervous system that controlled his newfound powers had its own autonomic responses. As the ship's orthogonal bubble touched him he phased precipitately out of the strat and found himself in a new, unexpected situation.

He was standing, still in his captain's uniform, in the chronliner's main lounge.

NERVOUSLY Inpriss Sorce sipped her drink, her eyes flicking here and there around the lounge like the wary eyes of a bird.

She spent most of the time in the big lounge. There were always plenty of people here, and bright lights. She was short of sleep because she was reluctant to stay long alone in her cabin, where she feared unwelcome visitors. Instead she had learned to live on nervous energy. At the same time she knew that she would have to learn to break this habit when she reached Revere, where she would spend much time alone—hopefully safe and unobserved.

Captain Mond Aton noticed the frightened girl as soon as he took stock of his surroundings.

Surveying the spacious, well-appointed lounge, glancing at the faces of the passengers, he discovered that along with the ability to travel through time at will went another gift. Insight. Either his awareness or his senses had been heightened; he seemed able to guess instantly what thoughts and feelings lay behind the faces he saw. Human personality was an open book to him.

But even without this clarity of perception the young woman's condition would have been no secret. He recognized her look as that of a hunted animal. He had seen that particular look only once before in his life, and that had been on the face of a man with whom he had been slightly acquainted. At the time it had been a puzzle to him. Later the fellow had been found murdered in an imaginative, bizarre fashion that had all the hallmarks of the Traumatic sect.

Cautiously he moved toward the girl and sat down at her table. A waiter approached. Having no money, he waved him away.

"Where are you bound?" he asked the girl. "I haven't had a chance to ask you before." She would not find the question strange: chronliners called at all nodes en route and they were now, he believed, somewhere between Nodes 4 and 5. The ship probably had two or three stops to make."

Her reaction, however, was far from reassuring. She shrank instinctively away from him. In her eyes Aton seemed to see the thought: Who is he? What does he want? Is he following me?

She's terrified of strangers, he realized.

Seeing that she was afraid to answer the question he let it pass, covering up her confusion with a stream of chitchat while he looked around the lounge, wondering who it was she was badly frightened of.

He spoke of his experiences in the Time Service, talking in such a way that few responses were required of her. He felt her eyes on his face and gradually she seemed to relax a little. If his guess was correct it would be hard for her to trust anyone, but he hoped he might inspire just a little confidence.

To test out his theory he mentioned the time he had found Traumatics aboard his ship. She gasped. He sensed her body tense, go rigid.

"They are extremely unpleasant people," he said.

She nodded dumbly.

"Listen," he said gently, "I think you ought to tell me what's worrying you."

She looked away. "Nothing's worrying me. What makes you think it is?"

"If you don't mind my saying so, it does show, enough for me to notice, at any rate. I've seen it before." He paused. It's the Traumatic sect, isn't it?"

Her lower lip trembled. She nodded again.

"Have you really seen it happen before?"

"Only once. To a friend of mine."

In a rush of words she told him everything. The three visitations, her desperate efforts to escape, to get lost. Finally her decision to migrate to another province of the empire.

He could see that it was a great relief to her to be able to tell someone. It also showed just how desperate she had become, for she could hardly imagine it was safe to talk to a stranger. Probably the uniform had helped. The Time Service was greatly esteemed. Few people knew that chronmen were perversely prone to the Traumatic heresy.

"So now you hope to settle in Revere?" -

"Yes. In Umbul, probably."

"Ah. The holy city."

"I thought that perhaps-perhaps-"

"Yes, I see." Her hopes were plain. She thought that perhaps the Traumatic sect stayed clear of Umbul, birthplace of San Hevatar, of the Church, and in fact of the whole Chronotic Empire.

He looked down somberly at his hands folded neatly on his lap. "Citizeness Sorce, I am sorry to have to tell you this but you have been doing everything the Traumatics want you to do. This is their play, part of their ritual. The sacrificial victim must not be killed outright but must be captured and allowed to escape in the nick of time—by luck or his own efforts, so he thinks. Then captured again, allowed to escape again, on and on. The purpose is to make the victim aware of his, or her, situation and of the fact that he is being hunted, so as to produce a particular psychological state. This continues until his will is entirely broken and he actually cooperates in the final ceremony."

Inpriss Sorce's brown eyes widened pleadingly. "Then I haven't shaken them off?"

"No."

"Oh!"

Her hands flew about agitatedly. Aton thought she might be near a breakdown. In that case the Traumatics would not be far behind her.

"Help me!" she cried. "Somebody must help me!"

"I'll help you. Calm yourself."

She gazed at Aton, studying his face. "You will?"

"I hate these people as much as you do."

"Is that why you're going to help me?"

"I'd help you anyway." Aton's eyes narrowed as he saw a man enter the lounge and walk to the bar with a swaggering gait. His jaw clenched.

The man was Sergeant Ouelle!

"Stay here and don't move," he told Inpriss. "I'll be back shortly."

Aton's onetime gunnery noncom uttered a grunt of startlement, his sharp face becoming a grotesque mask of disbelief, when he joined him at the bar.

"What the hell are you doing here? I thought—"

"You thought I was safely dead," Aton supplied. "More to

the point, what are you doing here?"

"Me? Why-" Quelle gave a weak, hysterical laugh. He was, Aton noticed, wearing civilian clothes. "Just taking a spot of leave, Captain. Well-deserved leave, so I thought I'd take a cruise. I've got a medal now, you know. All of us who got off Smasher of Enemies have. Except you," he added thoughtfully. He gulped down the drink he had just bought, nearly choking on it. "Did you get a reprieve, Captain?" he asked in a quavering voice. "How did you get here?"

"Suffice it to say that I am here and that I can now

remember all that took place on the Smasher of Enemies." Watching the look of agony that appeared on Quelle's face, he asked, "How many of your friends are with you?"

"Eh? I've no friends here, sir."

"You're lying. I know who you are pursuing."

Quelle's glance flicked involuntarily to Inpress Sorce, sitting and watching anxiously from across the lounge. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Perhaps Quelle was alone, Aton thought. Perhaps he was merely shadowing Inpress Sorce. Others would take over when the ship reached Umbul. But the gunnery sergeant's shiftiness and deceit was so plain that he could take nothing as certain.

"Are you going to turn me in, sir?" Quelle asked mildly, inspecting the bottles stacked against the bar.

"Yes."

"Then why haven't you done it before?" Quelle turned to him smirking. "You know what I think, Captain? I think you're an escaped prisoner. I don't know how you did it, but the fact you're here shows you did. There's a courier dispatch chamber waiting for you in Chronopolis, isn't there? Maybe I should turn you in. Because whatever you say it's still your word against the testimony of eight witnesses."

Aton stepped closer to the man. His hand darted inside Quelle's jacket. As he had expected he found a tiny beamer, small enough to fit into the palm of the hand.

No one around them had noticed his sudden move. "Let's go and see the security officer. Quelle."

Quelle stood his ground for a moment, then at an insistent nudge from Aton he reluctantly preceded him toward the exit.

Although familiar with the layout of the civilian timeship only in a general way, Aton found the security office without difficulty. Quelle made no attempt to escape or to move against him, and Aton reflected that the Traumatic had made a good point. Back in Chronopolis his own story would carry little weight. But that did not matter; somehow or other he would rescue Inpress Sorce from the Traumatic sect's attentions.

In the security office was a middle-aged, long-jawed man in the blue uniform of the Buick line. "Officer," announced Aton, "I am Captain Aton of the Third Time Fleet, and this is one of my men, Sergeant Quelle, whom I must ask you to place under close arrest. He is a criminal, a perjurer and a heretic, a member of the Traumatic sect, and is currently engaged in hounding one of your passengers with intent to murder her."

The officer looked from one man to the other, his face impassive. But behind that impassivity Aton caught feelings that were unsettling—recognition of Quelle, dismay at the whole proceeding.

"Serious charges," said the officer. "One moment, I'll call my men."

He pressed a button. Almost immediately two security guards appeared at the door. Uneasy now, Aton turned to face them.

"He has my beamer," Quelle said quickly.

A numbing, stinging shock struck Aton in the neck and spread down to his shoulders and arms. The beamer slipped from his nerveless grasp; his arms hung uselessly. He swung

around clumsily and saw the security officer holding the numb prong with which he had half-paralyzed him.

The door slammed shut. All four men crowded around Aton, pushing him back. "What on Earth happened?" the officer snarled at Ouelle.

"He knows about me," Quelle said in a surly tone. "He's supposed to be dead; we thought we'd fixed him in Chronopolis. Hulmu help me, I nearly dropped when I saw him in the passenger lounge just now."

"Does the girl know about you too?"

"I don't know."

"You'd better stay out of her way. We can't let this get to the captain."

Aton made a lunge for freedom, kicking with his feet, butting and shoving with his body. Before he could gain the door they had restrained him and held him in a corner where he panted in quiet fury.

Quelle swaggered in front of him. "It's not only the Imperial Time Service that's host to the Cult of Hulmu, Captain. We Traumatics make much use of the internodal facilities."

"What shall we do with him, Quelle?" the security officer asked.

"Maybe we could use him," one of the guards said in a caressing voice, looking over Aton in a way that was incongruous coming from the burly, blue-jowled strong-arm man.

"Don't be a fool, he hasn't been pointed."
"He's no problem," Quelle said gleefully. "He may have been my captain once, but the truth is that now he's a condemned convict who's escaped from the Courier Service. We can get rid of him without anybody asking questions."

"Good. We'll put him through the garbage chute."

Quelle cackled, eyeing Aton with undisguised hatred. "I'm sorry about this, Captain, speaking as one chronman to another. But you see how it is—dog eat dog." He darted a look at the security officer. "I hate to do this to my own superior officer, you understand."

"You traitor," breathed Aton. "You're worse than scum."

"Don't you go saying that, now." Quelle seemed genuinely hurt. "I'm a good chronman. Religion is one thing, the Time Service is another. Why, as soon as my leave is finished I'll be riding out with his Chronotic Majesty's armada!"

One of the guards checked the corridor outside to ensure it was empty. The officer gave Aton another dose of the numbprong so that he could give as little trouble as possible. Then they were dragging him along the passageway.

After a few yards they opened a gray-painted door and proceeded through narrow service passages, safe from the eyes of either passengers or crew. Aton knew that for the moment attempts at resistance were useless, and bided his time. Presently, close against the outer wall of the ship, they came to an area littered with cardboard boxes and tubs of rubbish.

The mouth of a big cylindrical chute, with a covering lid clamped shut, projected from one wall and was accompanied by several large steel levers. The two guards gripped Aton's arms tight.

"You tried to put me in the strat once, Captain," Quelle murmured. "It's my turn now, I reckon."

Aton struggled weakly. The security officer pulled on one lever; the chute's lid swung open. Aton was swung off his feet and inserted into the smelly cylinder, upon which the lid closed up over him to leave him for a moment in darkness; his feet pressing upon some further obstruction down in the chute.

Then this too, a second valve, slid open. He heard a clicking, grating noise and then the chute's hydraulic rams swept down on him, clearing the chute. He was pushed at speed through the ship's wall, through the limit of the containing orthogonal field, back into the strat.

SUPERNATURAL fire burned all around him. Looking back, Aton saw the chronliner receding into the futureward—the plusward, in chronman's jargon—direction.

The fate of anyone else thrown into the strat would have been clear. They would sink deeper and deeper into mere potentiality, into the Gulf of Lost Souls. If, as a time-courier, he had failed to reach his target that would have been his fate too, once he lost momentum.

But now he had nothing to fear from such a horrendous ending—if ending it could be called. He could move through the strat at will, by the mere wish.

His intention was to return to the chronliner where he would continue his efforts to help the Traumatics' frightened quarry, the unfortunate Inpriss Sorce. When he willed himself to follow the timeship, however, another, deeper urge in him took over and instead he moved with accelerating speed

minusward—into the past and toward Chronopolis. His sojourn aboard the chronliner had, it seemed, been but an accidental interruption of his journey.

For it was slowly becoming clear to Aton that his subconscious mind, not his waking thoughts, was controlling his destiny. His subconscious mind had discovered, under duress, the secret of time-travel. And now it was sending him, at near-courier speed, on a mission to save the empire!

To one side the shimmering leaden wall of the ortho-world flashed by. He knew that he could phase himself into that world anywhere he liked, choosing any of the millions of locations and scenes that the endless screen presented.

But he passed them all by. Prompted by his inner urgings, he had a definite destination in mind.

Chronopolis. Node 1. The Imperial Palace.

After what seemed like a long time the majestic vision of the empire's administrative center swung up before him. He sped closer, seeing it expand as upon a holo cinema screen. Then he phased himself into actual, orthogonal time.

Chapter Eight

Archivist Illus Ton Mayar, a slender wispy figure standing alongside the stocky detective Perlo Rolce, exhibited some awkwardness as he delivered his final report to Prince Vro Ixian.

When informed that the investigation he had ordered was complete, Vro had answered peevishly. "It has taken you long enough!" he snapped, turning his back on them to gaze into the holocast of the empty mausoleum.

"An undertaking of this kind does take time, Your Highness," Mayar told him apologetically. "It was with the greatest difficulty that I was able to include it in our work program. The tragic events befalling the empire have practically overloaded the capacity of the archives."

"Yes, all right. What have you to tell me?"

"Perlo Rolce's suspicion has been vindicated. The body of Princess Veaa has disappeared into a causal hiatus."

"And what is that, exactly?"

"Put simply, a dislocation in time. A failure for cause and effect to match up. In practical terms, Princess Veaa was transported to Node Six and, presumably, hidden there. Later a crack in time appeared; all events leading up to a certain point—in the city of Umbul—were wiped away. Normally this would lead to the body still being back in Chronopolis, never having been removed. Instead the effect of the nownonexistent cause remains: the body remains where it was hidden."

"But with the trail leading to it eradicated," Rolce put in. Prince Vro nodded his understanding. "All this would have seemed incredible only a short while ago. Now it seems commonplace."

Mayar murmured in agreement. The attacks from the Hegemony had intensified. Not only were whole continents undergoing existential deformation but the empire now seemed riddled with cause-and-effect cracks, some of them large enough to present enormous administrative difficulties. Sometimes it seemed to Mayar, from his unique standpoint, that the structure of time was about to come crashing down like a shattered vase.

"It's like magic," Vro said wonderingly. "She's been spirited away with no one doing it."

"That's what it amounts to, Your Highness," Rolce said

stiffly.

"Well." Vro's voice became brisker. "What can you do to find her?"

"The temporal discontinuity has been mapped, Your Highness." Mayar produced a thick scroll and opened it, laying it on the table. It was so large that it covered the whole surface.

Vro stared perplexed at the chart, written in the esoteric Chronotic symbolism used by the Achronal Archives. Mayar explained that the vertical grid bars referred to time-units, though whether to minutes, days, or months he did not say. He pointed out the jagged, wandering line that staggered through the neat layout like an earthquake crack.

"Here is the path taken by the discontinuity. Now, the issue revolves around Rolce's information that the body was secretly taken aboard the chronliner Queen of Time. Later this gilt-edged information was contradicted by the direct observation—and this has been verified by agents equipped with orthophases—that the body was not taken aboard. This anomaly suggests that time had mutated in a nonuniform way, leaving traces in the environment of both versions of history. Typical of a causal hiatus. The body is neither in Chronopolis, nor was it removed from Chronopolis. The perfect dilemma.

"Now what became of the princess during the first version? There are six stops where the Queen of Time could have off-loaded the body, presuming it was not discharged into the strat in transit. We reason that the body must have been taken off the ship before the hiatus occurred, otherwise it would still be here in Chronopolis and indeed might still be resting in the mausoleum; there would be no anomaly. On the other hand, it had probably been offboard for only a short time when the hiatus occurred. Transition from one resting place

to another would seem to offer the most likely circumstance for the dislocation of the cause-and-effect relationship."

Mayar paused to catch his breath. This argument had been worked out between himself and Rolce, and it had cost them considerable mental effort.

"Now look again at this discontinuity line," he resumed. "We find that it answers our deductions in every respect. It comes very close to intersecting the point in space and time when the chronliner was due to arrive at Umbul, Node Six. To be precise, it intersects Node Six just five hours after the *Queen of Time* docked."

"Umbul," breathed Vro. "The Holy City."

"We conclude that Umbul is where the princess was taken,

and probably is where she still lies."

"Archivist Mayar has even pinpointed the streets and buildings through which the discontinuity passed," Rolce informed in a dry voice. "It sounds incredible. Nothing, an investigator's void, and then, suddenly, clues begin again. The trail starts out of thin air."

The prince rounded on him. "You believe you can take up the trail again—in Umbul? You can find my beloved Veaa using your normal methods?"

"If our conclusions are correct, Your Highness, I feel every

confidence."

"Then you and I will both depart for Node Six, Rolce. I will order my private yacht to be readied tonight. Go, prepare yourself. Your instruments, your gadgets, whatever you will need. Can you manage it alone? Or do you need your agents?"

The detective shifted his feet. "One or two men, perhaps."
"Whatever you need. Go, now. Return as soon as you can."
With a how the detective departed. Prince Vro flung himself

With a bow the detective departed. Prince Vro flung himself into a chair and lounged there, relaxed. For the first time in many months his manner was almost cheerful.

"Well, Archivist, I hear your establishment has been moved into the strat. A wise measure, perhaps."

"It was deemed so, Your Highness."

"And so how does it feel to visit the world of we mortals?"

Prince Vro's tone was amicably sardonic; in point of fact,
Mayar found it far from pleasant. The deployment into the
strat had increased the sense of separation and isolation that
pervaded the archives. Mayar had had to conquer a very considerable fear in order to make this trip to the Imperial
Palace, and he longed to return to the safety of his vaults.

Nothing but a command from a member of the imperial family was enough to persuade him to venture forth these days.

"It feels unsettling, Your Highness. The world is in a far from happy state. It has lost stability. Who can tell what

will happen?"

"So you still feel it is all a dream, eh? Perhaps you feel you only wake from this dream when back in your archives."

"Something like that." Mayar licked his lips. "Your Highness, since you are going to accompany Perlo Rolce in the search for Princess Veaa, let me entreat you to take care. The Traumatics are highly dangerous people. They are afraid of no one."

Vro laughed. "Why, I had thought you were well on the way to becoming one yourself!"

The archivist looked puzzled. "I, Your Highness?"

"But of course! Surely you realize that all this gloomy talk of yours about time being a dream, and that only the strat is real, is part of the Traumatic heresy? That it conflicts with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity? You should be careful who you speak like that to. If Arch-Cardinal Reamoir were to—"

"I hadn't thought of it like that," Mayar muttered un-

comfortably.

"Probably, like me, you have no time for religion. And of course you avoided the misfortune of receiving a prince's education. I know every aspect of Church doctrine by heart; it was drummed into me from infancy."

"My work is more scientific than religious," Mayar admitted. "I was brought up in the tradition of the Church, of course, but I cannot say I have made a study of heresies. It

is not encouraged in a high official."

"Just as well, or you would probably be too frightened to indulge in your present freedom of thought." Vro swung a leg negligently from the arm of his chair. He seemed amused. "You are definitely heretical. Compare your frame of mind with the Church's teaching on the Holy Trinity. God is the Father, the world of orthogonal time is the Son, and the strat is the Holy Ghost, by means of which the Father creates the Son. According to the Church the orthogonal world is real, palpable, actually existing, while the strat, or Holy Ghost, is less real because it is spiritual and potential. It's sort of a median between the real world and God, who transcends reality."

"I know my catechism," Mayar muttered, a trifle put out by the lecture. Vro, however, continued. He enjoyed such discussions; although he was privately an atheist, theology fascinated him.

"Your own beliefs come closer to those of the Traumatics," he repeated to Mayar. "The world is unreal, or relatively so, and the strat is real. According to them the world is created by Hulmu, their god who dwells in the deeps of the strat, and he creates it by projecting it onto a screen, exactly as in a cinema. Its entire purpose is to comprise a sort of picture show for him. That's why their emblem of the creation is a hologram projector and why one of their ceremonial names for Hulmu is 'the Projector Operator.'"

"Strange that an organization with such horrible practices should support them with so philosophical a doctrine."

"Oh, the cult of Hulmu is not new. It is at least as old as the Church. Some say it challenged the Church for supremacy in the early days."

"You mean it sprang from an independent source?" Mayar frowned. "I always thought it was founded by renegades."

"The origin of the Traumatic sect isn't quite clear," Prince Vro admitted. "But the Church's doctrine has been modified over the years. In the beginning it was somewhat closer to the Traumatic beliefs. God was deemed to dwell in the uttermost depths of the strat. The Holy Order of the Chronotic Knights even organized deep-diving expeditions to try to find God, but they all came to grief. Later the Church's theology became more sophisticated and now it is taught that God cannot be found in any direction accessible to a timeship. Seeking for him by entering the deeps of time is regarded as a trap for the ignorant, for it harbors not God but the Evil One."

"Hulmu."

Vro nodded. "Officially the Traumatics are devil-worshipers. Hulmu is identified with the Adversary. It's rather interesting that even the Church doesn't dismiss the sect as simple foolishness. In the Church's eyes Hulmu really exists, though he deludes his followers into believing him to be the creator."

"Then the soul of Princess Veaa is in mortal danger," mumbled Mayar, and instantly regretted his words.

Vro's face clouded over. "Yes, Archivist," he said softly.

"But I may yet save her. Like a knight of old, armed and ready. I shall go forth into the future!"

Aton materialized behind a pillar in the main court of the inner sanctum.

While vectoring in on the spot he had glimpsed the multitudinous activities of the palace. He glimpsed Emperor Philipium himself, holding audience with nobles, ministers, civil servants, and military commanders.

The court itself had an air of tension and excitement, as though something was about to happen. Aton stepped into the open, looking about the sumptuous place with interest. There was much coming and going. All around him was the buzz of conversation.

Accustomed to a more austere life, Aton found the color and luxury disconcerting. He was wondering how to achieve his object—an audience with the emperor—when an oval-faced young woman wearing the tiara of an Ixian princess caught him by the arm.

"Good evening, Captain. You're new here, aren't you?"

Hastily Aton bowed, frantically trying to place her from pictures he had seen of the imperial family. The trouble was that it was so large. But he thought he recognized her as Princess Mayora, one of the emperor's own children.

"Are you going to be with the armada?" she asked, not

"Are you going to be with the armada?" she asked, not giving him time to speak. "But of course you are! A handsome fellow like you wouldn't let himself be left behind. Isn't it exciting? To fight for one's religion!" Her eyes sparkled.

Aton was about to frame a reply when a hush fell on the

Aton was about to frame a reply when a hush fell on the gathering. Through the padded doors came a procession; the emperor, noticeably tottering and with his right arm shaking visibly, was partly supported by servants. Behind him walked some of the dignitaries with whom he had recently been conferring. Close to the emperor, like an ever-present shadow, was Arch-Cardinal Reamoir, head of the Church. Something like triumph was on the arch-cardinal's face. Philipium's eyes, too, displayed a beady, unnatural brightness.

Everyone present bowed.

Philipium's weak, reedy voice rose to address the court. "Our tribulations soon will be at an end," he announced. "All vessels of the armada have successfully finished their trials and are fully provisioned. In a few days the enterprise will begin!"

His words were greeted with cheering and applause. Philipium advanced through the great chamber, a path spontaneously appearing before him, until he faced the gold panel that took up a large section of one wall.

"Imperator! Grant us audience!"

The gold panel slid up. From out of the deep recess the massive machine-emperor slid out on its castors.

Aton stared, entranced. So this was the *Imperator*, the enigmatic construct that stood even higher than the emperor himself in the exercise of authority. And yet Aton had never heard of a single edict that had issued from it. In practical terms most people believed the *Imperator*'s power to be nominal only.

Philipium repeated his words to the humming machine. "Give us your approval of this plan," he added. "Confirm its outcome, that our confidence may be justified."

The humming sound emanating from the *Imperator* intensified and broadened, changing into a vibrant baritone voice.

"The enemy of the empire grows powerful. The struggle will ensue."

Silence.

"Speak on, mighty Imperator!" Philipium urged. "Grant us the wisdom of my fathers!"

This time a grating tone entered into the magnificent voice. It spoke falteringly, as if in distress.

"The struggle will ensue!"

"In your omniscience, grant us the boon of knowing that the outcome is certain, *Imperator*."

But already the crenellated structure was retreating into its interior chamber. The gold panel slid down into place.

"Well, what do you make of that, Reamoir?" Philipium turned to his confessor, a frown on his narrow features.

"The Imperator is always cryptic, Majesty," Reamoir murmured, "but one thing is without doubt: it instructs us to continue with our plan."

"Yes, that is so. That is so."

Philipium was assisted to a throne, cushioned and molded so as to give comfort to his weak frame, where he reclined, speaking occasionally to those who approached him.

The chatter of the court started up again. Aton turned to Princess Mayora and in his urgency was nearly insubordinate enough to seize her by the arm. "Your Highness, I must speak with your father. Will you help me?"

"What is this?" She smiled at him gaily. "You have a petition? You are most importunate." She leaned closer, becoming a shade more serious. "Have a care. Father can be a crotchety old thing and is sometimes impatient with trifles."

"This is no trifle, Your Highness. I cannot put the matter through the proper channels. But as an officer of the Time Service I feel it my duty..." He trailed off, realizing the impossibility of explaining who he was and how he had got here. "If you could but help me into His Majesty's presence I will risk the rest myself," he murmured.

Somewhat curious, she sauntered toward the throne, beckoning him to follow. As they came near, he heard the emperor talking to his eldest son, the future emperor Philipium II.

"Not two hours ago a courier arrived from the dispatching station at Barek—from Commander Haight, no less, who put in there en route to Chronopolis. He has returned without the distorter but with the offer of a truce from the Hegemonics. It seems they want to parley for peace. That's a good sign they know how hopeless their situation is."

Philipium II laughed. It was a reedy, dry laugh. He had inherited his father's manner of speech, as he had much else about him. "Rather late for that now!"

The emperor nodded with satisfaction. "No doubt our retaliatory attacks have taught them what's in store for them. Also they must have gained some intelligence concerning the might of our armada." He frowned. "Haight discovered something about the distorter, too, but we shall have to wait until he arrives here for his full report."

Aton and the princess were now mingling with the courtiers surrounding the throne. Boldly Aton stepped forward to confront the emperor and prince.

"Your Chronotic Majesty!" he said in a loud voice.

Both men turned to look at him. Philipium II appeared cold and supercilious, the emperor merely startled.

For one instant Aton looked into his ruler's tired, feverish eyes and knew that his mission stood no chance of success. Behind those eyes was . . . nothing. The emperor was dead inside. There was nothing but bigotry, prejudice, set patterns of thought. Even if Aton were to persuade him of the truth

of his story, which seemed unlikely, nothing at this stage could possibly cause him to alter his decision.

Aton glanced from him to the younger Philipium, and again from him to Arch-Cardinal Reamoir, hovering as always by the emperor's side. As before he found that his new perceptions laid bare their inner natures. In Philipium II there was only a blind arrogance that was a sort of later version of his father's unctuous religious humility. And in Reamior there was ambition of truly shocking proportions: ambition that was prepared to sacrifice whole worlds, to cheat, lie, and kill in the pursuit of personal and religious aims.

He stood, tongue-tied and white-faced, as the awful reali-

zation struck him.

"What is it, young man?" Philipium said sharply. "Who are you?"

"Captain Aton of the Third Time Fleet, Your Majesty."
"Then you should be helping defend the frontier. On leave, are you? Why?"

". . . The action for Gerread, Your Majesty" Aton said

after a momentary effort.

"Ah, yes. Take courage, young man. Eventually we shall regain Gerread, together with all the other possessions that have been lost since."

An official slid through the circle and murmured something in the emperor's ear, who then turned and began a conversation with someone else. No one took any notice of Aton. His rude intrusion had been forgotten.

Princess Mayora accosted him as he slipped away. "Well,

I don't think much of that!"

"I suddenly realized how foolish my course of action was," Aton said ruefully.

"Rather belatedly, don't you think?" The princess eyed him with growing inquisitiveness. "What was your petition? Can I help?"

"I think not, Your Highness."

Awkwardly aware of his bad manners, Aton made a perfunctory bow and walked stiffly away. He felt desolated. Here was the center of the empire and everyone around him was hell-bent on destruction. Impending calamity was tolling like a great bell.

It seemed that his mission was impossible.

Or almost impossible.

Hours later the court chamber was deserted and in half darkness. A shadow slipped through that darkness, pausing and listening to the sleep of the huge palace.

At length Aton stopped before the dully gleaming gold

sheet that hid the Imperator.

He had spent the intervening time wandering through the inner sanctum or just sitting brooding in one of the libraries there. No one questioned his presence. It was assumed that anyone who had managed to enter the sanctum had a perfect right to be there.

"Imperator," he called in a hoarse voice, afraid to speak too loudly in case he was heard from outside the chamber.

"A loval servant seeks audience."

He had no idea whether the machine-emperor would respond to any voice but Philipium's. But it was worth a try.

Nothing happened, and he called again. "Imperator. The

empire is in danger!"

Miraculously the golden panel withdrew toward the ceiling. From the dark cave came the whine of an engine and the rumble of castors. The Imperator rolled majestically into view, a strange sheen playing over its matt surface. A scarcely visible light seemed to flicker between its four corner towers.

"Who has dared approach?" Although its thrilling full-

bodied voice was at low volume it seemed nevertheless to fill

the hall.

The experience of facing the Imperator alone was strange and frightening. The machine radiated charisma. Aton became conscious of how it stood in relation to the empire, and he felt small and insignificant.

"I am Captain Mond Aton," he said. "Late of the Third

Time Fleet."

The Imperator hummed and clicked. "Sentenced to death for cowardice and dereliction of duty. Placed at the disposal of the Courier Service. Dispatched to the receipt of Commander Haight on the thirtieth day of the fifth month of this vear."

"The facts are as you state, Imperator. However I am still alive, as you can see."

"Poor little tool of broken time . . ."

"Imperator, I have just returned from the Hegemony." Aton launched into his tale, describing Commander Haight's experiment, their meeting with the Hegemonic ministers, and his subsequent discovery of his new powers. Throughout, the *Imperator* made no interruption except for the continuous humming that swelled and feeded in volume.

Finally, with complete frankness, Aton related the intransigence of the emperor and of the advisers who surrounded him. "You are mightier even than the emperor, *Imperator*," he said. "Command that the empire make peace. Draw back from this suicidal course.

"All must be as it has been."

Aton puzzled over the words. He had heard that the Imperator rarely expressed itself in plain speech.

"The enemy of the empire is the enemy of mankind," said the *Imperator*. "Fight, Aton. The power is yours alone."

"Imperator, I do not understand you. Can you not explain what I am to do? Your meaning is not clear."

"We live in dreams and walk in sleep. All that is real is unreal."

Suddenly Aton heard footsteps behind him. Approaching out of the gloom came a young man wearing a short cloak of deep purple. The face was that of an Ixian, but unlike most of that brood, the eyes had a steady percipience and the man's whole bearing an uncharacteristic lack of vanity. As he came closer Aton recognized Prince Vro.

"An incredible story!" said the prince.

"You heard?"

"Forgive my eavesdropping," the other said with a shrug. "I merely happened to be passing. It was a scene I could not resist. Yes, I listened to every word."

A rumble caused Aton to whirl around. The *Imperator* was withdrawing into its chamber. The golden panel closed and left them in silence.

"I must say I think you're wasting your time petitioning that machine in there," the prince told him affably. "Nobody has ever got any sense out of it, and in my opinion never will for the simple reason that our much-vaunted *Imperator* is quite insane."

Aton must have looked shocked, for Prince Vro laughed softly. "Well, is it any wonder, my friend? Infused with the brains of all the emperors? If my father is anything to go by, it must consist of lunacy piled on lunacy."

He clapped Aton on the back. "We are somewhat exposed here. I was on my way to supervise the readying of my time-

vacht, in preparation for a certain romantic quest. Come with me. Afterward we can talk in my quarters."

With a last despairing look at the Imperator's dwelling, Aton followed.

PRINCE VRO's chill and morbid apartment intensified still further Aton's feeling of desperation. While looking over the

yacht the prince had explained his great loss to him, describing the steps he was taking to recover his beloved. Yet despite the prince's bizarre preoccupation, Aton saw him for a man of rare intelligence by the standards of the

Imperial Palace. It was a relief to be able to talk to him.

"Hmm. This certainly explains the rule about the disposal of couriers," Vro remarked, lounging in an easy chair and dividing his attention between Aton and the empty sarcophagus in the wall hologram. "Evidently people exposed to the strat are liable to develop a natural time-traveling ability. The Church wouldn't like that."

"Then that means I'm not the first," Aton pointed out. "The phenomenon must already be known. Where are the others?"

"It is, no doubt, a closely guarded Church secret," Vro said. "Chronmen who are pulled out of the strat are generally put in the care of secluded monasteries and are never heard of again. Officially that's because they're mentally deranged. Now we know there's more to it, eh, Captain? We can be sure eare is taken to see they never realize their powers. You'd better watch your step or you might find yourself forciby enlisted as a monk." Vro smiled faintly.

Aton reflected, "Did you mean what you said about the Imperator?" he asked.

"Of course. It's a demented machine, no more. That's why it's only a figurehead. My father can't quite believe it's not rational, of course. He treats it as a totem and consults it

from time to time. But it never says anything meaningful." "Then will you help me, Your Highness?" Aton pleaded earnestly. "You, at least, seem to understand what the present situation will lead to. Can you not try to persuade your father?"

"I?" Prince Vro chuckled, "Affairs of state are far from my interests."

"But how can you ignore them at a time like this?"

"I care only for my beloved Veaa," Vro said, gazing pitifully into the mausoleum, "Let the world perish, it's nothing to me."

Aton sighed deeply.

"As for my father the emperor and his enterprise against the Hegemony," Vro went on, "that old lunatic could never be moved by anything I say to him anyway. I have not spoken to him for three years, yet he still expects me to command a wing of the armada! He will be disappointed. I shall not be here. I shall be away, into the future, to rescue my beloved

and make her mine again!" Without warning a change came over Vro's face. He leaped to his feet and appeared to be listening intently.
"What is it?" asked Aton in alarm.

"Can vou not sense it?"

Aton became quiet and indeed did seem to sense something. A swelling that was inside him and outside him, in the air, in everything. Then he momentarily blacked out. When he came to, he was aware of a loss of consciousness lasting a split second.

Prince Vro went rushing about the room examining everything, peering into the mausoleum, studying his face in a mirror.

"What happened?" Aton asked in a subdued voice.

"That's the third time they've got through. Nothing's changed here anyway. But then, I wouldn't remember . . . not unless the change was discontinuous, perhaps not even then."

"The Hegemonics? They can strike even here?"

Vro nodded. "Usually they are beaten off, occasionally they manage to focus their projector for a second or two. Chronopolis has undergone a few minor changes, so the Achronal Archives tell us. I wonder what it is this time." His lips twisted wryly. "It could be for the best, Maybe my father has had some sense mutated into him."

This revelation of how hard the Hegemonics were attacking was the most depressing thing Aton had met with so far, He laid his chin on his hands, thinking deeply.

At length he decided upon something which had been brewing in his mind, but which he had not dared to think about up until now.

"You can see why my father is so keen to get the armada

under way," Vro remarked. "Much more of this and there won't be any empire left."

"But once the armada is launched everything will get worse!" Aton protested. "Both sides will let loose with everything they've got. The Hegemonics will use the time-distorter at full aperture!"

Vro did not seem interested. "What are you going to do now, Captain? You ought to give it some thought. It's dangerous for you here. Once someone realizes who you are they'll make short work of you."

"I haven't stopped trying yet. The emperor won't listen to me. The *Imperator* won't. There's still someone left."

"Who?"

"San Hevatar!"

Vro grunted. "Him! What do you expect him to do?"

"I don't know. The whole empire springs from him. Perhaps he can change everything. Perhaps he could even suppress the invention of time-travel."

"And wipe out the empire from the beginning?" Vro's voice was soft with awe.

There was a tight pain in Aton's chest. When he spoke, his tone was leaden. "It sounds strange, doesn't it? I, a committed servant of the empire, talking of annulling the empire. The ultimate in treachery. But I can see no other way. It is not just the empire that's at stake now, it's mankind, perhaps time itself. Mad the *Imperator* may be, but one thing it said is true: the enemy of the empire is the enemy of mankind. Perhaps madmen—or mad machines—can see clearly what saner men cannot."

"Your vision is certainly grandiose."

"With no communication through time each node would live separately, undisturbed. There would be no Chronotic Empire, but neither would there be any time-distorter, any Chronotic war, any strain on the fabric of time. Who can say what will remain when it finally rents open?"

"And no Holy Church," Vro reminded him. "I wonder what San Hevatar will have to say to that."

Aton turned to him. "You tell me you are heading for Node Six in the morning, Highness. Have you room for me aboard your yacht? Can you drop me off in the hinterland?"

"I thought you could travel through time at will."

"Not quite at will. I have already tried. It seems my nervous

system only asserts the ability during an emergency, or under certain kinds of duress."

"Well, it seems the least I can do," Prince Vro murmured, "to aid in the annihilation of the empire."

Chapter Nine

THE ORIGIN of the Chronotic Empire was, to some extent, obscured in the haze of recurrent time. It had taken place at a point in time that now lay between Node 5 and Node 6—between Barek and Revere—about fifty years into the hinterland of Node 5. But two nodes had swept over the spot since the earth-shaking discovery attributed to San Hevatar. The empire had had three hundred years or more of nodal time, as apart from static historical or orthogonal time, in which to establish itself.

And during that nodal time the soul of San Hevatar had, of course, traversed his life several times, as had that of everyone around him. The world in which he lived had changed much in the course of those repetitions. The original San Hevatar would not have recognized it. Largely because of his own efforts, he was now born into a world where time-travel and the empire were already facts.

Most history books inferred that the Ixian family had already been the rulers of Umbul when San Hevatar placed the secret of time-travel at their disposal. Prince Vro told Aton, however, that he believed this to be a distortion of the truth. It was unlikely that the city of Umbul itself had existed in the beginning. As far as he could judge, the Ixians had been not kings or rulers, but the owners of a giant industrial and research conglomerate where San Hevatar had worked as a scientist. They had seized their chance to indulge their wildest ambitions, conquering past centuries, always moving pastward, where the technology was inferior to their own.

For his part San Hevatar had been a man with a vision. He had given a religious meaning to his discoveries and had found the past a fertile ground for his teachings. He had founded the Holy Church, thus giving the burgeoning Chronotic Empire a unifying culture.

Eventually the Ixians had realized that, once it was let loose on mankind, time-travel, which they had used so successfully, could also work against their interests. It would be particularly dangerous if time-travelers were to penetrate the empire's rear, traveling into the past beyond the empire's control and working changes there—changes which inevitably would influence the present in ways not planned by the Historical Office. They determined to fix a date in time beyond which time-travel could not be introduced. To this end the stupendous Stop Barrier had been built, consuming one-third of the imperial budget and rendering the past impenetrable to time-travelers. One day it too would be moved back to bring yet more of history under the empire's control, but for the moment it remained both the pastward limit on the empire's expansion and its rearward protection.

Umbul, on the other hand, was much too close to the futureward frontier to be entirely safe from marauders from the future. A new imperial capital, Chronopolis, had been built close to the Stop Barrier, at what was designated Node 1 (although now another node, Node 0, lay between it and the barrier), protected by nearly the full extent of the empire.

So San Hevatar, prophet and God's special servant, now lived a life of relative quietude away from the mainstream of events. But he continued, in each repetition of his life, to make the crucial discovery of how to move mass through time, paradoxically even while the evidence of that discovery was all around him before he had made it. It was as if his inner being performed this act as a sacred rite: the central, essential rite of the Church.

Captain Aton meditated on all this as Prince Vro's yacht crossed Node 5. "Where in San Hevatar's life cycle would you like to intervene?" Prince Vro asked him politely.

It would be no use approaching the prophet when he was an eager young man, Aton thought. Someone on the verge of a momentous discovery would hardly be persuaded to abandon it. Aton needed to talk to a man who had had time to reflect, who would be old enough to make a sober judgment.

"At about fifty years of age," Aton requested.

"So late? That is a quarter of a century after the gift of time-travel. If your object is to annul the empire I would

have thought, perhaps, a few decades earlier."

"That is not really my object," Aton said with a smile. "It would, after all, be asking too much. But if San Hevatar were, perhaps, to appear at Chronopolis and speak against the war, then I am sure his word would carry more weight than that of all the emperors put together."

"Maybe. If His Eminence Arch-Cardinal Reamoir does not

declare him a heretic!" Vro laughed caustically.

The cabin of Prince Vro's yacht was not large (nearly all the vehicle's mass being taken up by its powerful drive unit) and with six passengers, three of whom were Perlo Rolce's assistants, Vro had been obliged to dispense with his crew and attend to both navigation and piloting himself. He typed some instructions into the yacht's computer and made adjustments in accordance with the figures it gave.

Rolce and his men, trying not to appear inquisitive, kept glancing at Aton surreptitiously. They could hardly believe what was happening.

The yacht slowed down as it approached Aton's target. Vro

became fretful.

"I am at a loss to know where to phase into ortho," he said. "To tell the truth I am reluctant to do so at all. As you know, civilian timeships are forbidden to materialize anywhere between nodes, and I am keen not to make myself obtrusive. I'm afraid I shall have to land you someplace quiet, Captain, and that could put you many hundreds of miles from San Hevatar."

A strange look came to Aton's face. "There's no need to phase in at all," he told Vro. "Just open the cabin door and let me out."

Perlo Rolce surged to his feet, his hard face displaying most uncharacteristic shock. "Your Highness!" He and his staff plainly thought Aton was insane.

Prince Vro waved him back. "It's all right, Rolce. We know what we're doing." But even he looked at Aton in a puzzled, doubting way.

"You're sure?"

"As sure as a swimmer knows he can enter the water."

Vro went to a cupboard and took out a flat boxlike gadget attached to a belt. "You'd better take this orthophase."

"Thank you, although I'm not sure I shall need it." Aton strapped the device around his waist.

Returning to the pilot's seat, Prince Vro watched the computer countdown while glancing at a small strat screen. "Right. We're about there."

"You'd all better face the wall," Aton advised. "Open the door, Your Highness."

Vro tapped out the safety sequence on the computer keyboard. With a hum the door slid open. Beyond it, outside the ortho field, the strat billowed and swirled.

Aton steeled himself and leaped right into it.

After the door had closed again the five men remaining in the cabin turned and stared after him, not speaking.

THE MANSE of San Hevatar lay in a great park in the southwest of the city of Umbul: a quieter, more sedate Umbul than it would be at Node 6 a hundred and twenty years hence. The park was dotted with shrines and religious monuments. The approach road that wound through the town was lined with churches, and that stretch of it that crossed the park was strewn every day with rose petals by order of the local bishop.

For all its magnificence the manse itself still bore traces of the research laboratory from which it had been converted. The limestone cupolas floated in places above rectilinear structures of glass and steel. An outhouse contained the powerful transformers, fed by underground cable, that had once provided energy for the scientists' experiments.

Like a ghost Aton observed all this as he approached from the strat. He phased into orthogonal time in a circular lobby, paved with mosaics, surrounded by balconies, and surmounted by a dome of frosted vellow glass.

The murmur of voices came from one side. Padding toward the sound, Aton found himself peering through the open door of a chapel. Two figures knelt before the altar, one wearing the prophet's mitre permitted to San Hevatar alone. The other was an older man, perhaps seventy, a small bent figure with a wrinkled face and bushy eyebrows.

Aton could not hear the words of the prayer or service which San Hevatar was intoning with feverish intentness. The older man was acting as his assistant, speaking the responses and holding a chalice of holy wine into which the prophet dipped his fingers, anointing both himself and the other.

Presently their business was finished. Both men stood, San Hevatar straightening his voluminous cope, and came away from the altar. It was then that San Hevatar saw Aton. He strode toward him.

"An officer of the Time Service!" he said wonderingly. "And may I ask how you got in here? No permissions were given for today, and I have been informed of no unwarranted intrusions."

"I made my own way here, Your Holiness. I have journeyed through time to see you. I feel that the information I have is so important that you must hear it."

San Hevatar looked about him. "You came through time? I see no timeship. I still do not understand how you entered my manse unobserved."

"I came by my own power, Your Holiness. My brain has learned to propel me through the substratum."

San Hevatar's eyebrows rose. He indicated a door to his left. "In here. We will talk."

WHEN Aton had finished, San Hevatar's expression changed not at all.

"Your power is not entirely unknown," he murmured. "It was at one time the Church's intention to create a body of time-traveling sainted knights. But the gift is unreliable. One cannot initiate it at will. Conversely one never knows when it will spontaneously show itself. It appears to answer to the subconscious mind, not to one's thinking self. In that respect it resembles other legendary powers of the saints, such as levitation, the ability to talk to animals, and so on."

"That is what I have found, Your Holiness."

"And that is why the Church has kept it a secret. Anything that cannot be controlled is dangerous. There is another reason also. You must beware, Captain."

"Holiness?"

"All chronmen fear the strat. You may think you have conquered that fear because you believe yourself safe in it. You are not. Eventually your power will fail and the strat will claim you. You will drown in the Gulf of Lost Souls, as have others who thought they had become supermen."

Already Aton was beginning to feel that he would be disappointed for the third time. Even in middle age San

Hevatar's face was striking. Full, sensuous lips, large soulful eyes, and an appearance of enormous self-collectedness that was somehow selfish rather than benevolent. It was the face of a fanatic. Aton could already guess what was coming.

"Your Holiness, the matter I have touched upon. You must agree that the Church, the empire, everything that has been achieved stands to be destroyed if the war continues. Instruct your Church in the foolishness of this Armageddon. The emperor is a deeply religious man; he would obey any command that came from you."

San Hevatar smirked ever so slightly. He turned and glanced at the aged assistant who also sat with them, as though sharing some private joke with him.

"Have you so little faith?" he said quietly. "The Church, the empire cannot—must not—be destroyed. It is eternal. The armada is God's plan. The Evil One must be fought. Mankind must be saved."

As he uttered the last words San Hevatar seemed to find speech increasingly difficult. To Aton's amazement he passed his hand over his eyes and seemed to be in distress, rocking to and fro.

"Fight the enemy of mankind, Captain Aton!" he gasped as though in a trance. "Conquer his minion! All is not as it seems!"

Aton was fascinated to hear the prophet coming out with words almost identical to those of the *Imperator*. Then San Hevatar seemed to recover himself and become once more self-composed. He stood up.

"Your concern, though bordering on the heretical, is commendable," he said smoothly, as though unaware of his words of a moment before. "It deserves a reward. It would be possible for me to have your sentence of death commuted. We have a certain monastery where by means of certain techniques your dangerous gift can be unlearned and your nervous system returned to normal. Of course, it would be necessary for you to pass the rest of your life in seclusion, as a monk. You know too much to be returned to public life." He nodded. "Spend the night here and think it over. Rilke will look after you."

Suddenly Aton said, "What do you know about a man with jewels for eyes?"

He did not know why the image had come to his mind so abruptly, but the prophet's mouth opened and his face went ashen.

"You have met him?" Already?"

"Yes."

San Hevatar's expression closed up. He reminded Aton of an insulted woman as he swept from the chamber, his long cope rustling.

The old man regarded Aton for long moments with tired eyes. "My name's Dwight Rilke," he said, standing and offering his hand. "Come along with me, I'll find you a room."

Aton had slept for a number of hours when he was awakened by the sound of the door opening. He sat up on the bed. The light came on.

Dwight Rilke entered the room. He looked stooped, defeated, and very tired.

"What is it?" Aton asked.

Rilke came close and licked his lips before speaking in a dry, ancient voice.

"I had to speak to you, Captain. Listen, you may not have convinced Hevatar earlier, but you sure as hell have convinced me."

"Oh?"

"I was Hevatar's assistant, you know."

"So I see."

"I don't mean in a religious sense. In the scientific sense. We were on the project together."

"The project?"

"That's right. Follow me, would you? I want to show you something."

Aton rose and dressed quickly. He followed Rilke through the passages and courtyards of the still brightly illuminated manse. Here and there cowled monks and comforters stood guard, some of them wearing handguns strapped over their habits. Rilke ignored them, however, and halted before a door apparently made of lead. He took a big iron key from under his cloak and inserted it in a keyhole in the door jamb. The door swung open.

"Here you are. This is where it all began."

They entered what Aton realized, after first taking in the profusion of heavy-duty equipment, was a high-energy physics research laboratory. He experienced an overwhelming awe to think that this was the center point of the whole empire.

Carefully Rilke closed the door behind him.

"So this is where San Hevatar discovered the secret of timetravel!" Aton breathed reverently.

"Him? He didn't discover it," Rilke told him flatly, I did." Aton stared at him blankly. "You?"

"Hevatar developed it, but I made the initial discovery." Rilke's face softened, and he began to reminisce. "We were a team. Hevatar was the leader, Absol Humbart and myself were his chief assistants. There was a lot more equipment here in those days. There were particle accelerators, high-energy plasma chambers, and so forth. But we weren't even thinking of time-travel then. We never dreamed it was possible. We were investigating the nuclear binding force of baryons, that was all. One day I thought of a new way to isolate pi-mesons. When I set up the apparatus, by chance a surge gate malfunctioned and there was a sudden rush of power. Suddenly I found-I had discovered a way to accelerate pi-mesons faster than light."

The old man looked around the laboratory as if remembering. "It was an accident, a million-to-one shot. From then on, Hevatar took over. Naturally he grabbed something like that with both hands, and he explored it from all angles. Before long he had discovered the most important consequence of the effect I had produced: that it could be used to move mass through time. From then on there was no stopping him. He takes all the credit for it now, of course, but none of it would have happened if I hadn't carried out that one experiment."

"You must feel proud."

"Do I? For a long time I did. But lately it frightens me. We get all the news here; we're privileged in that respect. History is being ripped apart. It's like seeing the end of the universe, but no one seems to realize that time itself can collapse and no one wants to stop it. I opened a real Pandora's box when I made that experiment. And when you came this afternoon I realized that everything had gone too far."

"What happened to this other man—Absol Humbart? Is he dead?"

Rilke turned away and muttered something Aton could barely catch. "We've spoken of him already. Let's not go into that."

Aton reflected bitterly that of the only two people to share his view of the situation, one was too obsessed with his insane love for a corpse to care and the other was this weary old

"I'm glad you agree with me," he told Rilke, "but there seems little we can do."

"There's something I can do. Something I can try, at least. I can go back in time, prevent any of it from happening."

"You can do that?"

Rilke led him to a large dull-brown cabinet that at first Aton had taken to be a cupboard. "This is a functional time-machine. The very first, in fact." He opened the door. Inside Aton saw seats, a control panel.

"You really think you stand a chance of influencing Heva-

tar's-or your own-younger self?"

Rilke's smile was wintry. "Hevatar has never been influenced by anyone. As for myself, I was an eager young pup and I certainly wouldn't have passed up the chance to make a crucial discovery, not for anyone. Besides, there's something you need to understand. My story would sound like a wild fairy tale. We didn't know anything about the empire in those days."

Bewildered, Aton tried to grasp what he meant. "How

could anyone not know about the empire?"

"Time has been changed a lot, remember. Past, present, and future have all been changed. But concerning one thing the empire and the Church are very careful. They are careful to preserve the vital event that led to the creation of the empire. San Hevatar and myself were brought up under special conditions and not even allowed to know that time-travel already existed. We worked for the same company, Monolith Industries, which presumably we had worked for before anything was changed. Once we had unearthed that one secret, how the time-drive works, everything was gradually revealed to us. We could scarcely believe it. Even now it seems like a dream."

"It's logical," Aton commented. "The Historical Office would want to avoid paradoxes in anything as important as that. But you mentioned another assistant, Absol Humbart. Presumably he was put through this procedure too?"
"Did I mention Absol Humbart? No, he wasn't there,"

Rilke said vaguely. "Maybe he was in the earlier repetitions."

The point didn't seem worth pursuing. "So what do you propose to do?" Aton asked.

The old man produced a heavy hand beamer from under his cloak. "Kill myself," he said simply. "It's the only way.

Kill the young Rilke before he makes that experiment on isolating pi-mesons, then none of this can happen. There'll be no empire, no Chronotic wars. The world will be as it was before time-travel was invented."

"And how was that, do you think?"

"I don't know. Nobody seems to know anymore."

"Your devotion to a cause is remarkably single-minded."

"Somebody has to do something. I can't think of any other way, and besides I'm really responsible for what's happening." His face creased. "It's taken me six hours to reach this decision. Now I've taken it, I know what to do."

"Paradoxes," Aton murmured. "If you kill your earlier self,

then you'll no longer be alive to kill yourself."

"We'll just have to let that sort itself out." Rilke jutted out his jaw ruminatively.

"Why have you taken the trouble to tell me all this?"

"Piloting the machine is a two-man job. One to navigate, one to steer. If anything happens to me you'll still be able to get back, though. It's programmed to retrace its course automatically."

"If you succeed," Aton mused, "there won't be any question of coming back. There'll be no time-travel. As a matter of fact, I probably won't exist. Few people now living will."

"True. Well, what about it?"

Dwight Rilke's self-sacrifice did not surprise Aton or occasion any particular admiration in him. The issues at stake were so awesome that the fate of any individual shrank to insignificance. Rilke was clearly not aware, however, of the other side of the coin; if the world returned to its original state, humanity would become extinct anyway in a few hundred years.

But, in fact, Aton was certain that the reversion would not be anything like as complete as the aged scientist imagined; otherwise he would not for a moment have contemplated letting Rilke carry out the scheme. Rilke's understanding of Chronotic mutations was evidently crude and simplistic. He did not realize that the original world had been so deeply erased that it could probably never reappear. Something else, resembling it in many features perhaps, would assemble itself out of the jumble the Chronotic Empire had made of time.

Which meant there was a good chance the annihilatory war that had made a desert of Earth would never take place. Mankind would survive even without time-travel.

"All right, I'll be your navigator he told Rilke. "But it's your show."

He followed Rilke into the narrow cabin and examined the controls. They were antiquated, but he recognized them as the forerunners of the timeship controls he was used to.

Rilke closed the door and busied himself preparing for the journey. The drive unit started up with a whine, and Aton realized it was more powerful than he had first thought.

He studied the navigator screen. Rilke, mumbling to himself, phased them into the strat.

THE UMBUL of Node 6 was a place of slender towers whose smooth walls, straddled at the base, curved up to end in knife-edge peaks. It was a place of boulevards and curiously intricate passages that wound around the base legs of the soaring buildings. Inpriss Sorce ran through these passages in blind panic.

She had been in Umbul for a day and a half, during which she had not slept. She had found nowhere to live, nowhere to earn money. She had been too busy running.

On the chronliner she had searched desperately for the handsome young Time Service officer who had promised to help her. He was nowhere to be found and she could think of only one explanation: the Traumatics had already murdered him. Neither had she seen the man he had left the passenger lounge with.

But the officer's warning was not lost on her. The Traumatics were playing cat-and-mouse with her. She could not escape them and they would kill her when they were ready.

When the chronliner docked she had fled into the city. She soon discovered there was nowhere she could go. As she stepped off the disembarkation ramp a man had emerged from the crowd and smiled at her.

It had been Rol Stryne!

She had run past him, but he hadn't tried to stop her. Since then either he or the other man, Velen, had seemed to appear everywhere.

Now her nerve had finally cracked. She ran up to strangers in the street. "Help me, please help me!" But they shouldered off her hysterical pleas. Once or twice she mentioned the Traumatics, but that only made the response even more hostile. The Traumatics were a secret power, here in Umbul

as elsewhere, and there was scarcely a citizen who would knowingly cross them.

Inpriss collapsed on to a bench, sobbing.

A man sat down beside her.

"You see, baby, it just isn't any good to fight it. Go along with it, it's better that way."

She looked up openmouthed into the lean, predatory face of Stryne.

"You just have to cooperate," he told her soothingly. "Then the hunt will be over."

Suddenly she was like a rabbit hypnotized by a stoat. Her eyes were glazed. "You want me to come with you willingly," she said in a flat, empty voice. "That's why you let me go before. Because I wasn't willing."

"That's right, honey. You understand now." He flashed a knowing glance at Velen, who was standing nearby, and made a signal to the helpers, who had been keeping track of the woman for them and were hovering in the background, to disperse.

She had broken and would obey them. Stryne knew how to recognize the signs. In a way he was slightly regretful it was ending so soon. Many victims kept up the chase for years. He knew of one, a man, who had been pursued for two decades before submitting.

"Hulmu is the only true reality, sweetheart. You'll find that out soon. You're going to him."

She closed her eyes.

"Come on, Inpriss. Let's go."

Meekly she rose and walked with the two men, clutching her satchel. She was in the grip of something she had never felt before: a resignation so strong it overpowered her. It wasn't as if they had broken her will. It was as if her will had changed, so that she agreed with what they were going to do to her, simply because she couldn't see any other future.

"You see, honey, by the time we get to this stage we're doing you a favor," Stryne told her as they walked. "Just imagine if we didn't sacrifice you for some reason or another. Every time your life repeated you'd have to go through all this again. But this way your life won't repeat. Your soul will go to Hulmu. You'll never have to endure the pursuit again."

"Where are we going to do it?" Velen asked eagerly. "Somewhere nice and quiet? We could hire a hotel room."

"We have to go to the main temple," Stryne informed him.

"The Minion himself is taking an interest in this case. He'll be watching."

"The Minion? Wow!"

"YES, he's one, Your Highness. I was right."

In Prince Vro's suite in the discreet, extremely select Imperial Hotel a man was stretched out on the floor. The oblong plates of a field-effect device stood on either side of his head. Perlo Rolce fiddled with the device's knobs, watching a small screen with a greenish tint across which dim shapes flickered, while one of his men knelt by the prisoner holding a pain-prong.

Progress had been much quicker than even Vro had hoped. Rolce had started by visiting the street where Archivist Mayar believed the causal hiatus might have occurred. While using a map to help him look out the likely routes where the body might have been taken, he had noticed some activity an untrained person would not have observed. In his own words the place was "crawling with snoopers." Rolce had taken a chance and his men had performed a routine but efficient street kidnapping.

"Why should so many Traumatics be on the street?" Vro

asked with a frown, sipping a liqueur.

"That's easily answered, Your Highness. This man's part of a pursuit operation. They are harrying some poor devil through the city till he drops."

He nodded to his assistant to apply the prong again, repeating his question to the prisoner. The Traumatic gave a long gurgling scream and squirmed on the thick pile of the carpet, and Rolce kept watch on the screen, stroking his chin.

He had long found that a field-effect device coupled to long jolts of unbearable agony provided an almost foolproof method of interrogation. The subject might discipline his mind so as to prevent the answers the inquisitor sought from forming there, but pain broke down this discipline. While his attention was preoccupied with pain, images and information flooded into the body's electrostatic field automatically, quite against his will.

"He doesn't know anything about Princess Veaa," Rolce declared at length. "But he knows the address of their chief temple here in Umbul."

"So what do you recommend now?"

"The princess might be in the temple, or nearby. At any

rate someone there should know what has been done with her." Rolce cogitated briefly. "Our best bet is to act quickly and decisively, before the Traumatics have time to suspect anything amiss; the disappearance of one of their members, for instance, might alert them to trouble. I suggest a raid on the temple, perhaps assisted by the police or by members of the Imperial Guard stationed here. Even if the princess is not on the premises we are very near the end of the trail."

Vro gestured floorward. "And what of him?"

"If the majordomo can be depended on to dispose of a corpse . . ."

"Have no fear. The standards of service in this hotel know no limits"

"In that case . . ." Rolce bent low, taking from his pocket a rubbery cylinder which he applied to the prisoner's head. The struggling Traumatic went limp as the weapon turned his brain to jelly.

"Now, Your Highness, I suppose that we make our move with the least possible delay."

INPRISS SORCE was privileged to be sacrificed with full ceremony upon the altar of Hulmu, in the Umbul Temple itself.

She stared as if hypnotized at the representation of Hulmu's Impossible Shape. Here it was not an abstract sculpture but a hologram mobile that writhed and twisted. Stryne noticed her fascination and seized her chin in his hand to forcibly avert her gaze. If one stared at it too long one's eyes began to move independently of one another and sometimes did not right themselves for up to an hour.

As the accredited pursuers, Stryne and Velen had the right to perform the ceremony with no other Traumatics present. A camera had been set up so that the Minion, founder and leader of the Traumatic sect, could watch from another part of the temple.

"Do you believe in Hulmu now, honey?" Stryne asked Inpriss.

"Yes," she said weakly. And she did. Evil as powerful as theirs could not be founded only on imagination. Something real had to exist behind it.

"He does exist, you know," Stryne assured her. "The God of the Church, he doesn't exist. We are all Hulmu's creatures.

He projected us on to the screen of time, so he could watch us. Mmmmmm."

The two men moved about the room adjusting the various apparatuses it contained. "Strip off, Inpriss," Stryne said.

Obediently she removed her clothes.

"Fine. OK., lie down on the altar." His voice became caressing.

They began the ceremonies, going through the Compounding of Villainies, the Plot and Counterplot, the Scriptwriter's Diversion. To indulge themselves, though it was not obligatory, they both performed the Ritual of Mounting for the second time, offering up the orgasms to Hulmu as before. Sex and death always went well together.

The devices around them hummed and clicked, many of them performing symbolic functions secret to the sect. Eventually, at their prompting, Inpriss began to speak the responses herself. This was most important. The victim's cooperation had to be genuine.

Stryne and Velen knew that Inpriss had reached a stage of resignation quite divorced from reality: a state that was almost euphoria. If they did their job properly this would be followed by a return to cold realism, a new appreciation of the horror of her position. That was what made the euphoria so useful: the subsequent mental agony was that much greater.

Velen flicked a switch. A chill, urgent vibration undulated through the room. It acted on Inpriss Sorce like cold water. Her eyes widened and came into focus. There came a pause in the Traumatics' chanting.

"What will happen to me when my soul is in the gulf?" she asked in a quavering voice.

"You will be Hulmu's to terrify and torture as he pleases." Stryne's voice was harsh and brutal.

Suddenly she was shaking all over, her naked limbs knocking uncontrollably against the altar table, and Stryne knew she was ready—in the state of terror required by the ritual. One that would multiply the natural death trauma a hundred-fold.

. To verify it he consulted one of the monitoring instruments that were arranged around the altar. Her fear index had passed the hundred mark.

Yet he knew that her obedience remained unconditional; her mind had given up believing in any kind of escape.

Finally he switched on an apparatus resembling a miniature

radar set. From its concave scanner bowl a mauve effulgence crossed the room and bathed Inpriss Sorce in a pale flickering aura.

This device was probably the most essential of the sect's secrets. The method of its manufacture had been imparted by the Minion himself, who was said to have received it direct from Hulmu. The gadget ensued that during the death trauma the soul would be detached altogether from the body it had clung to for so long. No longer would Inpriss Sorce return to the beginning of her life and live again. She would sink bewildered into potential time, to be seized by Hulmu and enjoyed by him.

Stryne nodded to Velen. They had already decided to accomplish Inpriss' exit by means of slowly penetrating knives. They picked up the long shining weapons.

"Arch your back. Lift your body upward," he ordered.

Inpriss obeyed. Her belly and breasts strained up off the table to meet the downpointing knife points.

Slowly the knives descended.

In the prototype time-machine Aton and Dwight Rilke spoke little to each other until they approached the end of their journey. Rilke was meticulous about the final vectoring in. He knew to the minute where he wanted to go.

The laboratory they emerged into was the same one they had left, but less tidy, better equipped, and obviously a place of work rather than a carefully preserved museum. Its sole occupant sat at a workbench with his back to them, poring over some papers and oblivious of their arrival.

Aton viewed this on the time-machine's external vidscreen. Rilke picked up his beamer. He was trembling and there was perspiration on his wrinkled face.

"You're afraid," Aton said quietly.

The other nodded. "Not for me. For him."

"How do you see your past self? Is he like someone else? Or is he still you?"

Rilke did not answer the question. "You stay in here, Captain," he said. "This is something I ought to do, nobody else." He paused, then opened a fascia panel beneath the control board. Another beamer was in the small compartment. "He has a gun too," he told Aton. "One shooting lead slugs. Maybe he'll kill me instead. If so, you'd better finish it. Think you can?"

"If I have to."

Rilke opened the sheet metal door and stepped out. Hearing the sound, the young Rilke turned. Aton saw a steady-eyed young man in his thirties who was less confused than most would have been by the sudden appearance of the bulky cabinet.

"Who are you?" he said sharply after a long pause. "How did you get here?"

The elder Rilke was close to collapsing with the emotion of the moment. "I am your elder self, Dwight," he cried in a shaking voice. "And I'm here to kill you!"

The other looked startled and then, surprisingly, laughed. "You lunatic!" He leaned over and held down a switch. "Security? I have an intruder." Then he turned back to the old man. "Now why should you want to kill me?"

"Because in a few years you are going to discover something that will turn the world inside out. Look at me, Dwight, Don't you recognize me?"

Aton was wondering why Rilke was prolonging the scene instead of getting it over with. Then he understood. Rilke could not bear to see his younger self die in ignorance. He had too much respect for himself.

And that self-respect was liable to prove fatal to his intentions. The young Rilke was acute. He glanced from Rilke to the time-machine as if prepared to take the old man's words seriously. Then he suddenly stood and crossed to one of the cupboards lining the walls of the laboratory and produced from there a hand weapon made of a bluish metal.

Old Rilke, who had kept his beamer out of sight up to now, pointed it and fired. From his shaking hand the beam went wide. The younger man dodged out of the way, turned, pointed and fired his own man

pointed, and fired his own gun.

Two loud bangs shattered the air of the laboratory. There was no visible beam but something whanged off some metal support struts. Old Rilke, it seemed, hadn't been hit. He took his beamer in both hands and held down the beam on continuous—a rarely used ploy since it exhausted the power pack. Before it faded the dull red ray scythed across the younger man and he toppled to the floor.

Aton came to the open door of the time-machine. Rilke let fall his beamer. His face sagged.

"It's done!" he said hoarsely. "It's done!"

Aton stared with interest at the living paradox.

And then what life there was in Rilke's eyes went out. He collapsed to the floor as if every string holding his body together had been cut. With amazing rapidity the flesh began to dry up and shrivel. In little more than a minute nothing remained but a skeleton covered with parchmentlike skin.

The paradox was resolved. If the time element was taken

out it was a simple suicide.

In moments the security men would be here. Aton gazed around himself once more, marveling at his continued existence. Then he moved back to the control board.

Experimentally he depressed the automatic retrack stud. The drive unit started up with a whine and instantly phased the time-machine into the strat.

He sat passively while it carried him back to the starting point, his thoughts subdued. Through the still-open door he could see the naked strat and the conjunction of that with the orthogonal interior of the gramped cabin was one of the oddest things he had ever seen. It occurred to him that there was a way he could control, to a limited extent, his time-traveling ability. He could take a timeship into the strat, open one of its ports, and jump out to go where he pleased—if his subconscious did not take over for him. He could jump out now if he liked. But he decided to see the thing through, and after a while closed the door. From time to time he did some navigational checking to make sure the automatic pilot wasn't being blown off course by Chronotic vagaries, but everything seemed to be functioning normally.

When the machine phased back into orthogonal time San Hevatar was standing in the laboratory looking pensive. Aton stepped calmly out of the cabinet.

"Where have you been?" San Hevatar asked somberly.

"Trying to straighten out time," Aton said with a cynical twist of his lips, dispensing with the customary deferences. "Your assistant Rilke suddenly became one of my disciples and thought he could cancel out everything that happened since you and he worked together. But he was wrong."

Concisely he related what had taken place. San Hevatar was not in the least embarrassed by the disclosure that it had been Rilke who discovered the basic principle behind the time-drive. He merely remarked that for purposes of religious mythology it was better that he, founder of the Church, should be the man to take the credit and that he, in his humility, should attribute it to a direct revelation from God.

"I suspected it would turn out like this," Aton finished. "That's one tenet of the Church that's apparently true. Once invented, time-travel stays invented. Rilke's sacrifice was un-

availing because paradoxes don't alter anything."

San Hevatar nodded thoughtfully. "I always considered that the Historical Office's protective attitude toward the crucial God-given event is unnecessary. Chronotic history is much too raveled to be undone so easily. The very fact of timetravel weakens from the outset the unique relationship between cause and effect, even when movement is only from node to node. So now we have time-travel without its ever being invented. Truly wondrous."

"And truly disastrous," Aton said. "Rilke could not wipe out the empire, but the Hegemony can. And probably man-

kind with it."

The prophet was staring at Aton with a terrible burning intensity. "You are he!" he gasped abruptly. "You are the one! I know you!" He passed a hand across his eyes and swayed as though suffering from dizziness.

"What are you talking about?" Aton demanded harshly.
"Forget my small deceptions," San Hevatar said with a weary smile. "Despite those, I am still a prophet of God and occasionally I see through the veil." His voice became dreamy.
"You are our hope, Aton. You are God's champion, His sword, to fight the enemy of Church and empire."

A dizziness came over Aton also as he heard the unexpected words. Then, from deep within his mind, he seemed to feel an urgency, a summons. He struggled against the feeling and tried to frame a reply to San Hevatar.

But it was no use. The subconscious part of his nervous system was asserting itself again.

Aton phased into the strat.

He went hurtling futureward—plusward, in chronman's language. All around him flamed and roared the supernal fire of the strat. As he went, that fire burned into him and he realized that his personal ortho field was down. He was soaking up transcendental energies, was becoming multidimensional in his nature and powers.

Because he was fused with this fire, because he maintained no subjective sense of passing time, the journey to his new destination involved no duration. He was vaguely aware that he was skimming at tremendous speed close under the silvery lead screen of orthogonal time. The events on this screen raced past him in a blur of motion.

Then the screen swayed as he slowed down and approached a certain location on it. He found himself looking into a room in a tall building in Node 6. Two men, one lean and feral, the other pudgy and bland, stood over a naked woman who lay on a cloth-draped table, her back arched. In their hands were gleaming daggers which they were bringing down slowly and deliberately toward her white body. All around stood humming, clicking, droning instruments.

Coming closer, Aton knew where he had seen the woman before. It was Inpriss Sorce.

He phased into orthogonal time.

To the two Traumatics it seemed as if he had emerged from the Impossible Shape of Hulmu, for he materialized between it and the altar. They stumbled back with cries of fear, conviced for a moment that their god had appeared to them. Aton was surrounded by a shining halo of iridescent colors. The energies with which he was saturated pulsed and flashed as he moved.

Then they regathered their courage, and, deciding in their confusion that Aton was after all but human, moved in to attack with daggers extended.

A dazzling cloud of pure power, like a charge of ball lightning, shot from Aton's chest and enveloped Stryne, who fell dead.

Velen halted in his stride and stood looking stupid, the knife held awkwardly in his hand. His attention wandered perplexedly between Stryne and Aton. A second power charge soared toward him and he died soundlessly.

Aton stepped softly to the girl. She still lay quivering with back arched, eyes closed, little grunts of exertion coming from her throat as she awaited the knife thrusts. As gently as he could, he put an arm under her shoulders, raised her to a sitting position, and told her to open her eyes.

• She looked at him blankly. "You're safe now," he said. But it was plain she was in deep shock. Someone who had been subjected to her experience could remain a psychiatric case for years.

He put his hand to her brow. Subtle powers flowed from his palm into her brain. He could sense her every thought, every crevice and receptacle of her mind. Into those hollows he sent healing influences as his thoughts flowed into hers. Eventually she stopped shivering and became normally alert and calm. "Thank you," she said.

"Get dressed. We're leaving."

While she hurriedly pulled on her garments he prowled around the room, contemptuously knocking over the stillactive items of equipment. When he came to the holo camera he cursed himself for not having noticed it before, but disconnected its lead.

He knew that they were at the back of the building and on the third floor. He opened the door and peered out. Glancing back to make sure she was ready, he signaled her to follow him. Together they ventured into the corridor.

On either side were doors, from some of which came the sound of murmurs or muffled chanting. Aton led Inpriss to a staircase. Confident of his ability to deal with all comers, he set off down it. leading her by the hand.

On the second floor a door opened a few yards along the corridor and a bony-faced figure wearing a preoccupied look stepped out. Aton pulled up sharp at the sight of him.

"Sergeant Quelle!"

Quelle looked up, jerked out of his reverie, and plainly could not believe his eyes. His lips mumbled something inaudible. He seemed rooted to the spot. Then, with an inarticulate cry, he turned and tried to claw his way back through the doorway.

Aton raised his free hand and pointed with his index finger. From the finger issued a tight, brilliantly white ray that struck Quelle on the back of the skull. Along the ray passed images: a succession of images at the rate of billions per second. A few of them were marginally visible to Aton and Inpriss, rushing along the narrow beam like a superfast comic strip.

The heretical sergeant fell headlong to the floor, his brain overloaded and burned out by the unnaturally high rate of impressions that had been forced into it.

In answer to Quelle's cry of alarm more Traumatics came to the door, perhaps half a dozen of them. Aton released more power balls in their direction. He felt exultant in his newly acquired might. Inpriss just watched, her disbelief suspended by everything she had been through lately.

suspended by everything she had been through lately.

They started down the stairs again, but now the building was coming to life. Doors opened and slammed all around. There was the sound of running feet. Momentarily Aton was puzzled. All this activity could not be on account of him,

unless he had been observed by remote. It could not be due to the camera in the altar room, either, or else it would have

happened before now.

His question was answered when they had descended one more floor. Below, on the ground floor, the staircase gave onto a lobby ending in a hotellike front entrance. The doors had been burst open and the lobby was filled with the grim faces, toques, and plumes of the Imperial Guard. Prince Vro Ixian, accompanied by a stocky individual and enwrapped in a purple cloak, presented a picture of youthful hauteur.

The captain of the invading force put a bullhorn to his lips. "The building is surrounded. There is no escape. Come down

and surrender to the forces of the law."

The guards spread out through the building, trotting past the two fugitives as they mounted the stairs. Aton approached Vro.

The prince raised his eyebrows. "But that the question might provoke a lengthy answer, I would ask what you are doing here."

Aton presented Inpriss. Overawed, she curtised automatically. Vro acknowledged her with a just-perceptible nod of the head.

"This lady is one of the Traumatics' victims," Aton said, "and has suffered much at their hands. Your Highness, I wonder if you would guarantee her safety." Moving closer, he murmured, "She needs gentle handling."

"You have my word," Vro replied. His eyes, however,

"You have my word," Vro replied. His eyes, however, were on Aton. He could not help but notice the change in the man since he had last seen him. The handsome officer seemed godlike, eyes flashing and stern, his whole being charged with life and energy.

Calling over the Captain of the Guard, he turned Inpriss over to him, ordering that she be placed under the imperial protection. Aton nodded to the girl, indicating that she should go with the escort that was immediately arranged.

"We are here looking for my beloved Veaa," Vro told Aton. "I would appreciate your assistance. Have you ac-

quainted yourself with the layout of this place?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you. I arrived here only in the last few minutes. But I have killed three Traumatics in that time."

"Easy," Prince Vro objected. "I want them alive."

They walked together up the staircase and through the

house. Aton watched as Vro's detective and his assistants questioned the Traumatics who were brought to them, using torture and a field-effect device. Most were eliminated after a minute or two; Rolce did not become interested until he interrogated one of the few women to be found.

She was a tough-faced woman of about fifty whose ragged hair bore streaks of gray. "She knows something," Rolce announced as she lay between the plates of the device. "I'm

getting images."

Vro peered close. On the monochrome screen flickered the shadowy specter of a young girl in a coffin. "Veaa!" he cried in a choked voice.

"The prong, long and hard!" snapped Rolce.

The female Traumatic screamed and drew in breaths in hard noisy gasps. "I'll talk!" she begged. "I'll talk!"

"Let her talk!" commanded Prince Vro.

"That's not necessary, Your Highness. Information is more reliable when obtained by field effect."

"Let her talk!" roared Vro. He leaned close. "You know

of Princess Veaa. Was her body brought here?"

"Ye-e-e-s." The woman's lips twisted lasciviously. "An imperial princess! The Minion thought her soul might be retrievable. That it was suspended in the strat."

"And was it?"

"No. She was good and dead. Properly dead. Her soul had gone back to the beginning, like everyone else's." Her face registered disgust.

"So what did you do . . . with the body?"

"Kept it. For a trophy."

"Is it here in the temple?"

"No."

"Then where?"

"Don't know." She shrugged. "In the city somewhere."

Rolce ascertained that she was telling the truth. And as more interrogatees were put under the device, Vno grew more and more fretful. Many of them knew of Princess Veaa. But no one seemed to know where she had been taken.

"Don't despair, Your Highness," Rolce comforted him, "She's been here, that's certain. It's a routine matter to trace her now."

Aton decided to explore the temple. It was fairly quiet now, but the Imperial Guard would have their work cut out to winkle out everyone in a building so large. There were probably a hundred hiding places. Aton made his way upstairs toward the area where he had found Inpriss. Perhaps, he thought vaguely, he could find what Prince Vro was looking for.

He opened all doors as he went. He saw altar rooms, store rooms filled with enigmatic equipment, rooms for mysterious purposes. People huddled in corners as he looked into some of the rooms, staring at him fearfully. He did not envy them; the Church was not kind to heretics.

Down an undisturbed side corridor he heard a strange mewing sound from behind a door. Aton hesitated, then slowly opened the door and ventured inside.

Standing with its back to the door was a fat, shabby, slopeshouldered figure holding in pudgy hands a mirrorlike object whose surface crawled and shimmered with unrecognizable shapes. The mewing seemed to be an expression of pleasure or amusement as the man gazed into the roiling surface.

At Aton's entrance he put down the mirror and turned to face him. Aton confronted a being straight out of a night-mare, a nightmare he had endured only recently.

The man with jewels for eyes!

The crystal-filled sockets flashed and glittered in a multitude of colors. The face was pudgy and covered with a film of sweat. The slobbery mouth was agape with mirth.

"Come in, Captain Aton, and close the door!" welcomed the creature, its voice giggly and cheerful. "I have been waiting for you!"

Aton felt an urge to retreat, to get away. "Who—what—are you?"

"I? Do you not know? I am Hulmu's Minion, chief of all his worshipers!"

"But you are not human."

"Not human? Indeed I am! A little extended, perhaps, but that is because I am Hulmu's pet, his little favorite. Like you, I am familiar with the strat. I have been all the way down to Hulmu, to let him sport with me. From time to time he gives me little presents and gadgets. He gave me these eyes, all the better to see in the strat with."

"Hulmu is real?" Aton became aware of a peculiar offensive

odor the Minion gave off.

"Oh, indeed! Do not doubt it. He gave me the time-distorter, all the better to wreak havoc with."

"The distorter? It comes from you?"

"Correct. Surprised?" The Minion lolled his head disclaimingly. "I don't use it much myself. I have an arrangement with the Hegemonics—purely out of the goodness of my heart, of course. When they want to raid the empire, I lend it to them. Afterward I take it back for safe-keeping. They tried to keep it for themselves once. They still don't know how I got it back!" He chortled.

"There is only one?" "Only one. It's enough."

"Why don't they try to make another?"
"Can't. They might have tried to analyze it, I daresay. No human being will ever make a gadget like my time-distorter. Only Hulmu is clever enough for that."

"But why? Why should you want to destroy the empire?" "Why not? It's all part of Hulmu's plot and counterplot. He is the scriptwriter, is he not? He projects us, does he not?"
The Minion's giggles became hysterical. "How does it feel to have an audience?"

Aton felt dirtied by this creature's presence. Surely, he thought, the Traumatics' creed cannot be literally true. When he compared this giggling monster with the sedateness and calm reason of the Church. . . .

The Minion seemed to read his mind. "Oh, the cult of Hulmu is very old. A little bit older than the Church, even. I should know, I started it! Before I became Hulmu's Minion I was Absol Humbart! But those other fools, San Hevatar and Dwight Rilke, rejected Hulmu, the genuine creator. They founded their silly church."

Grinning, the Minion came toward him with tiny steps. Aton determined to destroy the loathsome creature if he could. He ejected energy from his body, sending rays and waves against the shambling figure. The Minion laughed. His own body began to pulse, shedding sparkling rainbows all around. He seemed to regard it as a game. Their contest filled the room with fantastic forms of light, but neither was hurt in any way.

"I was wiser. I gave myself to Hulmu. He gives me my little toys, and I help him to get what he needs-souls in death trauma!"

They both left off wasting energy in fireworks displays. Suddenly the sound of booted feet came from along the corridor. The Imperial Guard were on their way.

"Come, friend Aton. Come to Hulmu!" the Minion hissed. With surprising agility he bounded forward and seized Aton in his arms. Fetid breath wafted across Aton's face, but before he could react, the Minion had phased into the strat, taking Aton with him.

The Minion was amazingly strong. Aton could not break loose from his embrace. Down they sank, spiraling and plummeting, down, down, down. The four-dimensional screen of orthogonal time was left behind. Left behind, too, were the upper reaches of the strat where what was potential already bore some resemblance to what was actual. They went down, down, into the deeps where potentiality had less and less prospect of becoming actuality—that is, of materializing on to the orthogonal world—and had less and less in common with its forms. The pressure was frightful. They sank into gloomy six-dimensional regions where nameless things lurked and waited in the murk. Aton felt brooding hatred as they passed by; the potential quasi-beings sensed that he and the Minion came from the upper world and experienced a writhing envy.

The descent was timeless and Aton seemed temporarily to lose the will to free himself. Then he began to feel the presence of a vast, overpowering intelligence.

Hulmu!

Hulmu was something impossible. A six-dimensional, non-existent shape that lashed and danced in all directions in frantic convolutions. He was lord of this region; all bowed to him.

A voice he could almost smell spoke in Aton's mind.

"Know me and surrender your being."

In that instant it came home to Aton with a certainty and conviction he could not analyze who the enemy was that had been spoken of by the *Imperator* and San Hevatar.

The enemy of the empire was not the Hegemony. It was not even the Traumatic sect, or the Minion.

It was Hulmu.

He could not define the ultimate evil that was Hulmu. He only saw, as if in a vision, that the struggle was relentless and would continue until victory was gained by one side or the other.

With newly regained strength Aton lashed out. The Minion sought to restrain him, but he broke free and soared upward like a bubble, out of the reach of Hulmu's lashing tentacles. Other powers snatched at him but he knew he was safe. Up, up, up.

op, up, up.

Chapter Ten

Aton was semi-conscious for the latter part of his ascent to the realm of materiality. He did not fully recover until he had already phased into ortho.

His subconscious mind had brought him to familiar territory. He was standing in the deserted court chamber of the Imperial Palace's inner sanctum, Node 1. It was night and the chamber was only dimly lit.

Silence prevailed everywhere.

After some moments he saw a lone figure seated on a couch and stepped closer.

It was Inpriss Sorce.

"Inpriss?"

She looked up. "You're back!"
"How did you get here?"

"Prince Vro's men brought me. They said I'd be safe here in the palace. I'm under imperial protection." A note of pride entered her voice as she said the last. She smiled, "It's certainly a different type of life to what I'm used to."

"But it can only have been minutes ago that I last saw

you."
A slightly wary look crossed her face. "It's been nearly

three days."

Three days. Had he been that long in the gulf?

Shaken, he glanced at a wall clock and frowned.

"Where is everybody? Surely they don't retire this early?"
"They're all in the churches and chapels, praying. The

armada has set out."

So matters were coming to a climax. And his mission had failed

Disconsolately he paced the great hall. He tried to imagine

the pace of events beyond the bounds of the palace in the eternal city and throughout the mighty time-spanning empire. Did he fancy he heard the structure of time creaking like the timbers of a crippled ship?

Unexpectedly there came the whirring of motors. The Imperator rolled out from its hidden compartment and

towered over the man and the woman.

"My servant, Captain Aton," the resonant voice murmured. "Imperator."

"It was a stirring sight, Captain. Powerful timeships, seemingly without number, coming one by one up the procession ramp to be presented to the people and blessed by the Arch-Cardinal Reamoir, before phasing into the strat. Now the three main wings are joining formation from the nodes where they were built. Very soon the Hegemony should feel their presence. If it does at all . . ."

"May God go with them, Imperator," Aton replied dully.

"If it does at all," repeated the *Imperator* fatalistically. "The Hegemony is also gathering all its forces. It knows the last card has been called. For the past few days it has been using the time-distorter at full aperture."

"Imperator," Aton said eagerly, though it now seemed rather late for this information, "the time-distorter belongs to the Traumatic sect and was given them by the being they call Hulmu."

The machine-emperor's continuous hum undulated thoughtfully. "Orthogonal time is breaking up, Captain. If you were to journey through the empire now you would not recognize it. For the past two days it has been impossible to phase into Nodes Three and Four."

Aton was aghast. "What?"

"Nothing intelligible exists there. Orthogonal time has become totally deranged in the area. The strat is like an ocean in many respects, Captain Aton. The features we call the nodes are the regularly spaced ripples on the surface that hold the orthogonal world together. But there can be deeper waves that can overthrow everything. Tidal waves that tear the world of reality apart."

Aton noted that the *Imperator* spoke more lucidly than on an earlier occasion. But if it had recovered its sanity it had done so belatedly. The picture it drew was frightening.

"What will happen?"

"What has happened will happen."

Back to cryptic utterances, Aton thought in disgust.

Inpriss had crept forward to join them. She looked up overawed at the *Imperator*, which she could only have known as a semilegendary ultimate authority. Her hand touched Aton's sleeve as if seeking comfort.

Aton happened to glance to his right and with bulging eyes saw the east wall curve inward as though it were a wall of water. In seconds the heaving structure righted itself and stood rigid, but he knew the signs of spatio-temporal deformation.

"Are we under attack?" he asked sharply.

"The whole empire is under attack. Time is under attack."
Those were the last words the *Imperator* spoke before the great darkness descended on them all and expunged them from reality.

THEY returned still carrying the memory of their previous existence. "What happened?" said Aton.

"The empire was annihilated," said the Imperator, "and then put back."

THE ENTIRETY of the strain being put upon orthogonal time had been steadily building up into a wide-scale wave motion originating deep in the substratum. Eventually it had climaxed in a sort of tidal wave. The Chronotic Empire, and everything associated with it, was swept away.

But the giant time-storm was by no means over. On the contrary, the oscillations were building up and becoming more violent. As the wave entered the second half of its cycle the empire reappeared, almost exactly as when the wave had overtaken it.

But not quite.

There were innumerable small changes. And the difference between this and normal Chronotic mutations was that the inhabitants of the empire were aware of them.

Prince Vro Ixian had at last achieved his heart's desire. Following leads found in the Traumatics' temple in Umbul, the detective Perlo Rolce had traced the body of Princess Veaa to a rundown house in the outskirts of the city. Prince Vro, arming himself and taking only Rolce with him, entered the house and found it uninhabited.

Methodically he went through the house room by room. In the second floor back he discovered a chamber draped in

white silk. An open coffin of pinewood lay on a dais, and in the coffin, as beautiful as a pale rose, was the embalmed corpse of the young princess.

"My dearest, my beloved Veaa!" Vro swept toward the

coffin.

And in that moment the tidal wave of potential time over-came the material world and swept everything away. The world came back in what, to the actors in it, could have been only an instant. But Vro was aware of the hiatus and understood what it implied.

In the coffin Princess Veaa opened her eyes, moved her

head, and slowly sat up.

Vro gave a wild cry. "Veaa!" he shrieked.

"Vro!" Her shriek was no less mortified.

The two stared at each other in utter horror.

In the court chamber everything was more or less as before. Inpriss Sorce clung tightly to Aton, whom she saw as her protector.

"Will it happen again?" Aton asked.

"The wave has but receded for a moment. The turbulence is still building up. When it returns there will be no reprieve. All will dissolve . . . permanently."

The Imperator clicked and hummed. Suddenly there was a muted whine, and a part of its matted surface opened. Within, Aton saw a tiny room, illuminated, its walls padded. "Get inside, quickly," the *Imperator* ordered.

The urgency of its command communicated itself to them. Hastily they crowded inside the small space. The door closed up behind them.

THE rolling geodesics of the substratum, summoned up from the deeps, had hit a resonance that nothing could withstand. As the mighty preponderance of Chronotic potentiality smashed against the empire for the second time the edifice that had been built with such care was, not merely temporarily annulled, but torn apart, and the materiality of the fragments dissipated beyond recovery. The screen of orthogonal time was, itself, ripped to shreds.

Seconds before this happened the Imperator had phased into the strat. Only mildly surprised to learn of this ability on the part of the machine-emperor, Aton read the move on a small instrument panel the room contained and heard the strained drone of the modest drive unit as it battled against the dangerous turbulences.

Where was the Imperator taking them?

So it had happened. The one thing uniquely feared by achronal archivists had finally come to pass.

Phased permanently into the strat, the Achronal Archives were the one department of Chronopolis' administration to survive. The archivists now saw the fullest justification of their cult of isolationism. The emotionally shattered men and women prowled around the vaults, touching one another for comfort, caressing the humming casings that contained the computer store of all that had taken place in the vanished Chronotic Empire.

All around them lay nothing but the strat. There was no orthogonal time. The time-storm, of unprecedented proportions, had eliminated it, and potentiality reigned supreme. There was no actuality, except for this one little isolated bubble.

The in-turned atmosphere of the sepulchral establishment, always noticeable, now intensified by the minute. Chief Archivist Illus Ton Mayar knew that in short order it would develop into group insanity. But he did not think that any of them would live to see that happen. Very soon the archives would melt into the strat like sugar in water. Their existential support—the whole material background from which they had sprung—had been taken away. They persisted now only by virtue of strat time, which did not match one-for-one with orthogonal time.

Mayar was sitting alone in his private room when there was a hammering on the door and an excited shout from one of the senior archivists.

"There's something approaching through the strat!"

Mayar hurried to investigate. He arrived at the loading bay just in time to see the imposing bulk of the *Imperator* materialize there.

All present fell to their knees. A door in the side of the *Imperator* clicked open and a man and a woman, the man dressed as a captain of the Time Service, stepped out.

Mayar watched the apparition with astonishment. "God be praised!" he managed to say. But he still did not dare to hope.

The man and the woman stepped toward him, but before

he could speak again the Imperator had once more vanished.

AND in the Invincible Armada, swaying its way through the disturbed and roiling strat, there also dawned the realization of the empire's destruction.

Prince Philipium, Grand Admiral of the Armada, enthroned in the majestic bridge of the titanic flagship God's Imposer, froze as though paralyzed. His face was almost green with shock.

There could be no mistake. From all parts of the huge armada the message was the same. The instruments revealed that the concept of order and religion which everyone on board was sworn to serve was irrevocably gone.

To the commanders surrounding Prince Philipium the news brought varied emotions. Sick anger, sinking fear, stony grimness: defiant hatred.

"We are ghosts!" uttered Prince Philipium in a voice hollow with grief. "What can we do? The empire is vanquished!"
"Ghosts we may be, but we shall still live for a while,"

growled Commander Haight. He tried to calculate how long it would be before the armada faded away and lost all vestige of materiality, now that it had no existential support. It could be hours or days.

"One thing is still left to us," he urged. "Revenge! Let us ensure that of the Hegemony, too, nothing remains!"

Exultant shouts greeted his words. Prince Philipium, his

eyes staring but devoid of life, gave the orders.

The ghost armada moved forward only to find that its quest was needless. The Hegemony had gone down along with the empire. The ships that it had put into the strat, however, persisted like those of the armada itself. The two forces locked on to each other and began to battle. There was no question of phasing into ortho to fire their weapons—there was no orthogonal time any longer—and the strat torpedoes were too ineffective to satisfy their blood lust. Instead the ships sought to destroy each other by collision. The conflict raged on, fed by despair and hatred.

ATON found he could strike little cheer from the Chief Archivist and his assistants. They seemed unable to recognize that the existence they knew had, in fact, vanished and that they would shortly die. In what Aton found a morbid manner they preferred to go about their duties and spent as much time as possible lovingly going over recorded scenes of bygone days and endless lists of names, places, and events.

Neither was he able to answer any of their questions. But two hours later those scanning the surrounding strat reported that an object was again approaching.

For the second time the Imperator materialized into the

loading bay.

"Aton, my servant!" it boomed.

Aton stood before it stiffly. "I am here, Imperator." Then he added, "Where have you been?"

"Into the far future. My mind is clear now."

The *Imperator* seemed larger, more powerful, more majestic than it ever had before. "The time for your greatest service to the empire has arrived, Captain Aton."

"I do not understand, Imperator. There is no empire."

"What has been will be. If you are victorious." The machine-emperor paused. "The Minion thinks he has won. He has recovered the time-distorter from his Hegemonic tools and now plans to use it again for another purpose."

"Imperator!" interrupted Mayar brokenly. "What is there

to talk about? All is gone!"

The Imperator hummed loudly. Impatiently Aton cau-

tioned Mayar to keep silence.

"At the moment potential time, alike to primordial chaos, has drowned the world of time," the *Imperator* continued. "However the Chronotic storm is now abating; soon orthogonal time will form again on the gulf's surface, like a skin forming on a liquid. It is impossible to say what that world will be like if allowed to form without interference. But that is where the Minion intends to come in. He will use the time-distorter to project a world agreeable to his master, Hulmu. That must not be. You must fight him, Aton. Take the distorter away from him."

Aton was hesitant. "I am not sure I can, Imperator. I have already discovered that the Minion is strong."

"You can defeat him with the help of religion."

Without warning a wide angled beam of light shot out from the *Imperator* and bathed Aton. Immediately an extraordinary flood of thoughts and feelings flooded his mind, all connected with the religion in which he had been brought up. Prayers, catechisms, and hymns such as he had been taught as a child seemed to sing in his brain.

The emotion engendered by this experience made him feel

humble. Objectively, he recognized the use of a thought ray similar in principle to a field-effect device, except that it worked in reverse. The *Imperator* was reminding him of his religious training. But why?

"The Minion approaches. Come."

The inner chamber opened once more in the machine's metal side. Aton entered. They phased into the strat and went speeding down.

The *Imperator* seemed to know where to go. Eventually the door to Aton's chamber opened again. Aton ventured into the strat.

He saw the Minion almost immediately. He was soaring up from the deep, carrying the big tubelike device Aton had seen once before. As Aton came closer he saw the jewel eyes flash and glint through the supernal fire that surrounded them both. The Minion's mouth was agape and raucous laughter issued from it.

"Ha ha ha! You want my little toy! Oh, no! This time Hulmu will have you!"

Aton moved in to the attack.

The Minion pointed the tube. Vapors gushed forth and Aton felt himself being wafted away, his four-dimensional form deformed and eroded. With difficulty he evaded the vapors, and then he closed with the Minion and wrestled bodily with him.

The Minion had more than one shape! Limbs and extruberances shot out from him in all directions of the five-dimensional space in which they fought. Aton found himself encaged in a living organism of roots, limbs, and branches.

He himself was not without resource. With a supreme effort he caused every cell of his body to discharge the transcendent energy it had gained by immersion in the strat. There was a sort of explosion, an uncoiling of the immaterial continuum, and he was free.

But he was weakened. And then, before he could take stock of himself, he was imprisoned once more.

This time he seemed to be transfixed or encaged in brilliantly colored glass or crystal. There was a sudden shift, and then he knew he had been transferred to a similar, but second prison.

He was inside the Minion's eyes, being flashed alternately from one to the other!

Laughingly the Minion ejected him and hovered jeering.

His ability to alter him in size gave Aton a real appreciation of the greater power of his enemy. He began to despair.

"Hee hee hee! First I will reform the world, and then I will take you down again to Hulmu, poor little captain!"

Tenaciously Aton circled, and then moved in again.

Through his brain was running a prayer, one he had known since he was a child. Something within him was urging him to say it aloud, and when he came near the Minion again, he sent the vibrations of the words spearing into the strat.

"Holy Father, bringer of comfort, deliver us from the enemy of time."

That was all, but surprisingly the Minion recoiled as if in horror. Aton pursued him, speaking the prayer over and over again.

"Holy father, bringer of comfort, deliver us from the enemy of time. Holy Father, bringer of comfort, deliver us from the enemy of time."

The Minion shrieked with pain. He flashed and writhed in a million illusory shapes, running the full gamut of his evil energies in an uncontrolled spasm. The prayer seemed to reduce him to a condition akin to the effect of nerve gas on a normal nervous system. Aton dived in and seized the timedistorter. The Minion struggled briefly to retrieve it, then fell back.

Then the Minion suddenly fell headlong into the gulf at extraordinary speed. "Hulmu! I have failed you again! Ohhhhhh..."

And Aton had carried out the orders of the Imperator.

THE God's Imposer was junked.

The huge ship had run head-on into countless enemy vessels. Smaller craft it had swatted like flies. But finally the total of those collisions had proved crippling. The twisted and shattered hulls of upward of a dozen Hegemonic vessels were imbedded in the God's Imposer, and the giant drive units now were silent.

"The ortho field won't last long, sir!" gasped an ensign. "It's down in parts of the ship already."

"Then kill yourself, you little fool, like the others are doing," growled Commander Haight. "Me, I'm not hanging around like a trapped rat."

And in fact the bridge was littered with suicides, including Prince Philipium. No one had bothered to use the ship's many life rafts or strat suits. But Commander Haight was not on the bridge. He was down in the guts of the ship, just within its outer wall. And the ensign was stationed at one of the ports that, had the armada succeeded, would have been pouring troops onto the ground.

"There's something I've always wanted to experience," Haight grated out, "and now I'm going to. Open the port,

Ensign."

"But, sir!"

"You heard me, you young squirt. It's an order. Get that port open!"

Trembling, the ensign turned his back to the port and operated a series of switches. The port whined slowly open, dilating iris-fashion. The safety cover went up.

Pressing his forearm against his eyes so that he would not be struck unconscious and fall upon the deck, Commander Haight flung himself at a run into the strat.

To understand what has happened," said the *Imperator* to Aton, Inpriss Sorce, and the assembled archivists, "it is necessary to understand the nature of time and the origin of Church and empire.

"Orthogonal time is reality. But reality cannot continue to subsist by itself. Like every structure in the universe it requires a certain kind of feedback on itself to remain steady. It requires something against which to rest itself, to react upon, otherwise, if it simply existed in a void, it would soon collapse into nothing.

"This something is the temporal substratum. The strat is, if you like, aberrated reality; it provides the feedback that keeps real time stable, or relatively so. As such, it is potential,

not actual, and less than real.

"The deeper one goes, the less like reality the strat is. In the uttermost depths are forms of quasi-existence inconceivable for us! and they are only there at all because somewhere—in orthogonal time—is the authentic existence from which they are degraded.

"The quasi-beings in these depths have a terrible hunger for authentic existence. But they are unable to emerge into it because they are too far removed from its nature. Some of them, however, are immensely powerful in their own realm;

such a one is Hulmu.

"He is the enemy of mankind."

"I had thought Hulmu was just a superstition on the part of the Traumatic sect," Mayar said hesitantly. "I hadn't even believed the Church when it identified him with the Evil One."

"He is genuine and we have been fighting him for countless eons. The empire is much older, in terms of eternity, than you think."

The Imperator hummed meditatively. "Until the discovery of time-travel the existential world was safe from such monsters. There was no possibility of their touching orthogonal time. Then, in some unique accident of history, a man called Dwight Rilke hit upon a flaw in the structure of the world. He discovered that there was a way whereby matter could be moved through time.

"From that instant the universe of actuality was in danger. And that danger manifested almost immediately. During the early experiments there was an unfortunate accident whereby one of the assistants fell headlong into the temporal substratum. This man was Absol Humbart, later the Minion. He was caught by Hulmu, who realized that the weakening of orthogonal time offered him an opportunity to claw his way up and become real. But still it was not easy. In order to gain a foothold Hulmu needed first to acquire sufficient reality, in order to transfer himself to the surface.

"This Absol Humbart promised souls! If Hulmu could devour enough souls that had lived in orthogonal time, then he could erupt into our world and establish himself there, satisfying his enormous hunger to become real!

"But the driblets he has been given are not nearly enough! His strategy has only one object—to be able to absorb the death trauma of mankind, past, present, and future! Only by devouring every man, woman, and child who ever lived, or will live, can Hulmu gain the wherewithal to climb out of his pit, claim the Earth and eventually, perhaps, the galaxy. To this end he and the Minion scheme, trying to create a situation that will bring about the death of humanity in special circumstances. If the Minion could have employed the time-distorter just as orthogonal time was reforming, he might have achieved this. The distorter is an instrument no man could have conceived of; its construction requires the powers of a god."

The Imperator paused to allow them to digest its words. "You say we have fought this beast for eons." called a

brave archivist, "but the empire itself has not existed that long."

Something resembling a laugh issued from the machine. "The empire has risen, fallen, and risen again, countless times. All that will be has been, again and again and again. Always, at this point, we have managed to foil Hulmu; always we have managed to resurrect the empire by the same means that he destroyed it. The process has, I estimate, gone through the cycle one billion times.

"But I have not completed my tale. How did the empire arise? It was no accident. Of those involved in so rashly presenting mankind with time-travel one, San Hevatar, saw the danger. He knew that the evil Traumatic sect had to be countered. He founded the Church to fight Hulmu. He designed the rituals of the Church as a weapon and a bastion against Hulmu. That is why, Aton, your prayer was so effective against the Minion; it is especially constructed to contain vibrations he cannot endure. If it were not for the Church, all might have fallen victims to Hulmu by now."

"You say this," pointed out Aton seriously, "but the San Hevatar I have met did not strike me as being aware of it."

"He was not. Perhaps the first time around. But now, after so many changes and resurrections, we move through our parts as if in a dream. Did you know that you must fight the Minion? Even I did not know; I only remembered flashes, like San Hevatar. Most of the time I am completely insane, as your friend Prince Vro tells you. I am insane, and know only these lucid periods when the empire has vanished. Then I travel into the far future to visit the civilizations there, and everything becomes clear."

"The future people," Inpriss objected, "why don't they help us to fight Hulmu?"

"They cannot, and in any case they do not believe in Hulmu. They know only that the secret of time-travel is the most dangerous secret in the universe, that if it is not controlled it can destroy time. That is why they want the empire continually to rise and fall in its war with the Hegemony; it is history's warning to mankind. There are no Chronotic empires in future ages; men are too afraid. But if the example of the empire were not before them then they might forget and begin to tamper with time."

begin to tamper with time."

"And you," said Aton. "Who are you? What are you?

"I am the oldest part of the empire. I began life as an

administrative computer in the physics laboratories of Monolith Industries. I took part in the original discoveries concerning pi-mesons. When the struggle with the Minion began I played a leading part in it. Gradually I was extended and increased my intelligence. Now I and the Minion are the main actors in the drama. He has an advantage because he is coached by Hulmu. With every cycle he grows stronger. We, too, must grow stronger, Aton! I could not tell you how often you have fought the Minion!"

"One billion times," Aton said drily.

"No, not so. No one could be expected to endure that for so long. Every so often fate changes the champion who challenges him. Once it was Commander Haight; now he has been relieved of the duty and knows nothing of it. Next time it may be you, or it may be not. I cannot tell. But someone always arises with sufficient power to struggle against him. And always I am here to see that he does so. Eventually, perhaps, I will have evolved sufficiently to play the role myself."

The Imperator's hum grew louder. "You must understand that of the world as it was before the empire arose nothing remains. Even the calendar is different. Dwight Rilke's discovery was made in the twenty-fourth century of their era; and the Stop Barrier was eventually placed in what was their fifteenth century, before a technological society had even developed."

"You speak of resurrecting the empire," said Mayar, still puzzled, "but how can that be? How can it possibly be accomplished?"

"In the same way that the Minion hoped to accomplish a world fit for Hulmu to live in. We have Hulmu's time-distorter. Hulmu misled the Minion when he represented himself as the creator and projector of the images on the screen of time; he is not that, merely an impotent spectator. Nevertheless his time-distorter can, to an extent, achieve creation."

The Imperator rolled forward and stood over them all in an almost menacing fashion. "The strat, just before the film of orthogonal time forms, is like a supersaturated solution waiting to be seeded. The time-distorter is designed to feed vibrations into it, and from those vibrations a world will grow. Here we have all the components to re-create the empire. We have the Achronal Archives with all their detailed knowledge of the empire. The rituals of the Church themselves are the

basis whereby the essence of the empire can be restored; San Hevatar intended them that way. We have the time-distorter to project all this on to the newly forming orthogonal world, and we have myself, *Imperator*, to operate it!"

With a small sharp explosion a section of the *Imperator* fell away to reveal a neat concavity. "Long ago I equipped myself for this task. Fit the distorter into this space. Jack into me the output leads from your archival computers. Quickly, there is little time! I will re-create all the original conditions, and the starting point from which the empire will burgeon! All will be foreordained! The war with Hulmu must continue eternally!"

Inpriss Sorce gave a little cry. "Must I go through it all again?" she quavered.

"There may be variations," the resonant voice said in a near-whisper. "Perhaps next time you will live in peace. Perhaps, too, some other officer of the Time Service, not Captain Mond Aton, will become familiar with the strat and be called upon to fight the Minion. Only one thing is important: if the empire falls and cannot be reformed, then mankind falls to Hulmu, and monsters crawl out of the deeps of potential time to claim the Earth."

While the machine spoke, the archivists were busy doing

its bidding; the Imperator could not be argued with.

And when the time-distorter was triggered and mighty energies began issuing from its mouth, and when at the same time they all began to fade out of existence, Aton, holding Inpriss' hand, felt in the depths of his being that this was not the end, that he would be called on, once more, to be a servant of the empire, and that the war was, truly, eternal.

Chapter Eleven

"These pi-mesons certainly are tricky fellers," said Dwight Rilke.

"Tricky as hell," agreed Humbart.

Rilke threw down his pencil and leaned back. Vague thoughts and ideas drifted through his mind, all related to the main problem: how to isolate pi-mesons in a stable state, for long enough and in sufficient quantity to do something with them.

His gaze fell on the computer across the room. Its unusual bulk was due to the fact that it incorporated its own compact nuclear power unit as insurance against the erratic electricity supply. The civil disturbances were becoming more pronounced of late and the computer did most of the administrative work for the branch.

Rilke had decided on a nickname for the machine, because of the imperious way it delivered data.

He would call it Imperator.

The door opened. One of the staff girls came in with a sheaf of reports.

"Thank you, Miss Sorce," Absol Humbart said.



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