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# SECRET AGENT OF TERRA

JOHN BRUNNER

Vultures from the A-Power orbit

First Book  
Publication



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# SECRET AGENT OF TERRA

by

JOHN BRUNNER

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THE RIM OF SPACE

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## Chapter 1

THIS YEAR the first new moon of spring fell early, and in the hill passes the way was still slippery with ice, and at night when the caravan made bivouac they got their water in the form of pailfuls of snow that they had to melt down, while shivering around their fires. But those who traveled this route knew Trader Heron, master of the caravan, and plodded on with good will. To reach the city Carrig before the day of the king-hunt would mean much extra profit; there, the coming of spring seemed to thaw people's purses as it thawed the snow of the hills.

As early as last evening, though, they had come into the Carrig domains, and met the winter watchmen descending from the high forts, and done some small impromptu trading with peasants. Their pack animals found the good metaled roads restful after the rutted hill-tracks. Secure in the knowledge that bandits had not penetrated Carrig's frontiers in living memory, merchants, drovers, hangers-on and soldiers alike relaxed into laughter and song as they rode or marched.

Trader Heron himself was not least pleased among the company. He was a large, jolly-faced man, far more affable than most who enjoyed such power and influence. Even his fiercest rivals in the trade disliked him only for his business acumen, not for himself.

He had a house and a wife in each of the four cities where he regularly worked his trade, but in no place could he settle. He had spent the past winter in an enterprise over the sea to the west, the sea to which Carrig's own river ran.



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He had returned less than a month ago. He sat his huge riding-graat like a cheerful statue, the brim of his flat hat tilted back from his face, the twenty capes of his great-coat falling around him like the roofs of a pagoda.

Thoughtfully he looked towards the rising heights of the city and wondered what he would find on this crucial visit.

Close beside him rode two men from the southland with whom he had struck up something of an acquaintance during the trip. It was common for southlanders to accompany caravans to Carrig. Most often they were merchants, or artisans who had heard that their skills were in demand in the northern towns; some were mercenaries, some few were men fleeing blood-guilt, condemned to five or ten years' exile. Also, there were entertainers seeking new audiences, and in the height of summer there were usually a few pilgrims.

The two southerners who rode with him had taken Heron's attention first because they seemed to fit none of these classes. Obviously highborn, from their sophisticated, even arrogant, bearing and their educated interest in the country through which they were passing, they could not be wealthy, for their possessions seemed to consist of two riding-graats each, on one of which turn and turn about they loaded their clothing, provisions and utensils. Neither of them had any personal attendants.

By name they were Belfeor and Pargetty, but as these were two of the commonest southern patronymics, Heron was little helped by that. He had privately decided they must be renegade younger sons of some noble family, and turning to adventure for want of a better career.

They interested him greatly, for in talking at night around the fire they had revealed a skepticism and rationality rare among the superstitious local people, even to questioning the divine right of the gods to order human lives by whim. Heron hoped that he would not lose track of them when the caravan halted at Carrig.



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The city Carrig had grown organically from its situation, like a forest spreading. Near the Smoking Hills, which curved about it in the north, like the arc of a bent bow, the land was wonderfully fertile, because lava breaks down rapidly into productive soil. Hence there was soon a surplus of food.

Only a few miles distant a great river turned from a rushing rocky torrent to a broad, calm, navigable waterway flowing west into the ocean. Accordingly, a settlement grew up at the highest navigable point; soon its overlords, who were raftsmen and boatbuilders, grew fat on taxes and commission by trading dried sea fish for vegetables and meat in casks of brine. Out of self-interest they spent some of their profits in building a good river port with wooden jetties, and later stone quays, and in hiring mercenaries to guard their cargoes from bandits.

Meanwhile, cities in the southland began to prosper, and the occasional straggling bands of peddlers and pilgrims who followed the north-south road through a pass in the Smoking Hills and continued to the northern sanctuaries—then greatly revered for their oracles—developed into caravans numbering hundreds of pack animals and more than a thousand people. It was logical to divert their progress to include a halt in Carrig. To encourage them, the lord of Carrig built a bridge a couple of miles upstream of the city and saved them from having to ford the river.

Over the generations the sanctuaries lost some of their attraction; other cults supplanted the most ancient. Nowadays barely one caravan in four continued north of Carrig, and then mainly for religious purposes—in summer, convoying pilgrims, or to guard a valuable offering made by some wealthy but superstitious southerner clinging doggedly to antique beliefs.

Dominating Carrig was a last outcrop of the hard rock over which the river tumbled in its upper reaches. On this acropolis a fortress and a temple loomed like thunderclouds. The fortress was of gray local stone, the temple of a pinkish rock that had been floated upstream on flat-bottomed barges, but the greater part of the city that wandered haphazardly



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from the foot of the citadel towards the river was of wood.

So also was the bridge, before which the caravan had to halt for customs inspection and to allow the graats to go across not more than ten at a time. Despite careful maintenance, the planked flooring groaned under the weight of this load.

At the head of the procession Trader Heron reined his graat to a halt. Patiently the big-headed beast snuffled and grunted its needless conversation with itself. From the guard-house, officers known to him came striding; one of them called out as he approached, to dismiss the runner who had brought news of the caravan's arrival in Carrig territory. Saluting, the man hurried across the bridge towards the town.

His business with the customs officers did not take long. He had been passing this way four times a year for better than twelve years, and could safely leave the routine to his overseers. Leaning forward on his saddle, he addressed the senior of the officers.

"You'll understand that if we do not gain audience with Sir Bavis Knole before sundown, we'll be constrained to wait out the week of the king-hunt without our licenses. You'll allow me to go forward at once, and those under my aegis with me?"

"Surely!" the officer replied at once. "Leave but enough to move the beasts when the inspection's done, and we'll not require your further presence, Trader!"

"I thank you heartily," Heron said, and swept his hat off with a bow. With a nod to an overseer nearby he indicated that some suitable gift should be given to the co-operative officer, and then he turned to Belfeor and Pargetty.

"For religious reasons no business is done for a week following sundown on the evening of the spring new moon," Heron explained. "Without casting ourselves on the protection of the city, and gaining citizens' rights thereby, we're not allowed to trade, to buy and sell in public places, or to seek work. Nor have we the protection of the police. We must hasten to the fortress and seek audience. To miss the



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chance to trade during the week of the king-hunt would be a sore loss."

Belfeor, dark-browed and heavy-set, exchanged a glance with his fair companion Pargetty. They nodded agreement and moved their steeds forward as Heron did.

"You spoke of religious reasons," Belfeor said when they had gone a little way. Heron fancied that Pargetty shot him a warning glance, but could not decide why. "As I heard it, is this king-hunt not rather a matter of politics?"

"Here in Carrig the two go thus." Heron held up his right hand with the first and index fingers crossed. "Their customs are strange ones indeed."

"For myself," Belfeor said, "I think nothing human can be called strange."

Heron's turn to shoot a glance at him. That was a highly sophisticated statement for a southerner to make. In Carrig it would probably be unthinkable. Oh, yes! Belfeor and his companion were going to be worth cultivating.

Neutrally, he said, "Well, I'm a roving man, and I have to act as I'm required wherever I go. Certainly to me it seems as you have said."

They were coming now toward the city itself; it had no wall about it, for in the days when bandits used to sweep by here the whole populace could find refuge in the citadel, and now—when twenty such citadels would not hold everyone—the bandits were stood off at frontiers a day's march distant. It was clear that people were preparing for festivities; over the doors of houses and shops, symbols of the clans had been put up, which was allowed at this season only, except where a shopkeeper had contracted to confine his trade to nobles of a single clan, and on many street corners as well as in the vast market place near the waterfront sharp-faced men had set up betting tables. Chalked on boards behind them were the current odds. This year one name headed every list: Saikmar, son of Corrie, of the Clan Twywit.

Heron, who had come for the king-hunt twelve years running, had never seen such low odds or such unanimity.



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Indeed, a few of the boards offered one thousand to one in favor of Saikmar to discourage further bets.

"They bet on the success of the contenders?" Belfeor said in a wondering tone. "This does surprise me."

"Many say it's disrespectful. But, you see, there has been the interregnum of eighteen years, and hence the city has been ruled by the Clan Parradile, who for their totem-kinship with the king cannot take part in the hunt. Some say that betting has been encouraged to degrade the status of the contending clans in the eyes of the common folk."

"As well it may," Belfeor answered, nodding at Heron's explanation.

At the foot of the citadel they had to leave their steeds. Followed by all the other southerners who had come with the caravan, who had had to walk anyway lacking beasts to ride, they ascended the winding path to the palace and there found they were both expected and forestalled. Accordingly, their eyes always anxiously on the slanting sun, they waited in patience for their chance of audience.

Sir Bavis Knole would gladly have consigned those who plagued him with business on this of all days to the pit of the biggest volcano in the Smoking Hills, but for one thing: it was unlucky to begin a new year with business unfinished, and though he had been lord of Carrig for eighteen years he was not a king. He was a priest. The king slept yonder in the warm caves, where tomorrow men would go to startle him awake.

Therefore, his belly churning beneath his cassock like a pot of soup stirred with a spoon, Sir Bavis dealt with the matters before him with such grace as he could muster.

There was the question of sixty peasants who had fled their village when the spring eruptions proved greater than usual. They brought the sulfurous smell of the Smoking Hills into the very audience hall; it hung about their unwashed bodies and their tattered clothes. These were shiftless, greedy men and women whose only virtue was persistence. Two or three of the families represented among them had been driven



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from their holdings by lava ten times in as many generations, and had still gone back as though fatally hypnotized by the luring smoke of the hills.

Sir Bavis dealt with their case quickly.

A man like Trader Heron though, you could not dismiss in a hurry. He was too wealthy and too powerful to cross. Sir Bavis, much against his will, accorded him almost an hour of talk and spent some time beyond that in an exchange of gifts.

Finally, as custom required, the travelers from the south who had crossed the passes under Trader Heron's aegis came to cast themselves on the city, thereby acquiring temporary right of citizenship. The notators listed the names of those concerned as well as they could, and issued them with certificates on porcelain to that effect, each certificate being a whitish plaque as big as a man's palm.

Among the applicants, Sir Bavis noted two who were apart from the ordinary run of artisans, entertainers and foot-loose adventurers. Instead of standing by respectfully while Trader Heron discussed his business, they took seats beside him, and from the fact that he made no objection it was clear that he too regarded them as persons of some status.

Heron did not offer to present them, but that was customary. Until they received their certificates of citizens' rights they did not officially exist. Sir Bavis listened as they gave their names to the notators, and made a mental note—for what purpose, he did not know—that the dark one was Belfeor, and the fair, lean one was Pargetty.

As they withdrew, he had a curious feeling that Belfeor was looking not merely at, but *into* him, searching out the secret Sir Bavis would far rather have kept. Of course, the idea was sheer nonsense. But it was disquieting.

The great doors of the audience hall closed. At once servants began to bring in benches for the assembly this evening, ranging them in groups for the various clans, and to change the stubs of last night's torches in the brass wall sconces. Sir Bavis did not move from his great throne.

*Tomorrow . . .*



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There was a sudden sharp pain in his chest—a pain that he could not localize, neither on the surface like a blow, nor from the surface inward like a sword cut. He seemed to be embedded in it; he felt his heart slow and falter, and the hall grew dark. Like a drowning man fighting back to the air, he mastered it and hauled himself back to the world, panting.

He looked around covertly. No one seemed to have noticed. Outwardly Sir Bavis was as he had always been—more care-lined, older, of course. But strong. And yet a god's hand had reached into his body and closed on his heart, warningly.

Sir Bavis Knole, chief of Clan Parradile, had ruled now eighteen years in Carrig, for no one had slain the king in all that time. With every passing year the king had grown more huge and stronger and wiser. It seemed at last to Sir Bavis that he had foolishly and vaingloriously thought he would do the same. Yet what plainer warning than the shadow of death falling into his vigorous life could he seek to prove himself wrong?

No; he *had* been wrong. These eighteen years that he imagined he had gained for himself by his own cunning and his own schemes—they were after all a loan from the gods. And now his stewardship was over. It was useless to rail at it.

With the decision the pain eased, and his heart resumed its regular rhythm. Oh, the omen was unmistakable! This year, then, let the king-hunt go forward without interference, even though men said Saikmar of the Clan Twywit was sure to kill the king. Let him! Let the gods' will be manifest, and put an end to this masquerade.

Sir Bavis, his head cleared and cooled by making up his mind, rose to his feet and walked majestically from the hall.



## Chapter 2

HERON RODE slowly through the crowded city streets with the southern strangers beside him.

Coming to the market place, they found that the caravan had already been passed by the customs and was milling around as harassed overseers tried to sort out groups of pack animals. They tried to keep track of mercenaries whose contracts called on them to stand guard tonight over the valuables and who kept tending to vanish in the direction of taverns nearby. Offers of accommodation were allotted to those in need.

Of course, people who meant to sell their goods tomorrow wanted to sleep as near as they could to the market place and insure an early chance at the best sites for stalls; but those who were merely weary also wanted beds close at hand, rather than having to traipse to the outskirts of the city for the night.

Heron lowered himself from his saddle and waddled into the middle of the confusion. With sharp orders and ripe insults he brought some kind of order out of it, and returned at last to Belfeor and Pargetty with a satisfied expression.

"Well, gentlemen!" he said. "What have you in mind to do now?"

Belfeor shrugged. "To find where we can sleep, I suppose," he said.

"You'll have no luck so close to the market now; we'll fill most beds in town. Before we reached here all the peasants from the neighboring villages will have brought their earliest spring produce. You see, most everyone comes to the king-



hunt, the greatest festival of Carrig's year. Look you, though, I have a house here, small but comfortable, and were you willing to sleep in one room you'd be my honored guests."

He thought for a moment that Pargetty was going to refuse, but Belfeor smiled quickly and cut in before his friend could speak.

"We'd be more than glad," he said. "I may say we've enjoyed your company too much to relinquish it before we must, and hope you think the same."

Pargetty said, "But—"

"Our business will not suffer by it," Belfeor interrupted. "Is that what worries you?"

Pargetty nodded, and Heron noted with interest. *So they have business here! They never spoke of it before*, he thought.

He wondered what kind of business it could be.

"What happens this evening in connection with the king-hunt?" Belfeor asked, falling in beside Heron as they moved from the market.

"Oh, when the evening star comes out, as I understand it, Sir Bavis must declare the season of the king-hunt open; then there will be an assembly of all the clans, who'll put forward their chosen contenders, one from each. These then will be dedicated, and must watch the night through till dawn; the other nobles have a great feast in the fortress.

"Tomorrow they will go to wake the king from his lair. Sometimes it takes a day or two to find what cave he's chosen for his winter sleep, though usually it's marked the year before. And then in the rising currents of hot air above the Smoking Hills the contenders do battle with him, till he is slain—and this king has lasted eighteen years thus—or till all the gliders are brought down. Some skillful challengers, they say, have remained aloft in constant battle for three days and nights, until the king was wearied and slow and a dart found him. But that was years ago."

"And he who kills the king?"

"Rules from that day till the next year. At present it is under the law of the interregnum; the Clan Parradile holds



power, so all the other clans attack together—Clan Parradile, you understand, being barred from killing the king. Were it otherwise, were another clan ruling, then he who killed the king the previous year would go forth alone first of all, for a chance to renew his power. So, usually, he does, for the old king will have killed all serious rivals of his own kind, and a new king is often young and weak. But this one, they say, after eighteen years' experience, is mightier than ever was seen before."

"You've seen him?" Belfeor suggested.

"From a distance," Heron shrugged. "For myself, I'd willingly go no closer to him than a day's fast march."

Having arrived at his house, Heron allotted attendants to wait on Belfeor and Pargetty, and was surprised half an hour later, when he was himself being washed and dressed in clean clothes, to see these same attendants returning to him. He demanded the reason.

"Your guests, sir," one of them explained, "declared their intention of giving thanks for a safe journey before a portable shrine they carry with them, and ordered us to leave them in peace while they did so."

Unbidden, there came a prickling at the back of Heron's neck. He got to his feet, thrusting aside those waiting on him, and went the length of the passage from his own suite to the room he had given his visitors. He walked quietly for all his bulk, automatically remembering every loose board and avoiding it.

Not caring that some of his servants had followed him and were watching him with amazement, he put his eye to a fine crack in the slatted wall. The window of this room was to the west, and sunlight slanted brightly in, falling directly on his mysterious guests. He had a perfect view of their portable shrine. He knew very well indeed what it was. He had one himself.

It was a subspace communicator.

He took a pace back and to the side, poising himself opposite the door. With a curt order he commanded his servants



to follow him. No time for precautions now. He had to act, and act quickly. He flung himself forward.

The door's wooden lock was not designed to withstand almost two hundred pounds of determination. It snapped; the door shot back and let Heron pass to take his stand in the middle of the room facing the astonished southerners. Southerners hell! No wonder he hadn't been able to place them. They were from off the planet!

He had hardly spoken Galactic except to make his quarterly reports since he was posted here. But it was his native tongue, and his alarm and amazement made it automatic that he should utter his angry demand in it.

"Who the hell are you? And what are you doing?"

Pargetty, at the controls of the communicator, was absolutely thunderstruck. But Belfeor, moving as though he had been expecting this moment for weeks and had prepared for it, took up something else that lay on the table with the communicator. An energy gun. An old one, but serviceable.

With a blazing bolt he cut Heron down where he stood, and the servants—to whom it was as though he had wielded the lightning—screamed, turned tail, and fled for their lives.

In the stone-walled room where his valets were robing him for the ceremony Sir Bavis called for a harper to quiet his jangled nerves. The man bowed with a flourish and demanded his master's preference of songs.

"Sing the *Ballad of Red Sloin*," Sir Bavis ordered.

The harper bowed again, seated himself on a velvet stool, brushed back his long dark hair, and struck a chord. In his ringing tenor voice he began.

*I sing the honor and renown,  
The glory brought on Carrig town,  
When first Clan Parradile was—*

"Stop!" said Sir Bavis, so sharply that his valets exchanged glances of alarm. "Not that one! The old one!" He heard his voice ragged with tension.

The harper was not the least astonished of the company. He said doubtfully. "But, the old one is—"



"The old one, I said!"

The harper shrugged and began again.

*I sing a hero of renown,  
Red Sloin who came to Carrig Town,  
A stranger and a man of might . . .*

Listening, Sir Bavis felt a grim stir of satisfaction. It was as though he was regulating accounts with the gods.

The *Ballad of Red Sloin* was so old no man knew when it was made; it told how the first interregnum had come about. There had been nine clans then, instead of the present eight, and the chief of the ninth—Clan Graat—was a treacherous schemer, hated by all. But his son was the most skillful glider pilot of his day, and as spring of the year approached men were certain that he would be the one to kill the king. His clan would achieve power, and would then sell the city to a tribe of bandits who had beseiged it for three summers running.

From the south, then, came Red Sloin, a mighty stranger, and he spoke up in the assembly called at the beginning of the king-hunt. Though he was not a clansman, it was agreed that he should be permitted to go out with the other contenders, for no one imagined he had a chance.

But he dashed his glider against the king's neck, and fell together with the king into the smoking pit of a volcano, and thus laid clear the way for the chief of Clan Parradile to take power, which he did. His first act was to extirpate the treacherous Clan Graat down to the last child. Afterwards the bandits were driven off and peace returned.

During the eighteen years that Sir Bavis had now ruled, the harpers—perhaps out of a deliberate wish to flatter him—had taken to making Red Sloin's part in the story smaller and smaller, and Clan Parradile's far larger. But they remembered the original version, and it seemed right to Sir Bavis that it should now be restored.

The harper's song was dying to a close when the door was slammed back and his son Ambrus came hurrying in.

"Respect, father," he said, making a perfunctory bow, and not waiting for the formal answer before charging ahead. "I



would know whether what is to be done should be done now or in the morning."

"What?" said Sir Bavis stonily, looking the youth up and down. He had sometimes wondered about his wife's constancy, seeing this black-browed youth with the sullen mouth and the fierce face devoid of subtlety. Himself, though men might say he was strong as a pillar of the fortress and as hard as its stones, he had ever appeared what he was—a man whose greatest strength lay in his mind, who would not strike down what he could undermine. Nonetheless, he knew how rarely a strain bred true from generation to generation.

Not understanding, Ambrus stared at his father. He said, "Why—what has to be done, I'm talking of!"

Sir Bavis leaned back in his high-armed chair. He said, "Tell me, Ambrus, who do men say stands the best chance tomorrow?"

At last the youth was catching on. He brightened. Sir Bavis prompted him further. Though surely only a dummy would fail to realize that a servant's mouth could be unlocked when a noble's could not, and that those who attended him were servants nonetheless, not to be party to deadly secrets. "For example," he pursued, "do men speak well of Saikmar, son of Corrie, of Clan Twywit?"

"Indeed!" Ambrus confirmed, pretending enthusiasm. "It's said he's the cleverest seen in forty years."

"Then before the week is out we may see a new clan ruling in this fortress." Sir Bavis spoke with equanimity, but he saw Ambrus's face go darker than ever with jealousy. "Well, since men regard him so highly—"

He broke off. A sudden renewed stab of pain had come to him. He closed his eyes.

There was a pattern to this dialogue. It had been spoken each year for many years. It concerned a certain porcelain jar that waited, well-stoppered, in a locked chest in an adjoining room. The jar held a brew of herbs and fungi of which twenty drops would fuddle the strongest man. Sixteen times at the start of the king-hunt, Sir Bavis had



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sent a luck-cup to the most fancied contender—or contenders. Spiked with the brew.

And yet this year, whenever he thought of it, the hand of a god closed squeezing on his heart.

He opened his eyes and looked harshly round at his servants. "Are you done?" he said.

They nodded fearfully, reading anger in his face and wondering whether it concerned them.

"Then get gone!"

They went, scurrying like little thievish animals. Only Ambrus remained. Getting to his feet, Sir Bavis began to pace up and down before his son, welcoming the renewed pounding of his heart. He did not look at him.

He said at length. "We will send no luck-cup to Saikmar."

Ambrus took half a step forward, words boiling to his lips. "But father! This is—"

"Silence!" Like a spear, the word halted Ambrus. Sir Bavis continued, fumbling for words.

"Son, I have perhaps led you to—to an overly-light regard for the gods. I have been tempted—oh, I admit it freely—to change matters, organize things as I would have them, not as the gods willed. Or so I thought. But it was all illusion, for what the gods will, they will, and men they use as their instruments. We have prospered for a long time—but not of our own cunning; rather from sufferance from *them*. And the end is now."

He could not express the sense that went deeper than words, the sense of impending death and beyond death the pit of torment in the Smoking Hills. He could only say words. "Eighteen years, Ambrus, have made the king mighty beyond belief. Perhaps I have helped him. Perhaps but for me, and the luck-cups I have sent annually, he would have been laid low. But now it is time to make an end of interfering. We must cast our destiny to him, and rely on his strength and cunning."

He could read the rebellion in Ambrus's eyes, to which words were no answer. Ambrus was saying, "But that this



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womanish Saikmar should oust Clan Parradile from ruling! It's unspeakable!"

"If it happens, it happens," his father answered heavily.

"It must not!" Ambrus stamped his foot. "Oh, why was I born into Clan Parradile that's permitted to rule only when others default?"

"You're greedy!" snapped Sir Bavis. "Envious of power! I am ashamed for you. Do not men pray as they lie dying to be reborn into this clan you hold so lightly? Do they not call it an honor?"

"Oh, for you to speak is well enough!" Ambrus countered. "How do you think I should feel, to see hope of such estate as you've enjoyed for eighteen years snatched from me?"

"By your speech and actions now, you seem ill-fitted for it!" Sir Bavis retorted.

For a moment Ambrus was at a loss for words. His eyes narrowed. Finding himself beside a low table, he planted a balled fist on it for a prop and leaned forward. He said, "You say so. How shall I prove you wrong? Shall I arm my glider and go forth tomorrow to contend with the king? Better that I should lay him low than that—that weakling Saikmar!"

All Sir Bavis's old strength came back with a sudden torrent of rage and horror. He strode towards his son, snapped his fingers on the youth's ear like the jaws of a parradile, and used the pain as a lever to bend him from the waist. As he had not done since Ambrus was twelve years old, he clouted him enormously on the seat of his breeches.

"Go!" he said thickly when he had delivered the blow. "Go and purify your mouth before you dare speak to me again—or anyone! Go and atone for your sacrilege!"

As though realizing at last the weight of what he had said, Ambrus's anger gave way to fear, and he made no move against his father. His mouth working, but not uttering a word, he turned blindly to the door and went out. Shocked to the core, Sir Bavis remained alone. That his son should speak of going forth against the king—himself a member of



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the king's clan! How far was it from there to speaking of killing a brother, or even his father?

He had waited some minutes to recover his calm when there was a tap on the floor outside and the chief acolyte came with his staff of office to say that the sun would soon be setting. Sir Bavis straightened himself and took the staff, hoping that no one had heard what Ambrus had said. He could read no disdain in the acolyte's eyes, and that was good.

He went up the winding stair that led to the topmost parapet of the highest watchtower, hearing in the distance the confused noise of the nobles as they arrived for the assembly which would follow the sunset ritual. Emerging on the flat stage that circled the top of the tower, he found all in order—robed acolytes, servers, sages, his kinfolk who wore the proud symbol of the priestly clan, the stylized two-winged shape of the parradile, their cousin. He greeted them stiffly as he went by.

At last he came to the western battlements, and looked toward the twin furnaces of the sunset and the Smoking Hills. Already the reddish disc of the sun was misshapen by the hot air rising over the volcanic range. And the wind must be from that quarter, for he could smell—

No. The scent of burning was from close at hand. Glancing down over the city, he could make out a smear of smoke indicating the site of a house afire. Fortunately it was not far from the river, which meant plenty of water to protect nearby buildings. From the volume and density of the smoke it was clear there was small chance of saving the house itself.

Out of curiosity he called to one of the youngest servers behind him. "See you there!" he said, pointing. "Do your sharp young eyes tell you whose house is burning?"

The youth hesitated. "It would be—Trader Heron's." he said doubtfully. "But there is too much smoke to be sure."

His of all people! Sir Bavis nodded thoughtfully. The fault of a servant, surely; Heron was himself a careful man.

Then he glanced up, and saw that while he was distracted the evening star had come out like a water-white jewel on the



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dying-coal color of the sky. All else was instantly forgotten except the ritual words; he raised his staff and pointed towards the star.

"Tomorrow it is lawful that the king be killed!"

### Chapter 3

SAIKMAR, son of Corrie of Clan Twywit, moved as in a dream to take his place in the hall of audience. In his veins the blood seemed to rush like a mountain torrent; he felt he was watching his own actions from a distance, as a man does when drunkenness severs the body from the mind's control without blurring the mind's awareness. Yet this was in no way like being drunk; it was closer to a state of ecstasy.

Those about him—his mother, his uncle who had stood guardian to him since his father's death, his sister, his aunts and cousins to the fourth and fifth degree—were proud of him. As he passed by them on the way to his seat in the front rank, they clapped him on the shoulder or called encouragement to him. But he was not proud of himself. His ecstasy was beyond pride. He was not completely here in the hall. Part of him was out there above the Smoking Hills, riding the turbulent air in a flimsy glider—already lost in tomorrow.

He was dimly aware that most eyes were upon him, but took no notice. Those eyes were seeing a youth as tall as a man, but curiously slim, all his bones even to those of his skull being narrow and light—birdlike, people said. A few years ago none would have wagered on him as a possible contender, for he spent his time dancing, studying, singing, and climbing trees by himself away from the rough-and-



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tumble of his fellows. Now he was eighteen, and had learned to express his dancer's grace through the medium of a glider, and his light build and nervously quick reactions had marked him out far above the rest.

Limping a little—he had been thrown by a spirited graat and broken a leg that healed short—his uncle, Sir Malan Corrie, chief of the clan, took his place on one side of Saikmar, and his mother on the other. His mother was queenly still, though growing old, and carried herself grandly.

And now Sir Bavis was emerging from the doors behind the dais, surrounded by his acolytes and servers and all his splendid retinue. Saikmar's eyes fastened on the face above the glossy black beard. Could it be true, as men said, that this noble head of the noblest clan, the priestly clan, had drugged contenders year by year to insure they would not kill the king? Could it be? Oh, that was past belief! That ringing voice as it uttered invocations to the gods sounded like a bell of sincerity, resonating all through him.

Then, when the invocations were done, there came the appeal for contenders against the king. Saikmar felt his heartbeat quicken; he turned to look at the first of his rivals as he rose to give his name to the notator for the record. Of course, the contenders had been selected weeks ago. But for the sake of form the notators had to hear them speak for themselves and write the names down.

In old days, ancient traditions reported, the pattern was not so rigid; contenders were not confined to one from each clan, and even men from outside the Carrig territory had been permitted to attempt the king's life. Red Sloin, for instance, about whom a famous ballad had been made. Saikmar, waiting his turn to speak, heard a few lines of that song in his memory.

Then his uncle was urging him to rise, and he was on his feet. Making his voice as deep as he could—for it was high and clear, and sometimes he was taunted because it had never actually broken, merely slid from the boy's treble to a youth's tenor—he announced his name, his clan, and his intention to go forth to hunt the king.



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One moment later he had forgotten, and was lost anew in visions of the hunt.

It was not until after the last contender had been listed that he was recalled to reality, and then in a strange, unlooked-for way. The great doors at the rear of the hall had been heard to open, but none had looked round, assuming that with the approach of darkness servants were coming to light the torches, or to attend to some other necessary task. Now, though, from a pool of shadow a bass voice rang out.

"And I! I also would go forth against your king!"

Startled—Sir Bavis perhaps most startled of all—the assembly stared towards the back of the hall. Emerging from his shadow, the speaker proved to be a man of at least thirty, possibly older, heavy-set, with dark brows. He wore a southland costume of loose belted shirt and flapping breeches, and he hooked his thumbs defiantly into the belt as he faced the hostile glaring of the assembly.

After a moment's silence, the indignation of the nobles broke out like floodwater breaching a dam, and Sir Bavis had to command a trumpeter to blast on his horn before he could cut through the tumult. When he had a semblance of silence, he demanded of the stranger, "Who are you? Where are you from?"

"Belfeor is my name!" the intruder said loudly. "And I am from the south. And do not tell me I have no right to offer myself as a contender against the king. Red Sloin was so permitted; I ask no more."

Considering what he had been through this past hour and a half, Belfeor reflected with grim satisfaction, he felt he had made an impressive entry. Of all the incredibly bad luck, to fall in with a galactic agent—to find themselves in his very house! When, at the most, there could be hardly a dozen such agents on the planet, and probably half that many.

Still, it had not turned out too badly. Though Pargetty was inclined to panic at first, he had to agree that if Heron—or whatever his real name was—had charged in so stupidly,



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and spoken to them in Galactic, this was the first inkling he had had of his guests' off-planet origin. Which in turn implied that they had disguised themselves well. And further meant that he had had no chance to report their presence to the authorities.

All was not lost, therefore. But they had to move quickly. They snatched up the communicator and hurried out of the room.

"Burn the house!" Belfeor snapped to Pargetty. "We've a good chance they'll believe the servants to be mad—at least until tomorrow, and by then we should be in a position of power."

Pargetty, pale-faced, gave a nod and fumbled out his own energy gun from under his shirt. Sighting to the other end of the long passage, he started a fire there also. Then they descended the staircase to the stable-yard behind the house, they completed their work with two more shots through windows.

"That'll occupy their minds," Belfeor said grimly. "It's good dry timber—it'll be a furnace in no time. We've got to get lost in the city now."

"How long until the assembly meets in the fortress?" Pargetty panted.

"Have to be there as soon as the evening star comes out, apparently. That's two of this system. Blast Heron for interrupting! I wanted an accurate time-check from the ship."

"Think they'll assume something's gone wrong?"

"Of course they will. Your first job is to find somewhere you can set the communicator up again and explain what happened. Make sure no panic action is taken. Explain very carefully that Heron couldn't have passed the word to anyone, and that there's no reason not to go ahead as planned. Probably Heron used his caravan as a cover for a regular beat, and that means there can't be a permanent agent in Carrig. By the time news of what's happened to him filters through to another agent on this planet, we'll have had months to get dug in."



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Pargetty nodded doubtfully. "I wish we hadn't fallen down like this!"

"That was a risk we had to take. Now get moving. I'll see you tonight at—no, of course I won't. If they accept me, and there's no reason they shouldn't, I'll have to go through with this all-night watching and the rest of the mumbo jumbo. You're on your own, then. I'll link up when I've killed the king. Don't do anything rash!"

And then there was no problem except to get into the fortress, which he managed with a cover story so flimsy he could hardly believe it, though he had been assured beforehand by experts it would succeed. All he did was to show the guards a little southland trinket and tell them it was a luck charm he wanted to give to Saikmar. And they let him by. Obviously they had bet heavily on Saikmar, and wanted him to have all the luck that was going.

If the hint about Red Sloin was equally effective—whoever Red Sloin might have been—he was certain of bringing off his gigantic gamble.

All the time that the argument was raging in the hall, Saikmar was staring, puzzled, towards the intruder. He looked *old*. Old for a contender, anyway. And heavy-built, even stocky. A man like that was hard to picture piloting a glider among the chimneys of the Smoking Hills. Moreover, unless he intended to do as Red Sloin had done in the legend—crash his glider deliberately against the king's neck—how could he hope to lay the king low? Saikmar thought he had a slender chance himself, but he had practiced daily except in the bitterest month of winter since he was fifteen years old.

And this Belfeor did not have the air of a man who wanted to die.

Behind Saikmar there was sudden clamor. Luchan, who had been last year's contender on behalf of Clan Twyvit and whose glider had crashed after a blow from the king's left pinion, leaving him less of a man by one arm and one eye, was on his feet, pointing accusingly at Sir Bavis on the dais.



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"Your doing!" he barked. "A scheme of yours to keep power in the hands of Clan Parradile!"

Instantly there was fresh uproar, and the waves of sound beat at Saikmar's head like fists. Other ready accusers were found from other clans, and slanders were soon being hurled like darts. At last Saikmar could stand it no longer, and stood up bellowing for silence.

Because he was the champion, they shamefacedly allowed him to be heard. He did not plan the words; they merely tumbled out of him. He shouted, "Has none of you a grain of sense? Have you looked at this man Belfeor? Have you wondered if he can fly a glider? Have you wondered what chance he has against the king?"

Apparently they had not; they studied him thoughtfully now.

"Were you Sir Bavis, and had you some dirty scheme to twist the plan of the gods, would you pick such a man? I've no idea what drives him to make his challenge, but so far as I can see he knows nothing of what's called for—seeks only to gamble on a chance of power. Let him! If he matches himself with Red Sloin, let him! If he's as good a man as Red Sloin was, he'll prove himself; if not, he'll meet inglorious death. I say he is welcome to break his neck."

Breathing hard, Saikmar sat down, astonished at himself. His mother bent over and whispered some compliment in his ear.

"But it's against all custom," a doubtful voice said from the left of the hall.

"Against custom perhaps." Sir Bavis seemed to have recovered his aplomb completely and spoke with his usual authority. "But against the law it is not. Saikmar son of Corrie has spoken well. And I may say I have seen this upstart Belfeor but once before, when he came with Trader Heron today to claim a certificate of citizens' rights. Beyond that I know nothing about him."

Throughout the long debate Belfeor had said nothing; he had stood in the same defiant pose with thumbs hooked in his belt. Now he raised his voice.



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"Am I accepted, then?"

"Against my will, against the will of us all, but because it must be done, you are accepted," said Sir Bavis bitterly.

"Good!" Belfeor said, and grinned around at the scowling nobles. "Moreover, friends, I'm not here as one who lightly gambles his life. Perhaps in a day or two we'll see those sneers on the other side of your heads!"

Seeing the man's utter self-confidence, Saikmar had a chill of apprehension. It was absurd to think this upstart might succeed! And yet, such assurance must be rooted somewhere.

### Chapter 4

NOT MERELY a madman, but an unbeliever too. Surely he had no chance of success! In the dark side-chapel of the great temple, Saikmar's head still rang, hours later, with what the upstart Belfeor had said. It was the custom that each contender should watch the night through in the chapel where stood his own clan's symbol and the statues of the patron gods appropriate to them; belonging to no clan, the intruder put the priests in a quandary over where he should be set to keep his watch.

And Belfeor had said in loud cheerful tones such as men never used in the temple, "Don't mind me. Anywhere comfortable will do."

Leaning back in his hard chair carved of stone, Saikmar stared wondering at the god-statues and the twywit symbol. If Belfeor died in the hunt, of course, this would be fit reward for his profanity. But if he did not . . .



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Doggedly he drove the idea from his mind. He began to meditate on the nature of his clan-animal, the twywit.

A few years ago a great pestilence had almost cleared the territory of twywits to the relief of farmers who had lost children or valuable stock through its ravages, and to the dismay of the clansmen who bore its symbol.

Was it a good thing at all to claim kinship with the twywit, a beast of prey? Saikmar found himself wondering this unexpectedly. He stared at the statue of Maige, goddess of speed and the wind, next to the twywit, and found no information there. There had been a Clan Graat once—mentioned in the *Ballad of Red Sloin*—and this, now he came to think of it, was strange. Because the graat was a riding and pack animal, and very useful, whereas the twywit, the parradile, the coshivor, the arbitz and the rest of the clan totems were wild beasts, to be hunted down.

Could the graat possibly have been a wild and dangerous beast in the days when the clans first chose their totems? It was a new and strange idea. But it fitted.

Saikmar shivered—not only with cold, though in the high-roofed drafty temple at this dead hour of night it was far from warm, but with the impact of his idea. One did not think usually of change in the world—oh, there were petty changes, improvements in the design of a glider wing, new imports from the south, changes of fashion in clothes and manners. But nothing significant.

When you considered that a graat might once have been a wild beast, though. And that there must have been a time when on the site of Carrig there was nothing at all—not even a cluster of clay huts.

Suppose Belfeor did kill the king? What would he do, having no clan? Would he choose to be adopted into one of the existing clans, or would he create a new one for himself? If so, what would he choose as his clan-animal?

Angrily, Saikmar checked the line of thought again. It was ridiculous to think of Belfeor's success. Better to pursue the scarcely less uncomfortable idea of the way things had changed in the past than the way they might change in



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future. He had always been studiously inclined, and he knew most of the old tales that accounted for man's presence in the world. They varied to some extent, but on basics they agreed.

Once men had been like the gods, and had dwelt in a fairer world than this, and had had marvelous powers over nature. But they became arrogant. Seeing this, the gods smote the sun so that it blazed a hundred times more fiercely than usual, as a fire roars up when a poker lets air into its base. Most of the arrogant people were destroyed; only a few, by divine grace, were able to escape the sun's fury. They had fled in a boat across some vast ocean—the sages held that the western ocean was referred to—and for a long while had been compelled to live in a frigid northern wasteland. When at last they were permitted to move back to better lands and a more temperate climate, they were warned that it was only on sufferance; if they offended the gods again, they would be destroyed forever.

It was said further that the custom of the king-hunt had been instituted by the gods as an annual reminder that man was a frail creature. On the other hand, you could point to lands where there was no such custom and argue instead that the king-hunt was developed by men themselves to insure that the cleverest and most skillful became rulers of Carrig, and to bestow on the reigning clan those qualities of strength and cunning men respected in parradiles. But here the matter shaded over into magic, and magic was the province of the Clan Parradile alone; Saikmar knew nothing of it.

Whichever way you looked at it, one fact remained: this was the custom of Carrig, and for it men died yearly. It was not fitting that an irreverent stranger should trample his clumsy feet across sacred ground as Belfeor was doing. Saikmar turned to the other statue flanking the twywit symbol, that of Oric, god of everything sharp—fangs, claws, darts and spears. He besought him to blunt Belfeor's weapons so they would not wound.



Each of the clans had its own launching site for its gliders; the Clan Twywit's was closest of all to the city, and the party accompanying Saikmar the next day, could delay their departure a full hour beyond the others' without risking the loss of a chance at the king. It was almost noon when they took station on the grassy plateau among the volcanic peaks, and looked out over them for signs of activity. Saikmar knew this area better than his own clan's estate, for he had flown over it hundreds of times and each smoking crater was an old friend to him. Yet he found himself shivering as he stared at the landscape, waiting for the riggers to set the glider up.

"Scared?" Luchan said. As a former contender he had insisted on being present at the launching site, though Saikmar would have been happier without him; Luchan's missing arm and closed left eye were unpleasant reminders of what the king could do to an over-bold contender.

"A little," Saikmar acknowledged.

"You've taken nothing of Sir Bavis's?" Luchan suggested. "No luck-cup or anything?"

"Nothing!" Saikmar stared at his companion. "Why?"

Luchan shrugged and gave a twisted smile. "Myself, I did. I think I was unwise. But don't let's blight the day with slanders, anyway. What were you thinking of when I spoke?"

"Of the stranger Belfeor," Saikmar answered. "He gives me a disturbing sense of—of menace."

"Why so?" Luchan laughed. "What menace in such an absurd and foolish man? How will he make shift to join the contest, even? Has he a glider? Has he the skill to use it? Has he flown over the Smoking Hills before? It seems not. What are we to look for except a ridiculous downfall, then?"

Rationally Saikmar had to agree. But he could not still his nagging worry. He turned his eyes again to the distance, and suddenly he stiffened. In the same moment a shrill call came from the keen-eyed lookout on the edge of the plateau.

"They wave the yellow flag! The king's been found!"

At once there was shouting and much haste. Up dashed his uncle to clap Saikmar's shoulder and wish him well; the riggers stood by the weights and winches as he piled into



the fragile shell of the glider and fastened safety lines about him, setting his knife where he could reach it to cut himself loose if he had to. He took hold of the control stick and set it for launching, pushing it well forward so that he could dive from the plateau's edge before rising into the hot up-current of the nearest crater; then there was a moment's wait which seemed long as eternity.

"He comes!" the lookout shrilled at last. And they let go the weights.

Next moment the eyes of everyone else were on the king. Only Saikmar could not yet look at him. He was too busy gentling the glider through the treacherous air, hunting for the upcurrent which would whip him a safe thousand feet higher than the king. When he at last did so, he could look. And caught his breath. No matter how often you flew over the Smoking Hills, he thought, the first time was the time you shared the air with the king-parradile.

He had just taken his first leap into the sky; it was clear from which cave he had emerged, for his stiff tail pointed at it like a signpost. He was black, and blue, and gold, and he shone in the sunlight; under his smooth hide the pumping wing-muscles rippled like waves in oil. Never in living memory had the king lived so long; never in memory or legend had one grown to such a *size*!

Seeing his true proportions, Saikmar was so startled he almost tilted his glider into a stall. The king's body was five times a man's height from shoulders to root of tail, sharp-keeled below, broad and flat above. Tail and neck together added as much again to his length; atop the curving neck the wise old head, hammer-shaped, turned to survey the rising adversaries, for other gliders had taken the air now. And as though defiantly, the king opened his vast jaws in a blood-red yawn, then leaned on his left pinion—sixty feet to the tip now it was full spread!—and stooped into the updraft of a volcano.

Before Saikmar knew what had happened, the king was at his own level and still rising.

Some said that the parradile had learned this trick from



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men; Saikmar had formerly held this to be nonsense, saying that no flying creature could lair among the Smoking Hills and not discover the trick in the course of nature. Yet, watching the intelligence with which the king rode the hot rising air, he understood why people could believe it a learned skill.

As yet, however, it seemed the king was drowsy, for he did no more than glance towards Saikmar's glider and then sheer off in a dive, pumping his wings to work the winter's stiffness out of them. Relieved, for he felt it best to circle a while before planning his first attack, Saikmar decided to gain more height still, and while doing so to see where the other contenders were.

He recognized their various gliders easily enough; each clan had a distinctive color, and painted their craft accordingly. His own was tan, like the face of a twywit. Others were green, slate-colored, blood-red, checkered or striped.

No glider should have been white.

He realized this in the very instant when it happened. The glider that should not have been there, the white one, rose with insolence to confront the king, and something spat from it like lightning in a clear sky. One second later the king—that which had been aerial majesty, wisdom, and doom incarnate—was a blistered, tumbling hulk shorn of a wing, falling like a wounded god towards the pit of a volcano straight below.

And Belfeor the upstart stranger, the intruder from the south without reverence for the gods, had made himself legal lord of Carrig.



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## Chapter 5

THE PAY was the highest in history, because you were paid in life. But because the rewards were so high the conditions were stringent. In other branches of government service you could earn on a four-for-one basis, or six-for-one, or seven-for-one. Only in the Corps Galactica was pay on a ten-to-one scale. Straightforwardly, for every year you spent in the Corps you would be *guaranteed* ten healthy, youthful years of extra life.

But the minimum service contract was ten years, and if you quit—or were thrown out—before those ten years were up, you had lost your chance for good. Nobody got a second try at any career that paid off in longevity treatment.

Maddalena Santos thought of this fact, sitting in the ante-room of the commandant's suite, and was suddenly afraid. She was twenty-five years old. She had just begun to realize what life could mean—what twice a lifetime could mean. And she was afraid she had thoughtlessly found out how to throw her chance of it away.

It was never cold under the dome on this airless world—airless like all Corps bases, so that hyperphotonic ships could come out of subspace almost on its surface—but Maddalena felt herself shivering. There were so few things that a call to the commandant's office could mean, especially when a ship had just docked off a long tour on patrol and might very well be heading back to Earth from here, for a change of crew and a refit. That was the way failed corpsmen went out; back to Earth, or wherever they came from originally. Not many of them were from Earth any longer.



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And there was part of the trouble.

She closed her hands convulsively on the arms of the big chair she sat in and her lips moved silently. They formed words which might have been, *I didn't mean to be like that!*

No. But people too often did things they didn't mean.

Looking back, she saw that coming fresh from Earth's most famous university, proud as all space of her diplomas and degrees, she must have looked arrogant and cocky to these more experienced corpsmen she found herself working with. She just didn't think of them as corpsmen, that was it. It was too far a cry from the glamorous ideal to the hard-bitten, weary, unromantic reality. Subconsciously she found herself looking on her companions as awkward colonials, while she was a sophisticated product of Earth itself.

Obviously, the Earthside way to do things was the best way. Maddalena knew the Earthside way. This made her superior.

It took almost a year for her to realize how she was disliked. With some people it was nearer hate than dislike. And six months beyond that—up till now—to figure out why. She had just got there. She was just learning to feel ashamed of herself, learning to writhe at the memory of her own voice raised as it had been a hundred times in complaint, complaint, complaint!

"There's never any fun around here! You can't think about the work clear round the clock. I wish I was back home. You never need to feel bored on Earth. Always something to do, always something new and exciting."

Or if it wasn't her boredom, it was about the food, or the accommodation, or the smell of the ventilator current, or the incompetent way she thought someone else was handling what was none of her business.

She studied herself in a hand mirror. She blushed. Maybe she'd thought too much of this face and body of hers. Out here on a Corps base two parsecs from a civilized planet a body was a vehicle for getting a mind from place to place. The mind was what counted. It was man's only weapon of last resort against the universe. What she wanted, needed



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to do was to start regarding the good looks that had come with her body as a bonus, not as the important part.

Of course, they were a substantial bonus. She tilted her head a trifle to one side. The blush had gone, leaving her skin as usual—flawless, lightly tanned, with a hint of olive beneath. Her eyes were large and dark and the long lashes were natural. Her glossy black hair was cropped short (she'd complained about that too!) because hair more than one inch long was dangerous inside a space helmet, but that merely emphasized how beautifully shaped her oval head was. A student of pre-atomic art she had known in college had compared it to a form by Brancusi. Her shoulders sloped a little; her waist was small, and her legs were over an inch longer than they should have been in proportion to her trunk, giving her a look of tall fragility.

She was tired as hell of that fragile look, she realized abruptly. She was probably conditioned by it herself—the exquisite product of Earth, too fine to rub shoulders with these gross colonials!

And for that, the chances seemed good she had thrown away a century of much-coveted extra life.

A voice spoke out of the wall close at hand. "Probationer Santos to the commandant's office now, please."

Automatically she got to her feet. *Probationer!* she was thinking. That had rankled too. She had expected to be confirmed as most people were in lieutenant's rank after a year; when she was not, she had gone around complaining and saying that it was because people didn't like her. Not believing what she said. Speaking from malice.

But it was then, of course, that someone finally lost his temper and told her that it *was* because people didn't like her. That was the beginning of her real education.

More than likely, this was the end now.

She walked through the autodoor of the commandant's office as smartly as she could, but when she announced herself she heard her voice shaking a little. Commandant Brzeska took no notice, but neutrally told her to sit down. She obeyed,



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thinking, *Well, at least he isn't alone. That may be a good sign.*

She knew the man who was sitting beside the commandant. He was a tired-faced man with prematurely gray hair which had presumably turned color while he was out of reach of longevity treatments. He had come in on the ship that returned from its patrol yesterday. Her first hopeful reaction turned sour as she thought of the possible corollary of this.

And yet, would Brzeska tell her she was through in the presence of a stranger?

There was a silence while the patrolman looked her up and down. At length he turned to the commandant and raised one eyebrow inquiringly; Brzeska nodded and spoke.

"Santos, this is Patrol Major Langenschmidt."

Maddalena gave the customary polite nod and waited for Brzeska to continue.

"Well, Santos!" he said finally. "I'm going to say what I have to say in front of Major Langenschmidt because it's only fair that he should hear it. I don't imagine I have to tell you now that you're by far the most cordially detested person who has ever been stationed here, under my command or anybody else's. Do you know that?"

With all the spirit she could muster Maddalena said, "I've known for some time. I'm doing my best to rectify it."

"Glad to hear that," Brzeska said caustically. "So far I haven't noticed much success. In fact—look at this!"

He picked up a report form from the desk before him and held it out to her. She took it numbly, and read:

"In view of her congenital inability to co-operate with more experienced corpsmen, and her indomitable conceit, Probationer Santos appears wholly unsuitable as career material."

She went on looking at the words long after they had blurred unreadably.

"All right, give it back," Brzeska said, took the form, and crumpled it in his hand. Tossing it into the disposer where it vanished with a puff of heat, he leaned back.



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"According to your documents, which I've studied pretty often when I got puzzled as to why you were selected for Corps service in the first place, you have a good aptitude for languages, right? And in college your chief leisure activity was face-to-face dramatics—acting, as they used to call it?"

Maddalena nodded. She could not trust herself to speak.

"Hrmph! Probably half your trouble is due to dramatizing yourself above your real place in the scheme of things. Well, in the normal course of events you'd have been given some job already which would employ your particular talents to advantage. One has just shown up, and thanks to it, and to our current shortage of spare operatives, you've had a reprieve." He turned to Langenschmidt. "Tell her about it, Gus."

The patrol major hesitated. "You know the patrol's main job in this sector," he suggested.

"Uh—well, aren't you mainly mapping the places where the refugees from Zarathustra wound up? And planting and collecting agents on the worlds which haven't been brought into the galactic circuit?"

"Correct. We've heard nothing from one of our most important agents on one of these worlds for nearly nearly two years. According to reports reaching our other agents there, he's dead, nobody knows quite how. In general, this wouldn't matter. It's a backward world in most respects, and things don't change greatly from generation to generation. However, something very odd indeed is happening in one of the areas which used to be included in the dead agent's beat. There may have been some crucial technological breakthrough, leading to an explosion, or some cultural upheaval. We can't tell. All we hear is at third-hand or worse, muddled by rumor and exaggerated into nonsense. It will take us a year or two to build up a good cover for a new permanent agent on the planet, and a year or two might be dangerously late. I put it to the commandant here and he agrees with me."

"So, Santos," the commandant rumbled, "you being the only operative I can cheerfully spare, I'm offering you a



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choice. I know it has offended your sensitive soul to be forced into the company of us rough backwoodsmen here. It'll be quite consistent if you refuse the job—after all, on that world people are not just uncouth but unwashed, not just unsophisticated but uncivilized.”

Under the lash of Brzeska's sarcasm Maddalena felt herself trembling. It took all her will power to bear in mind that she deserved to be talked to like this after the way she'd behaved.

“Only, of course,” Brzeska continued, “if you do refuse, I'll rewrite my report in the same terms and this time I won't throw it away. I'll send it, and you, to Earth. And you will be out one century's pay.”

“Permanently,” Maddalena said. She didn't intend to speak.

“I'm afraid so,” Brzeska confirmed.

While the commandant was speaking, Langenschmidt had been looking puzzled. Now he said doubtfully, “Pavel, you've used some pretty strong terms about—uh—Probationer Santos. I know you well enough to realize you had good reason. But if this is the way things stand, maybe it wasn't a good idea in the first place. Would she—uh—prove adequate?”

Maddalena took a deep breath. “Major,” she said, “when I came here a year and half ago I was a conceited little fool and I thought that because I was Earthborn I knew everything. I realize that now—fully. I'll take any chance at all to make up for my own idiocy. I can't do more than my best, but I don't think the people who passed me for Corps service could have been completely wrong. If there's anything useful in me I'm going to find it, and right now I want the hardest job I can get—anywhere, in space, on a planet. Anywhere.”

“Santos, you're dramatizing yourself again,” Brzeska said. “There was a legend they used to have in the days when people acted face-to-face as professional entertainers, which always concerned some young unknown player becoming famous when the most important player was taken ill, or in-



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jured and he or she had to step into the role. You're not being chosen for some glamorous part, understand? You're a stopgap. Your job is to go to a place and find out what's happening, *nothing else*. The fewer people who've heard of your existence when you leave that planet, the better we'll be pleased. You're not going to be famous and there won't be any glamor. Clear?"

"I understand," Maddalena said stiffly. "I'm not dramatizing the job. Far from it."

"Good. All that remains is for you to prove you mean that. All right, Gus—up to you now."

Langenschmidt hauled himself to his feet. "Come with me, Santos," he said. "We start at once."

### Chapter 6

IN SOME ways, Gus Langenschmidt thought, he was better off than Commandant Brzeska or anyone tied to an on-planet base of the Corps. For instance, you seldom found that more than half the personnel of such a base really cared about the work they were doing. The rest were serving out their time, stacking up their future life ten years for one. Aboard a Patrol cruiser, people *all* cared about the work. They had to. If they didn't, a single ten-year tour of operations would drive them crazy.

Also he was better off than the commandant because his job took him places; he might actually set foot on ten or a dozen different worlds in the course of a trip—under conditions of fantastic secrecy, of course—while Brzeska was stuck where he started.

There was one fundamental way, though, in which the



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commandant had the better of the situation. If things went seriously wrong, it would be Brzeska's responsibility as ranking officer in the galactic sector. But it would be Gus Langenschmidt's *fault*.

He led Maddalena into the office that had been assigned to him for the period of his stay on the base-world, and flung himself into a chair. "Sit down," he said, waving his hand vaguely. She did so nervously, and he looked her over again.

He said, "What do you think of the work the Patrol does, and our on-planet agents, and everyone else in this benighted corner of the universe?"

She was taken by surprise. She said, "Well, I guess—"

"Skip the stock answer you're trying to remember from your original indoctrination. What have you been in the habit of saying about the work?"

Maddalena bit her lip, but raised her head and looked him straight in the eye. "When I first came out here, I said I couldn't see why we should waste so much time worrying about the affairs of degenerates grubbing around in the mud. I don't have that view any more. But I guess I haven't acquired one to go in its place."

"Sounds like a fairly honest answer," Langenschmidt nodded. He didn't reveal it, but he was more pleased than he'd expected. "So we start level. You can't figure out what makes people like me tick—and I can't make out why people like you think they're ticking at all. I saw you looking puzzled at my gray hair. I could practically read off your face what you were asking yourself, 'If he's old enough to go gray, he must have stacked up centuries of credit. Why doesn't he quit?' Well, I *have* been around for quite a while, and I haven't quit because I don't know of a better use to put a spare century or two of life to. Okay! I get the impression that you know nothing worth mentioning about my beat, so I'll start you from scratch."

He reached to thumb a switch and the office went dark. On one of the walls an offset stereo map of the local systems shone out. He took up a light-wand and began to use it to point at what he was talking about.



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"That system has an inhabited planet. That one. That one. All six of that cluster there. Two more beyond that, and some more beyond that still, we're pretty certain. That's to say they were inhabited last time we checked, but struggling. An epidemic might have wiped the population out by now. My beat doesn't go quite so far.

"The reason why these populated worlds are grouped around here so far from the nearest nexus of civilized planets can't have escaped you. Or can it?"

She was going to have to stand a hell of a lot of needling. Maddalena said as calmly as possible, "Zarathustra."

"Exactly. It was in the direction of those systems that the bulk of the refugee ships came from Zarathustra seven and a half centuries ago—ships full of people who'd picked themselves off their home world when the sky was on fire and the seas were already practically boiling from the nova. In their understandable panic they were content to save their skins; consequently they arrived—when they did arrive—on their new planets with practically nothing else. It was a fantastic achievement evacuating as many as they did manage to get away: something of the order of two and a quarter million in three thousand ships. For a long time we were convinced that only the handful that made it to Baucis Alpha on the solward side of Zarathustra had survived; it wasn't till a hundred and twenty years ago that we stumbled across indications that many more ships had reached habitable worlds.

"By that time, of course, things had developed of their own accord. To us, conditioned by the availability of longevity treatments, a hundred years isn't a very long time. But to man in his natural state, it's more realistic to think of it as four to six generations. And thirty generations is quite long enough for Galactic to have evolved on these isolated worlds by way of dialects into individual languages, so that a speaker from the north doesn't understand a speaker from the south. That's one thing.

"The second is that when you're sick with some local bug, hungry as hell because your spear has broken off short in



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the last animal you went hunting for, and your fire went out in last Tuesday's cloudburst, you put down great-great-grandpa's tales of flying between the stars and cities with millions of people in them as the senile nonsense of a crazy old man. You're preoccupied with practical matters. You don't even bother to read, because it makes more sense to spend reading-time practicing with your bow and arrows. As for learning to write—who are you going to write to? Everyone else is within shouting distance.

“Consequently, when we began discovering the worlds the refugees from Zarathustra had occupied, some of them were full of subhuman savages; dietary deficiencies in childhood accounted for that. But others had sprouted some very interesting new civilizations. They'd hardly had the opportunity to achieve much technology, of course; even if chance had included a mining engineer, for instance, among the survivors stranded there, it still is a long, long way from finding a strike of iron ore to refining steel. Further yet from a pitchblende strike to an atomic reactor!

“Well, it's the job of the Patrol and its agents to watch these civilizations. One of the lessons it's taken us longest to learn is that we don't know everything. In its evolution, the society on one of these isolated worlds may come up with something we've missed—may take a different turn, may go further into the human sciences than we've gone, for instance, or develop biochemistry as we've developed electronics to a standard of high accomplishment. So we haven't interfered, or made our presence known, or done anything but watch.”

Maddalena felt a stir of rebellion deep inside her. This she had learned in indoctrination before she was posted here. And yet, somehow it *was* different, coming from a man who'd given up more than a lifetime to his work.

“We do have to keep watch, though. Two reasons. First is the brand new angle these cultures give us on human social evolution. We've learned more about the way new inventions and discoveries change a civilization from a century of watching these refugee worlds than we've learned from a



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millennium of study of terrestrial history. Second is that the Patrol is not the only organization that's come out this way."

"Slaveworld," said Maddalena.

"Quite right. Slaveworld. Did somebody tell you that, or did you figure it out?"

"I guess somebody told me," Maddalena muttered.

"Doesn't matter. The point is you remembered it in context. Good! Of course, Slaveworld wasn't one of the planets colonized from Zarathustra in a panic; its people were deliberately kidnaped from their home worlds, forced to colonize what we came to call Slaveworld, and all for the sake of a labor force to exploit its resources of light metals. But the plan worked for two hundred and twelve years and proved very profitable before the Patrol was set up and found out what was really going on.

"Nonetheless there's always the risk that someone on some world or other nearer to Earth might see the possibilities of dominating a superstitious and backward population on a rich and almost virgin planet. As it happens, in the present case the risk is a very acute one. Not that they would get away with it for long—after all, the planet concerned is on my beat, and we have five agents scattered over the surface. In a matter of decades, at most, we'd catch on.

"But of course the knowledge of the existence of men from beyond the sky would foul things up enormously, since most of their local cults are founded on fables about star-flight. In some of the societies where the relapse to barbarism was never total—this one I'm worried about in particular—they're working free of the grip of superstition, but intrusion from space would probably cause a wave of religious hysteria and set them back a long way.

"That's the particular system I'm talking about, by the way." He moved his light-wand and laid its bright beam on a sun about twenty-five parsecs from the base. "ZRP—Zarathustra Refugee Planet—number fourteen. Total population, confined to one major continent except for islands around it, a little more than two million. They started with less than eight hundred; just one shipload set down there. Climatically



very comfortable. Also it's a Class A planet; human beings can eat indigenous plants and the flesh of at least some indigenous animals. The largest city on the planet is a place called Carrig, which dominates the junction of the major north-south trade route and a navigable river up which the coastal folk trade their dried fish.

"Carrig has seventeen thousand people in it and controls an area equivalent to a small nation-state. That was where our agent was killed, or died. We're not clear which because he hadn't made a report for some time. He was posing as a caravan master and he couldn't very well use a subspace communicator during a trip lasting several weeks over icy hill-passes.

"Carrig, so our social analysts inform us, is situated where it's virtually bound to become the capital city of its continent when communications improve to the point where government can be extended to the coast in all directions. There will certainly be several small wars first. But it'll come. Much more to the point: Fourteen is building some mountains late in its existence. There's a good deal of continental drift still in progress, and not far north of Carrig, where the edge of the continent meets the north polar ocean, there's a complex geological stress system that's created a fault area with consequent volcanic activity.

"And the volcanic range is crawling with high-number elements. In short, simple geology is making sure that when the local people achieve nuclear techniques, Carrig will have the biggest supply of reactor-fuel right on its doorstep."

"Slaveworld," Maddalena said again.

"Precisely. If some unscrupulous group decided to pull the trick, they'd have a big labor force right on the spot."

Maddalena hesitated. "But is there any reason to think that someone actually has—?"

"Intruded? No reason. Just a hunch. You see, Carrig's society is organized on a clan-and-totem basis—seven rival clans, plus one nominally neutral and above politics, a kind of priestly caste. In an annual contest they determine the succession by a fantastic airborne duel between men in



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gliders and a winged animal called a parradile, sacred because it symbolizes the quality of kingship. The winner's clan becomes the cabinet, so to speak, and takes over the administration clear down to the collection of taxes. In theory, anyone can have a go at the king-parradile, but for a long time the practice has been to restrict competition to a few specially selected champions.

"According to rumor, however, an outsider recently did go in for the contest and *won*. The story goes that he wielded a bolt of lightning! Slee, who's our nearest surviving agent to Carrig, suspects that someone may have invented gunpowder, because there are plenty of deposits of sulfur, potassium nitrate and sodium nitrate in the volcanic region—all you need for a simple explosive. If he's figured out how to make elementary bombs, or worse yet, some sort of rocket missile, then this outsider may be all set to launch the people of Carrig on a war of conquest."

"And you want me to go and find out if this is true?"

"Exactly," said Langenschmidt, not without sympathy. "I wish you luck. You'll be heading for a real turmoil."

People don't change their natures overnight. Many times in the course of the intensive program she had to undertake to fit her for the new job, Maddalena gave way to the old discontent, the old rebellion. The last time, however, was the time when Langenschmidt lost his temper and snapped at her, "What the hell are you in the Corps for, anyway?"

"The pay!" she shot back angrily.

"What use are you going to put an extra lifetime to if you aren't doing anything with the first one?"

The insult cooled her down; after a while she brought herself to apologize, and things went more smoothly. But total reform was going to take a very long time indeed.

Subconsciously she seemed to have the idea that the administrative work she had been doing since she was posted to the base was all that the Corps ever did. It made her ashamed when Langenschmidt turned out to be able to hoist



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from his memory snatches of languages spoken on Fourteen, rules regarding their relationship, bits of the now hypothetical ur-dialects developed from Galactic and the second language spoken on Zarathustra before its destruction, which was Irani.

Langenschmidt had by his own admission been on Fourteen three times only—twice to get new subspace communicators to agents who had had theirs accidentally destroyed, once in company with a student of social analysis who wanted more detail about religious rituals than the local agent, a nonspecialist, could give him. And yet he probably knew more about Fourteen than the best-educated native of the planet.

Maddalena was proud of her linguistic ability, and had believed herself well grounded in etymology. But the difference between paper analysis of language, and learning to speak three languages each with four or five local dialects well enough to pass for a native in any of them seemed completely terrifying.

It became worse still when she had to go aboard Langenschmidt's cruiser for the trip to Fourteen itself. Half his crew was due to be rotated and take a long leave; this time, although none of them was Earthborn, they had been allowed to stop for a refit on Earth and spend their furlough there. Ten years on tour had brought them close to the point of cracking, and now the conclusion of their trip had been postponed to allow for her delivery to Fourteen. None of them put their common thought into words, but she could feel it in the air of the ship—the unspoken comment: *You'd better make the trouble we've taken over you worthwhile.*

Outwardly, of course, they treated her exactly like any agent being delivered to a new assignment, and that was almost worse.

She needed to spend most of the time the voyage took revising her knowledge of the planet's society and perfecting her ability to speak its languages.

In particular she passed many hours playing over and over the disinhibiting tapes which psychologists at the base



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had prepared for her. Langenschmidt had been brutally straightforward about her problems in tackling her task; he had pointed out that like most similar societies the culture in Carrig was masculine-dominated, and women were poor choices as agents there. However, there was one weapon a woman could always use to acquire influence over men—her body.

It was highly likely, therefore, that the only way she could establish herself sufficiently comfortably in Carrig to study the city would be to make herself the mistress of some local clan-chief. And she would have to rid herself of her instinctive reaction that the population of Fourteen were dirty barbarians. They were dirty, true. They were barbarians, true. Which made it all the harder to reconcile her to the prospect she faced.

She wasn't going to like her assumed role very much either. It had been suggested by Slee, another on-planet agent whose cover was usually translated as that of hetaira-manager. In the territory south of Carrig a system resembling a cross between the geisha system and the mistress system of ancient Greece had evolved; high-class courtesans favored not less for their skill at music, dancing and conversation than for their amorous talent were a regular part of a rich man's retinue, and those who could not afford to keep a hetaira on a full-time basis were catered for by managers with several girls under contract.

This profession—a perfectly respectable one—was ideal cover for a galactic agent, for his girls could learn and report to him as gossip, news of every activity which was going on. Most of them believed that he was a spare-time blackmailer and wanted the gossip to gain fresh holds over important people. Since he treated them as well as any manager in the business, they didn't care.

Recently, so Slee reported, it had become fashionable in Carrig also to keep or rent hetairas; there was no reason why Maddalena should not be brought to Carrig as a supposed employee of his, testing the possibility of expanding the business northwards. There was not so much contact between



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Carrig and the southlands that anyone would suspect her foreign origin.

She had to concede the logic of the scheme. But she also had to play over the psychologists' tapes several times a day to condition her into acceptance of it.

*One thing*, Maddalena thought as she stood before the mirror in her cabin studying herself for flaws in her disguise, *one good thing is my hair*. They had injected her scalp with concentrated tricholene, and since leaving the base her hair had practically streamed back to its natural shoulder-length. Now it was tied and braided into a sort of openwork cap of white lace.

A skintight bodice of the same white lace and leotards of red lace—both garments oddly comfortable—clasped her body as closely as a lover; over them came a tunic and loose breeches of black embroidered with yellow and green, then a sort of cape of yellow into which a red design was woven, and for street wear and traveling a voluminous cloak which could be caught up by a drawstring if she had to walk on muddy ground. The cloak had a hood against the rain. On her feet were red slippers and to go with the cloak she had huge wood and leather overshoes lined with a sort of sponge.

She turned from the mirror and looked at the rest of her gear. A wooden trunk of authentic native pattern was made of synthetic wood, but the grain had been checked from another recording, this time an account of the timber used in ZRP 14's northern subtropical zone. It would pass the closest inspection short of a powerful microscope. In the trunk were five or six more costumes, cosmetics, a subspace communicator hidden under the false bottom, and a comprehensive medical kit disguised as a sewing box and a case of herbal ointments.

Plus one musical instrument, a sort of Panpipe turned on its side, combined with a bellows. Another recording had supplied not only pictures of the instrument and the technique of playing it, but thirty or forty popular tunes to be rendered on it and the words of a dozen traditional songs.



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Plus a brush-pen and a booklet of coarse native paper, because a hetaira was expected to be able to write flattering quatrains about her employers.

Plus a jeweled box—tightly locked—with religious ideograms on the lid, ostensibly containing relics of her ancestors but in fact holding a well-charged energy gun.

No reason why she should not succeed! None at all! And yet no matter how often she assured herself of that, she was still scared.

A call from Langenschmidt interrupted her, asking her to go forward to the bridge of the cruiser, and she went as she was in her native costume. On her entry Langenschmidt looked up from a tape that had just reeled out of the communicators and gave an approving but absent-minded nod.

"You look the part perfectly as far as I can tell," he said. "We haven't long now before the landing, but I just had this from the man who's covering for you—Slee. I'll play it back for you."

He dropped the cassette back in its slot. Slee, exotic in a costume almost as gaudy as Maddalena's, came on the screen. Having a permanent home on Fourteen, unlike Heron, he was able to maintain a vision circuit as well as voice. He looked worried.

"I've just had some disturbing news. I've been trying for some time, as you know, to get details of Heron's death; his house was burned down which was fortunate in that his communicator was destroyed, but unfortunate because it made it hard to get sense out of any witnesses there might have been. Carrig is too far from here for me to get more than rumors, anyway.

"Something's come up which ties in closely with what people are saying about this stranger Belfeor who made himself ruler of Carrig, though. You'll recall that he was said to have killed the king with a lightning bolt, which I suspected to be some primitive gunpowder rocket.

"Well, according to a former servant of Heron's, who's been in a bedlam for alleged insanity since his master was killed, it was Belfeor who killed him—and what's more, by



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throwing lightning bolts at him. You can presume, it's my belief, that Heron got wind of Belfeor's plans, and Belfeor probably set a mine or something of the sort in Heron's house, blowing it and him up. I don't see any other reasonable explanation. It's the devil's own job sorting out fact from fantasy in these tales, even when you know pretty well how the natives' minds work. We *must* get an agent into Carrig again, soon, to see if this is true or whether the facts are otherwise."

Langenschmidt shut the recording off. He looked at Maddalena. "Sounds as though you're really needed badly," he said. "I thought you should hear that before we put you down. Are you all ready? We're due to break into real space soon."

Maddalena nodded. Her throat felt terribly dry.

"Get your suit on, then. And have your gear put in the landing craft. I'm taking you down myself."

It was only a few more minutes until they took their places in the needle-shaped boat which would sneak them unobtrusively down to Fourteen's surface. Once the gear was stowed, Langenschmidt occupied himself with pre-flight checks; Maddalena could hear his voice and the pilot's in her helmet phones as she struggled to get her awkward clothing organized in her spacesuit. You didn't go aboard a landing craft without a suit and helmet—it was far too risky.

The checks completed, the pilot gave the standard all-hands warning about breaking through into real space, and they braced themselves for the peculiar shuddering grinding sensation that always accompanied dropping out of hyperphotonic drive. One moment later the pilot was speaking again, his voice half-strangled with astonishment.

He said, "Of all the—! That's a *ship* out there, in orbit around Fourteen!"

Maddalena froze. Langenschmidt snapped, "A ship? What sort of—?"

He got no further. There was a huge cracking sound followed by a rending of metal, and Maddalena's last conscious thought before passing out was that she was probably going to die.



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### Chapter 7

SAIKMAR, son of Corrie, penniless refugee, walked down the long shining corridor of the sanctuary towards the twisted doorway where the wind already whined and occasionally howled. He walked with determination. As he came close to the door he encountered the old priestess Nyloo and with her a girl-child of seven or eight, one of those that a woman pilgrim had borne during a pious visit and left as an offering. The child's eyes were round and prematurely wise. Saikmar was always disquieted by such children.

The old priestess said, "You go outward, Saikmar, son of Corrie?" She spoke the queerly accented antique dialect that he had now come to understand well. "Outward grows cold. Not long hence to build snow walls at the door and close the chill from us."

Saikmar had got past the stage when he had addressed the staff of the sanctuary obsequiously. He answered harshly, "And what is it to you if I freeze out there? Will that not be one less useless mouth to stuff with precious food this winter?"

The priestess looked at him steadily. She was very, very old; the skin on her skull, which was almost bald, seemed dry and crackly, like parchment. She said, "You take complaining from us to your heart too much. Who here blames you that we lack our due this summer? For more generations than it is remembered we have served by giving asylum to those who flee injustice and tyranny, as you yourself, asking only that we get, each summer, gifts from fertile climes, to fill our bellies when it is winter here. From Carrig nothing has



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come this summer. Yet we blame you not. The old and the weak who have used up their lives will resign themselves that the young and strong may see another summer."

"Are you going to die this winter, granny?" said the child looking up at the old woman with her big round eyes. Saikmar flung his threadbare cloak about him, ducked his head as a man does when rushing an ambush, and hurried out into the bitter afternoon.

Gasping sometimes as gusts whipped powdery dry snow off ledges and outcrops and blasted them at his face, he set himself to climb the jagged rocks around the sanctuary. It had become a daily habit with him to scramble among the cavern-riddled cliffs hereabout till he could stand at last on the crest and gaze out, over the silvery scarred dome of the sanctuary, over the landscape which at this point in the year still showed some rock after the summer thaw, but which soon would be blank snow as far as the eye could reach. He would stare achingly south—towards Carrig that he perhaps would never see again.

Staring, he remembered. How Belfeor and his evil kinsmen claiming to be of the southland, but some of whom did not even speak the southland tongue, and women with them as arrogant as men—had claimed their right to be established as a clan and rule Carrig; how they were at first resisted, but how they, in the end, repressed all opposition through their strange magical powers; how then they set the people to unheard-of tasks among the Smoking Hills, driving them cruelly and killing many; how Sir Bavis Knole—maddened, men said, because he had had to say honestly that Belfeor had come legally by his right to rule—had cast himself from the watchtower of the fortress to his death on the rocks of the citadel because his son Ambrus had taken service with Belfeor and forsworn his clan.

He shivered, standing on the cliff's edge, and wrapped his cloak still tighter about him. The sky, even in the afternoon, was darkling at this season. Soon the night would come—the night which would last half a year. He had lived through one such night already, and had not believed it



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until it was upon him. The darkness! The loneliness! Outside the howling of the wind, inside the chanting of the priestesses as they rehearsed their charms to assure the rebirth of the sun.

They had counseled him when the last resistance to Belfeor broke. His mother, his uncle and his cousins with one voice had counseled him to travel to the northern sanctuary before Belfeor ordered him slain. The sanctuary had offered asylum to fugitives since legendary times; their fee was paid by the cities entitled to such protection by pilgrims who brought barrels of dried fish, salted vegetables and meat with them on their summer visits. Without this addition to what they could grow on the poor soil during the short summer, those at the sanctuary would perhaps starve in the winter.

Last summer, of course, there had been several caravans of pilgrims, and he had sought among them eagerly for news of Carrig, and all the news was bad. At least, though, it was a link with his home. This summer—nothing. Not one caravan had come through Carrig to the north.

Saikmar looked down past his feet. His mouth set in a hard, bitter line. Down there was a clear fall of sixty feet to a slanting jagged scree of loose stone. One step, and he could be free of his fate. Better this way, surely, than to become like those others whom he had found here at the sanctuary—miserable, cringing beggars skulking in corners, without shame, without hope. *That* was no end for Saikmar, son of Corriel!

Yes; better so than to suffer the winter under the cruel stare of the priests and priestesses and of those terrible wise children who shared the secrets of the mystery. One step . . .

He squared his shoulders and threw his head back for a last look at the world, and in the darkening sky he saw an omen. For the first time in his life he was sure beyond doubt that he had been given a personal sign by the gods.

There, circling and swooping in the gathering dusk, but unmistakable to a man who had spent years studying the habits of that species, was a creature that no man had ever



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seen so far north before. Splendid in dark blue, green and gold against the sunset was a young male parradile.

Shivering with awe and not with cold Saikmar saw it hesitate, hover, and plunge. On the sheer face of the cavern-riddled cliff it touched, clung, folded its wings, and disappeared.

Early next morning—he had hardly slept for his fever of excitement—Saikmar left the sanctuary again. He had known since he saw the parradile what he must do. Go to it and throw himself upon its mercy and the gods'. For was not the parradile also a stranger in a strange land? That he should have seen it so far north suggested that Belfeor's sacrilege had reached unheard-of-heights. He must have driven the parradiles out of the Smoking Hills!

Saikmar felt light-headed as he started to scramble across the cliff face to the cave where he had seen it make its lair, and small wonder. Lack of sleep, and tormenting excitement, and lack of food all helped to account for that. He had eaten neither his supper last night nor the handful of dried fruit and parched grain he was given this morning. He carried them in a pouch at his belt as his offering to the parradile.

The task of reaching the cave was a dreadful one. Saikmar had to clamber over icy ledges, sometimes chipping himself a hand-hold with his knife, with the wind whipping his cloak till it threatened to fill like a sail and drag him away. In many of the caves he passed he saw with dismay that last night's frost had produced layers of ice; how would a parradile, accustomed to the warm caves of the Smoking Hills, endure a winter here?

Whatever he could do to help the beast live, he would—at the expense of his own life, perhaps. He toyed with the idea of telling the priestess in charge of the food store that he was going to kill himself and wanted to take the rations he would consume during the winter if he stayed and give them to the parradile. He dismissed it. She would laugh in his face. The parradile had no place in the sanctuary's cult.



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To the people here it was merely a weird beast from the south.

He considered another idea—bringing all his meals here as long as he could. But it would be only a week, ten days at most, before they closed off the door of the sanctuary with a snow wall; from then till spring no one would go outside. And after eating nothing for two or three days he, Saikmar, would be too weak to make this climb and deliver the food anyway.

What *was* he to do?

At last he set his foot where the parradile had settled, on a ledge of ice-free rock at the mouth of a cave which he could enter stooping. It was in shadow, though much of the cliff face he had come across was bright with sunlight reflected off the snow, and he had to pause while his eyes adjusted. Sniffing, he knew he was at the right place. He had whiffed the scent of parradiles before, and its pungency was unique.

He opened his pouch of food and took a handful of fruit and grain on his palm. Holding it out before him he ventured into the cave.

And had gone five paces when he saw the cave was empty.

Thunderstruck, he let the handful of food fall. But the scent of parradile was real! Where in the name of the gods had the creature gone?

His first thought was that some shadow at the rear of the cave must indicate a tunnel further into the rock, but he hammered on the wall in vain. All solid. The parradile had gone for sure.

After his elation, the shock of disappointment made his eyes sting with tears. Half-blinded he stumbled back to the ledge at the cave mouth, leaned back against the cliff face, and put his head in his hands. He was so lost in black misery that he did not hear the slap of the parradile's wings until they were close enough for their wind to fan his skin.

He snatched his hands from over his eyes—and the parradile was there, on the same ledge with him, wings half-folded, head cocked suspiciously, sharp eyes studying him, red



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mouth half-open around something which looked familiar.

A bolt of cloth! A bolt of heavy woolen cloth of the kind men wove out of graat-hair in the country east of Carrig!

It took the parradile only a few seconds to decide he was no kind of threat. Although probably a mere four or five years old, not due to mature for two to three more years, it was already bigger and heavier than Saikmar and enormously strong. It let the bolt of cloth fall to the ground and began to nose it into the cave. Only then did Saikmar see that in both its feet it gripped spreading bundles of unwoven graat-hair on which it moved shuffling, like a man in too-big slippers. When the bolt of cloth was securely hidden in the cave, it kicked its feet free of the clumps of hair and pushed them in also.

Making itself a nest for the winter? Saikmar could conceive no other explanation. But no one had ever heard of a parradile making a nest!

Nosing the nest material along the floor of the cave, the parradile found the grain and fruit Saikmar had let fall. Its tongue slapped the rock wetly and scooped them up. Saikmar fumbled more out of his pouch with clumsy hands and held out more of the same. The parradile examined it. Then it opened its mouth. Saikmar turned his hand over and spilled the food into that big blood-colored maw.

The parradile chewed the morsel and swallowed it. A moment later it had turned off the ledge and launched itself on its vast wings, swooping and diving towards the south.

Saikmar began to laugh. He laughed until his ribs ached and the cold air was torturing his throat, and then he laughed again.

The next day, when he returned, the parradile had half-filled the cave with soft warm materials—stolen cloth woven by men, graat-hair, dry grasses, and a whole animal hide tanned and softened for making leather. Out of this the parradile's head poked at him curiously, but it refused the food he offered and seemed to be explaining that it had fed well, for it opened its mouth wide and blew breath scented with a raw meat tang.



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He stayed with it for a while; it was his only link with home. Meantime he ate what was in his pouch, since the parradile had refused it.

He came each day for as long as he could, until they had begun to build the snow wall across the sanctuary door; then he knew this visit must be his last. He was afraid he would not reach the cave today, for there was a storm from shortly after dawn till the afternoon, and the days were very short now. But he seized his chance when the snow died down for a while and made haste to the cave to bid his friend farewell for the winter.

The parradile, as though expecting him, gave a grunt of greeting and turned on one side in its nest of soft material. Under its huge left pinion lay a sleeping human being.

### Chapter 8

AFTERWARDS Maddalena realized that she had been conscious during more of the disaster than she believed at the time; she could remember practically nothing when she found herself lying three-quarters buried in a gigantic snowdrift, astonished that she was even alive. But that was the effect of shock. Later disconnected pictures like dreams pieced together in her mind, and she was able to figure out what must have happened.

There were flash-pictures she remembered. Gus Langenschmidt struggling with the controls. A second jolting crash. The shock of looking back in the cabin and seeing a gash in the hull, and the rear edge of the gash glowing red-hot and melting in brilliant droplets as the thin outer air of the planet tore at it.

Gus Langenschmidt giving her incisive orders which she



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obeyed machinelike although she barely heard them for the howl of air blasting across the opening in the hull like wind in an organ pipe. Convinced she was jumping to her death, piling out of that same gap when Langenschmidt had forced the speed down low enough, into a night as black as space, where she felt as though the clouds and stars were below her and the white winter landscape above. Hitting the airbrake release on her suit, then the trigger of the tiny altimeter-computer controlling the jets. The reaction mass ran out when she was twenty feet above the ground, but it was snow she plunged into and she was unhurt.

She lay there quiescent for perhaps an hour, until her hands and feet were numb even through the insulated suit. It took her that long to get all the facts in perspective. She had not yet recovered everything she had seen happen; she knew only that she was alone, on a strange planet, and she had no resources whatever except what she had on, and her intelligence.

She had no idea what had become of Langenschmidt. She could not even remember at first whether she had seen the landing craft again as she tumbled groundward. The odds were strong that it had crashed. Perhaps Langenschmidt had bailed out before it was too late; perhaps not. For sure, at the speed they had been going he would have landed hundreds of miles away even if he had left his control chair directly after she herself had jumped.

The cold and shock combined to make her mind sluggish. She had to struggle for a long time before she solved the simple problem of working herself out of the snowdrift in which she had sunk up to elbow height. At last she realized that by making for solid ground with a kind of swimming motion she could prevent herself from sinking back in deep, and after a hundred yards of crawling she was able to stand on rock. She looked about her. It was hard to imagine that this was a world where human beings could live. The desolation was total.

The stars told her she was at the planet's arctic, rather than antarctic. She could set her suit's gyrocompass, at least.



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Obviously the thing to do was to head south, failing any visible landmarks in this icy desert. The ship that brought the refugees here had crashed near the north pole, that was known; it was still visible, and had become the focus of some kind of mystical cult. When the refugees' descendants spread out, they had headed south towards more fertile lands. Provided she was on the same side of the pole there was a slim chance she might stumble across habitation fairly soon.

She considered waiting for daylight before making a start, but then realized that she had been coming to the planet at the end of the northern summer, and for all she knew the polar night at this latitude might have set in already; she might have to wait six months for the dawn.

She remembered to change from the suit's canned air supply to filtered external air, cursing the length of her hair which had come loose from its braiding and kept blowing across her mouth whenever she drew a breath, and began to walk.

At first she was buoyed up by memory of purpose, and by the good resolutions she had made about reforming herself. She tried to pass the time by thinking of what had to be done if she did reach human habitation. She would have to strip off and destroy her suit, for instance, with its off-planet gadgetry; likewise she would have to invent a story to account for her presence. What? Kidnaped by bandits? There were bandits here that had given Trader Heron trouble by attacking his caravans on one or two occasions. But would they be so far north? Probably not. She'd have to think of some other lie to tell.

Bit by bit as she grew tired her thoughts slowed down. A sharp headwind arose, and made her progress difficult with its blustering resistance. Every few moments a spray of snow would dust across her helmet and blind her till she wiped it away with the back of her gauntlet. There was a mechanical wiper inside the faceplate which took care of any mist that formed there, but its movement was hypnotic and combined with weariness to dull her brain.

She had been walking so long she wanted to fall down



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and go to sleep; perhaps the only thing that prevented her was that a decision was needed to stop walking, and it was less demanding not to make the decision. The wind grew fiercer still; she had the impression she was walking in one spot, as though on a treadmill, unable to go forward.

The going here was extremely hard, and it was not only because of the wind, as she suddenly discovered. She was climbing a rise in the ground, and the last few yards of the ascent seemed impossibly difficult.

She began muttering to herself. "From the top of the rise," she said, "I'll see a village. I'll see people. Maybe I'll see smoke rising off a fire. Maybe there'll be someone who will come out and meet me and help me the rest of the way. Maybe—"

She looked up as a movement overhead caught her attention. For one instant before a blasting shower of snow blinded her she had a clear sight of something monstrous and winged that circled patiently. Waiting.

In historical romances she had read about the vultures that would close in on a dying traveler lost in a desert, and she had seen pictures of the way you could track the progress of a wolfshark through the shallow seas of Cyclops by the line of Jackson's buzzards that formed over its murderous trail and dived one by one—until scores or even hundreds had swooped—to feast on the killer's leavings. The images fused in her mind. That thing! Up there! Waiting till she dropped in her tracks and then . . .

She hurled herself forward wildly to the crest of the rise, sobbing.

When she clawed as much of the snow off her faceplate as she could, she saw that a few rays of sunlight were still slanting between the clouds. She could make out that she was at one end of a quadrant of low cliffs that grew much higher at the other end; the face of the cliffs was riddled with dark patches that might have been the mouths of caverns. But she scarcely saw them. For one of the rays of sunlight fell directly upon a glistening domelike shape around the sides of which snow had drifted. Its top, however, was



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still being swept clean by the wind, and that top gleamed as only one substance she knew would gleam. The chromium alloy plated four inches thick on the hull of a spacecraft.

At that, she lost her head utterly and completely. She heard herself shout, "Gus! *Gus!*" And she started forward.

There was nothing under her feet.

She half-slid, half-tumbled fully twenty yards down the icy slope, her hair once again filling her mouth so that she had to spit and splutter to cry out, and when she rolled over and the sight of the sky whirled into her field of vision, she saw the monstrous flying beast hurtling towards her with its blood-red mouth gaping and its taloned feet poised.

It was upon her at the very moment when she sank helpless into a pile of soft snow with her arms flailing and her ears full of her own vain shouting for help. There was a snapping grip like a pincer around each of her upper arms, and she was instantly whipped off the ground. To struggle was useless, as she found immediately. The flying monster was incredibly strong, and no matter how hard she twisted, it kept on its imperturbable course towards the face of the cliff.

On a ledge outside the mouth of one of the many caves there, it set her down with such astonishing gentleness that she was taken aback. Then it planted its feet firmly, keeping its wings spread wide to prevent her from jumping or scrambling away from the ledge, and began to prod her with its blunt muzzle.

Willy-nilly she stumbled into the cave.

There was a sort of nest there—soft, smelling pungently of its owner with a tang that penetrated even the filters of her suit. She waited passively when she reached it, expecting that the beast would attack her any moment now.

Instead, it backed past her and burrowed its body among the nest material. When it was comfortable, it half-opened one enormous pinion and hooked it over her head, knocking her off balance and forcing her to fall into the nest as well.

For a little she struggled. Then sheer exhaustion overcame her, and she knew no more until she awoke hours later to



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find that a lean young man was staring at her from the cave-mouth, his face pinched with the cold and his mouth half-open with pure amazement.

At first Saikmar had thought wildly that the girl must be dead, and that the parradile was showing him the body as an example, or even as an indication that it was well supplied with food. There was such a dead look about the clothing she wore, a heavy dull metallic garment with big belts and a casque or hood or helmet topping it. Indeed it was not till she spoke to him that he realized he was looking at a girl.

Her voice was hoarse, but pleasant. She said something in a language he did not know, and then caught herself as though dazed but recovering and addressed him in the ordinary Carrig tongue.

"Who are you? What is this creature that brought me to the cave?"

Straining his eyes, Saikmar stared past the curious transparent membrane on the front of her helmet. He said, "I am Saikmar, son of Corrie of the Clan Twywit in Carrig, dwelling in asylum at the sanctuary here. And this creature is a noble beast, a parradile."

She gave a slow thoughtful nod. Beside her, its wing still raised, the parradile turned its head on its long flexible neck and snuffed at her. Then it glanced back expectantly at Saikmar.

"And you?" Saikmar demanded.

The girl shook her head helplessly. "I—I—"

"What happened to you? How did you come here?"

"I—do not remember clearly. I have been faint."

Saikmar stood looking at her with wonder. If only the parradile could talk, he thought. What was the meaning of all this? Clearly the parradile had brought the girl here with some kindness, for she was unharmed although one stab of those great talons would have killed her instantly. Had it rescued her from the snows? If so, that led to other questions—what was she doing here at all? Why was she so strangely



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clad? Or had the parradile brought her from far to the south where it had roved on its expeditions to gather material for its nest? He had never heard of such a thing. There were tales of parradiles making off with children and young graats, and men had sometimes been killed. But carrying away an adult?

But with the wind howling at his back and a threat of darkness he could not spare time for questions. He said, "I must bring you to the sanctuary and find warmth and food for you. Are you well enough to move?"

She rose cautiously, to her knees first, then to her feet, having to bow her head under the cave's roof for she was nearly as tall as Saikmar himself. She said, "I am weak, but I will go as well as I can. Is there a storm outside now?"

"There was a storm, but just now the sky is quiet, Still we must go quickly. Night will soon come on us."

Moving slowly, she came out from under the parradile's wing and looked down from the mouth of the cave. She pointed at the shining dome of the sanctuary hesitantly.

"Is that where we must go?"

"Yes," Saikmar said. "It will be hard, but you cannot stay here. Today they are building the snow wall at the door, to seal the sanctuary for the winter. There is no place on the cliff for two to go together; I shall have to go before you and show you where to cling and where to step."

The girl made no reply, but went on studying the cliff face. Saikmar could not blame her for hesitating. The storm earlier had laid snow like whitewash across the rocks, and in the low sunlight it was scarcely possible to see any ledges or crevices at all.

He was still pondering what he could do when there was a grunting and heaving from behind him, and the parradile pushed its way out of its nest. On the ledge there was barely room for the three of them; against Saikmar's hip the beast's huge shoulder nudged gently.

Almost he could have sworn that it was making darting inquisitive gestures with its head, pointing at the sanctuary.

Suddenly the parradile seemed to lose patience. Its wings



slapped out to their full span and beat the air like thunder. Startled, and knocked off balance, Saikmar pressed back against the rock wall behind him. Treading air as a swimmer treads water, the parradile turned ten feet from the ledge and darted forward at him, its pinions fetching it up short like airbrakes as its talons snatched at his arms.

And he was being carried like a doll over the rocky scree far below.

The flight was so brief that he was too astonished to cry out; as he was gathering a deep breath to do so, he found himself set down on level ground not far from the sanctuary, and the parradile was zooming back up the face of the cliff to fetch the girl also. Poised on one knee in the snow, Saikmar stared in amazement, tinged with admiration. For it took courage to act as the girl was acting—to step to the very lip of the ledge before the cave and cast herself backwards into the talons' grip.

Another moment, and the girl had been gently set down beside him. Hovering with the slightest waver of wings, the parradile waited to see if they were both all right before it spun so swiftly that it raised a snow flurry and headed to its warm nest in the cliffside cave.

There was a strange tightness in Saikmar's throat, he found. As though bidding good-bye to a friend he realized he was waving at the parradile's dwindling form. He checked himself, mindful of the snow wall that was being built at the door of the sanctuary, helped the girl to her feet, and began to lead her without a word towards shelter.



## Chapter 9

THEY HAD almost finished the snow wall now. It was one of the tasks demanded of the refugees in return for their keep, to prepare the great rolls of hard snow forming the base of the wall, to bring loads of soft snow afterwards and hammer them into the chinks and crevices, making it at last completely windproof, and as Saikmar and the girl approached they paused in their work. They were a bedraggled motley crew, mostly thin and wily-eyed, their hands chapped raw with the cold of the snow they had been handling and their ears and noses bitten red by the wind. Few of them had adequate clothes; some of the lucky ones had filched blankets and draped them about their bodies like ponchos.

Saikmar knew he had been expected to take part in the work on the snow wall, though no one had formally ordered him to do so, and he did not like the looks with which the workers greeted him. Still, he put on a bold face. Taking the stumbling girl by the arm, he brought her towards the last gap in the wall, where a keystone arch of snow blocks broached its quarter-spherical shape.

But waiting there, calm-faced and as rigid as though frozen, was the old priestess Nyloo.

"Two mouths to feed this winter, useless one?" she said after looking Saikmar and his companion up and down.

"The woman here also claims sanctuary," Saikmar snapped. He had no idea whether she intended to do that or not, but in the barren arctic waste there was no other course she could take.

"I see." Nyloo's eyes burned in her old face. "A woman, is it? Fearing that you would grow cold in the long winter night, you conjure yourself a succubus to warm your bed. Is that it?"

"I know nothing of conjuration," Saikmar retorted, feeling



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his face grow hot despite the icy air. "Magic belongs to your province, not mine."

"Indeed!" she answered sharply. "That is a pity. A great pity. For without conjuration how—tell me, please!—how is food for another hungry mouth to be come by this winter?"

"There are seventy refugees in the sanctuary," Saikmar said. "With one more is the difference large?"

"It exists," Nyloo countered coldly.

By now the other refugees had ceased their work on the snow wall altogether, and begun to crowd around Saikmar menacingly.

Foremost among them were two men he knew to be the fathers of children growing up here; like children born to pilgrims during a stay at the sanctuary, the children of refugees were taken over by the staff and taught the mysteries, but their fathers and mothers—being under the same roof—did not forsake them as the pilgrims did.

"This woman!" one of them said now, and clouted the girl roughly on the shoulder so that she winced though saying nothing. "Where does she come from? From a city that has sent tribute by caravans hither, and has bought the right of asylum for its citizens, as our cities did?"

"Well spoken," rumbled another man beside him, and there was a quick chorus of agreement. The circle closed still more on Saikmar and his companion.

"Well spoken indeed," Nyloo nodded. "This woman, Saikmar—if she be real and not a succubus, which would be well, for you do not have to feed spirits with corporeal food!—why does she not speak for herself?"

"I am from Dayomar, a city of the southland," said the girl loudly, and raised her head to look Nyloo straight in the face.

"Dayomar?" said the refugee who had put the question. He sounded disappointed. "How say you, priestess?"

"Yes, they have sent to us from Dayomar," Nyloo answered slowly. "They have the right of asylum with us,



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though no one from so far south has claimed it in living memory."

Saikmar felt a stir of hope, and broke in at once. "Then allow us passage, old woman!"

"Not so fast now," the man with the rumbling voice objected. "She *says* she's from Dayomar. I've been to that city myself before my unjust accusers forced me to come hither. And never in the southland did I see a garb like what she wears!"

Fear of hunger, already deeply rooted in the refugees, was stinging them now to a more aggressive manner. They began to shout. "Turn her away! Turn 'em both away! He's too lordly and haughty to do a hand's turn for his keep here!"

Nyloo lifted a hand and sharply ordered silence. "From Dayomar, how came you here?" she questioned the girl.

"I—do not know," the girl said after a pause.

"I found her where the parradile has nested yonder on the face of the cliff," Saikmar exclaimed. "The parradile had taken her into its nest to save her from a storm."

"A likely tale!" scoffed the man with the rumbling voice. "I say turn her away!"

But Nyloo's manner had changed completely. Not taking her eyes from the girl, she raised a dry old hand sideways to point its bony index finger at Saikmar. "Will you take your oath on that?" she said. "An oath by the gods of your clan in Carrig, and by the parradile and the twywit?"

"Gladly!" Saikmar said.

Nyloo came forward curiously, while the refugees behind Saikmar hesitated, sensing something of supernatural import in the air. She fingered the girl's clothing wonderingly, and at length stepped back again.

"It is a sign," she said reluctantly. "An omen. Until we have defined its meaning, we must admit you to the sanctuary. But I warn you!" Her voice rose. "If we determine this thing to be untrue—if you, Saikmar, have taken a false oath—we shall broach the snow wall to the winter night and drive you through it, both of you, to wander till you die."



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She moved aside and gave a jerk of her near-bald head.  
"Enter!"

Upon reflection, Madelena knew perfectly well where she was; when she caught sight of its shining metal dome from the rim of the nearby cliff wall and shouted for Langenschmidt she had been both right and wrong. Right, in recognizing the chromium alloy hull of a spacecraft. Wrong, in thinking that it was the landing craft from which she had bailed out. Though it was referred to by the natives under a name meaning sanctuary or place of safety, it was the ship that had brought eight hundred refugees from Zarathustra, preserved—as she had been told in her briefing—as a shrine for a mystical cult.

From the glimpse she caught as she was hurried inside with her companion Saikmar's hand grasping her arm, she could tell that the ship had buckled badly on landing. The door through which they entered was apparently an old lifeboat lock, and either from the force of the original crash or because the great weight of the hull had settled in the subsequent centuries, it was too far off-square ever to be closed again; hence the windproof wall of snow being piled up over and around it.

Inside, the durable plastic which coated all metallic surfaces as a guard against corrosion had been worn away by the passage of innumerable feet, and here and there patches of rust marred the floor. Frost was thick on the walls before they came to an internal door that still functioned; beyond, though, there was a foetid warmth and a smell indicating long human occupancy and little sanitation. She shuddered.

Saikmar hurried her onwards. At an intersection in the passageway they came upon half a dozen children of ages from five to ten playing with chunks of something tough and rubbery, cut square; the game was to bounce them from one to another so that they bounced unpredictably and were hard to catch. Saikmar thrust between the children and turned to the left.

Down here, the crash had severely buckled the hull plates;



there were gaps and cracks plugged with clay or with rags over which some pitchlike substance had been smeared. She guessed at crew's quarters, for there were doors at intervals of five yards on either side of the passage. Doorways, rather. The sliding panels had been either cut away or hammered back in their distorted grooves where they had rusted fast, and now the openings were masked with panels of basketwork or with animals' hides hung like curtains.

Saikmar halted at last before a doorway on the left at the very end of the passage, and she saw that this one was more effectively closed than the others. What looked like the six-foot long mesh metal base of an ancient bunk had been lifted into the opening and there secured by a bronze bar drilled at each end to fit a peg sunk in the wall. A clumsy device like a rudimentary padlock, weighing two or three pounds, held the bar fast in the middle. Saikmar found a key to unlock it in the pouch he wore at his belt, lifted aside the mesh metal frame, and stood back.

"Enter," he said shortly.

She obeyed. She found herself in a four-bunk cabin, one of the bunks having been sawed off its mounting to serve as she had seen in place of a door. Presumably the reason Saikmar had gone to such lengths to close the gap was that he had more possessions than other people here—whatever they might be. The remaining three bunks were loaded with clothing, blankets, the huge handwritten books of which she had seen pictures, some metallic objects which were probably armor, and other things.

The sight reminded her painfully of how completely she was at the mercy of events without the gear she had abandoned in the landing craft. She had no means of signaling her whereabouts, no weapons, no medical supplies—which on a backward world like this might well be the deadliest lack of all—and no more clothes than what she wore. Also it had become clear that her arrival was resented because of a food shortage. And with the polar winter setting in for six months, it was sure there could be no supplies from outside.

One stroke of luck she had had, though. She had been



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very afraid that her spacesuit might be recognized for what it was, and that she might be regarded as an enemy. The intruders, who had fired upon them, must have planned to cause as little disturbance as they could, and had probably disguised themselves in native costume. Unless Trader Heron's death had been coincidence, they would have realized that there were galactic agents on the planet, and wished to keep the news of their arrival from reaching Heron's colleagues.

They had been very clever, she thought bitterly. It had taken a long time for even a hint of their interference to get back to a Corps base; longer still for an agent to be sent to investigate. By firing on the cruiser as soon as it had appeared in real space, they had certainly gained a further respite of a year or two unless she or Langenschmidt got to a subspace communicator.

By that time, the intruders might well have gained a secure enough foothold to thumb their noses at the Corps. For there were two current views regarding the planets where refugees from Zarathustra had landed. The long view was that which the Corps accepted, and which Langenschmidt had expounded to her: to allow these isolated worlds to develop along their own lines free from interference by more advanced worlds.

The short view was that they should be opened to ordinary trade and traffic, like all the others in the galactic civilization. If the intruders established themselves so well that the Corps would have to root them out by force, they could secure still more time by appealing to higher and higher authority, tying the Corps's hands until a final decision was reached. Say half a century? Coping with the problems of two hundred and sixty civilized planets in uneasy federation was a slow, slow process.

And after that, of course, it wouldn't matter which way the decision went.

She felt partly terrified, partly elated. She had made herself unpopular back at base because all the time she was telling herself that the routine jobs she was given were too



petty for her abilities. She had a superb conceit. But here she was landed with a job which was so tremendous a challenge she was unable to kid herself. It was absolutely up to her whether it was accomplished.

More to the point—it was up to her whether she survived or not.

There was no furniture at all in the cabin except the bunks; there were sanitary facilities, but they had probably not been in operation since the ship landed. Saikmar cleared a space for her on one of the bunks, padding the metal frame with a blanket, and indicated she should sit down. Of course; that was where the children got their chunks of rubbery stuff to play with. They had been cut from the mattresses that once overlay the bunks.

She lowered herself to the bunk and took off her helmet gratefully. Saikmar was watching her curiously, but there was no hostility in his expression. She had not realized at the time when he introduced himself as coming from Carrig, but now she did. If he had recognized her as coming from space, and knew that the intruders in Carrig were from space also, he would not have been so friendly. She waited for him to speak.

### Chapter 10

SAKIMAR found himself at a loss now. Until Nyloo mentioned signs and omens, he had not thought of the girl's arrival as having any supernatural connotations. Gradually a sense of awe and excitement was welling up in him. The whole mystery of the girl's presence here; Nyloo's words; the way the parradile had brought them both off the cliff face and to



level ground. All these tied together and filled his mind with visions of divine intervention.

He took a deep breath. "Are you human, or do you come from the gods?" he demanded.

The girl paused a while before answering. He had the impression she did not know the truth herself, but was having to work it out. She said finally, "I am human and ordinary. But very strange things have happened to me."

"You are from Dayomar, you say. How are you called?"

"Melisma, daughter of Yull and Mazia, but they are dead." She made a sign he had seen southlanders make. So far, fair enough.

"How did you come here from the southland, then?"

Again this pause before an answer. He wondered if she was preparing a convincing lie, or whether she simply disbelieved some extraordinary event that had happened to her. Her next words persuaded him that the second was the true reason.

"I don't remember clearly. Perhaps the parradile brought me. It seems to me that it did."

To Saikmar's mind, only a supernatural occurrence could have accounted for her presence; there had been no caravans passing north of Carrig this summer, and the sanctuary was many days' journey over ice-deserts and rock-deserts from the closest villages. A tremendous thrill passed through his body, and he had to shut his eyes for a moment, steadying himself. What the purpose was of this visitor the gods had sent, he could not yet tell. But here was certainly an omen, directed at himself, for him to riddle out if he could. And if Nyloo tried to make out otherwise, he would take her fuddled old head from her shoulders, priestess or not.

"This place," the girl was saying thoughtfully, looking about her, "it's the northern sanctuary?"

"Yes."

"And what do you do here?"

"I have had to seek asylum here," Saikmar said bitterly. "I am a nobleman of Carrig, where the king-hunt yearly decides who shall rule. I, who should have slain the king,



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was cheated of my right by strangers from the south with evil powers. Had I not fled to the sanctuary I would be dead, for the strangers leagued with traitors in the city—among them Ambrus, son of Knole—whom may the gods swiftly destroy—and burned down those who stood against them with magical lightning.”

The girl's face had lit with astonishment. She said. “But then you're—”

At that instant, though, the metal frame he had put back across the door was rudely flung aside and fell clattering. Into the cabin stepped the refugee with the rumbling voice who had threatened them outside the sanctuary, and behind him most of the other refugees could be seen, menacing-faced, women as well as men who had been working on the snow wall.

“I've come to tell you thieves and wastrels,” the man said curtly, “that though talk of omens may impress old women confused by years of their mysteries here, it cuts no ice with us. Food's short, for your city Carrig must have stopped the summer caravans this year and kept the pickings for themselves. We're all agreed that that's the likely explanation. So we're going to put you out of the sanctuary, to make your way to Carrig—if you can!”

The man smiled sardonically, and behind him the others shouted their approval. Some of them, Saikmar saw with sinking heart, held club and knives, and their faces were bright with malevolence.

For a moment there was silence, stretching like the string of an instrument tuned upward till it was bound to snap. Saikmar's eyes sought the hilt of the sword he had not worn when he went out to climb the cliff to the parradile's lair; it was diagonally across the cabin from him, and before he could reach it the refugees could be on him. Only two or three of them could enter the cabin at a time, but he doubted he could stand them off for long. Sword or no sword, he was going to have to try.

“Move!” the refugees' self-appointed leader snapped at last, when his patience ran dry. “You're going outside!”



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"Graddo! Push 'em out to us!" a cry came through the doorway. "If they don't want to go, we can drag them."

"I'll do that!"

Suiting action to words he took half a step towards Saikmar, raising his hands to seize him by the arms. What happened next Saikmar did not quite see; he was still poising himself to duck under Graddo's arms and try a wrestling throw on him when Graddo abruptly was not there any longer. He was flat on his back with a startled expression and the girl Melisma was standing over him.

"They want to play it rough," said one of the refugees in the doorway contemptuously, a man with a club whom the lean months had not been able to pare down to thinness. He stepped through the door as Graddo started to get to his feet, cursing. Saikmar decided that the extraordinary girl with him could take care of Graddo for the moment, and as the newcomer reached for him, Saikmar thought of the lightness and quickness he had come by through his childhood hobby of dancing.

When the new attacker struck at him, he wasn't there; he had jumped back exactly far enough for the man's ankle to catch against Graddo's as Graddo went sprawling the second time. There was a tremendous clang as the man fell against the metal wall; the whole cabin rang.

Before the man could rise, Saikmar—realizing this was no time for finesse—charged him and crashed his head back on the wall again. Satisfied he had dizzied him for the moment, he spun to face another who was trying to come through the door. Feigning, he pretended to launch himself forward directly at him. At the last moment he darted aside; the man stumbled, and Saikmar's clubbed fist took him on the back of the neck. He continued forward willy-nilly.

The girl caught his waving arm at the wrist with one hand. With the other she pushed at the back of his elbow. The man screamed like a beast! He fell across a bunk, moaning. When he tried to move his injured arm, he could not for the pain.

One could imagine, Saikmar reflected approvingly, a



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woman like that being very much at home in a parradile's lair.

Graddo had still not had enough, it seemed. Once more he tried to scramble to his feet. Losing patience, Melisma put a booted foot against his solar plexus. It was not a kick she gave him, but a jab; nonetheless he doubled up coughing, clutching his belly.

The man with the dislocated elbow screamed again, and the noise seemed to chill the enthusiasm of those who still stood at the doorway. None was so eager now to follow up Graddo's lead; besides, with three attackers sprawled around the cabin and Melisma and Saikmar poised watchful among them there was hardly room for anyone else to move in.

Suddenly there was a commanding voice in the passage outside, and the refugees fell back. Some of them had the grace to look ashamed as they made way for Nyloo. Others grumbled, sour-faced.

The old priestess came to the doorway of the cabin and gave a comprehending nod as she looked inside. Beside her, clinging on her arm, was the little old-wise child who was her usual companion. It was to her that Nyloo spoke.

"Graddo it was, you said, who led the onslaught?"

The child nodded, her big eyes raised to Nyloo's face.

"Graddo!" the priestess said, and her voice was as terrible as the grinding of a glacier. Still doubled over his sore midriff, Graddo looked up uncertainly.

"You have blasphemed," Nyloo said. "The sanctuary rejects you. You are cast out into winter darkness, and hence forward your name is accursed."

Graddo's face went bleached-pale, and he froze into immobility. From behind Nyloo came a sigh as all the refugees together heard the terrible sentence of doom.

Saikmar relaxed and wiped his forehead. Well, *that* was a relief.

He was surprised and alarmed to hear Melisma say a moment later, "What is to be done to him?"

Nyloo glanced at her. "He will be driven from the sanctuary, to live or die as the gods will among the snows."



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"Not for my sake," Melisma said. "Do not do it in my name."

"It will be done because he attacked you," Nyloo answered shortly. "No one may set himself up as judge of what is to be done here; we the priestly staff alone have that right. Graddo! This is the last time your name will ever be spoken. It is accursed. Go."

Machinelike, Graddo got to his feet. Stumbling, he crossed the cabin to the exit. The other refugees moved aside as if from the carrier of an infectious disease. With one last glance around, Nyloo and her child companion followed; then the two other attackers, shaking with relief that the curse had fallen on Graddo alone.

Melisma made to start after them, but Saikmar caught her arm. He said, "He would have done that to us! Why do you say no?"

She did not answer, merely shaking her head. Reluctantly she turned away from the door. He picked up and put back in place the improvised barrier, and when he turned round he saw that she had opened and was taking off the peculiar coverall she wore. He stared at her, feeling a thrilling stab of surprise, for she was as slim and graceful as a dancer now, and under the coverall she was exquisitely clothed.

He had no chance to speak of it, though, because at the same moment there was the reverberating thrum of the meal gong, and the squeals and the hammering feet of excited children all along the noisy metal passages. She paused, dropping the heavy suit on the floor.

"What was that?"

"The signal that—like stabled graats—they are now consenting to feed us. Are you hungry?"

She nodded.

"Come then."

Maddalena-Melisma tried to ignore the sour looks of those who waited in line in the passage near the door through which drifted the succulent smell of food. Mostly now it was the women who glowered, seeing her so finely dressed



and so healthy and attractive; though they must all have been quite young, the refugee women were prematurely aged by worry and hunger. Two or three young men leered until Saikmar took half a pace towards them; then they quickly looked the other way.

"Who exactly are these people?" Maddalena asked in a low voice. Equally quietly, so that she had to watch his lips to catch all his words, Saikmar explained.

"The right of asylum here is immemorial; these people, like myself, have claimed it—to avoid unjust accusation, to escape punishment for debt, or because they have been exiled from their own cities and have no skills to support themselves in a strange country. Without Graddo but with yourself, they number sixty-nine. People without hope, without a future. They cannot even look forward to honor by their descendants, for their children are taught by the priestesses to forget their parents little by little and are then trained in the mysteries. For, you see, the priestesses must be virgins, and the priests are not—uh—no longer equipped to father children."

Melisma's surprise must have showed on her face. At that moment the line began to move, and Saikmar gestured ahead of them. "In that room you will see."

And she did. The room was thick with steam, but she saw at once that it was serving its original purpose of a canteen, for behind a metal counter pitted with rust, fat persons stood ladling out stew into bowls that the refugees held up, adding to the stew a chunk of coarse dark bread and a strip of some kind of dried fish on which salt granules glittered. These persons sometimes snapped angrily at children who were disorderly while waiting their turn, and their voices were high and querulous.

Priests. No longer equipped . . . She turned it over in her mind. Of course, when the refugees came from Zarathustra the ban on spacecrew fathering or mothering children still stood; proper hard-radiation screening had not been developed. So presumably a tradition had sprung up when the reason was forgotten. You could explain the function of the



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stranded ship as a sanctuary in the same terms. To people who had been saved by a spaceship from the destruction by nova of their home planet, the mental step from ship-equals-escape to ship-equals-safety was a very small one.

It struck her that this canteen was not complete. Instead of the refugees going to tables or benches to eat their food, they left the room to return to their cabins. Looking more closely at the counter, she saw that it had been cut from its original position and moved several feet across the floor. Behind the serving priests big urns of stew bubbled. Through the steam she could just make out that the walls and roof were buckled and gashed. Pipes ran through the gashes into darkness beyond.

She demanded of Saikmar as it came her turn to take a tin bowl and receive a portion of stew, bread and fish, "Behind the priests, there through the wall—what is there?"

But Saikmar shook his head. "This is magical, the business of the mysteries. I know nothing of them. Only that it is warm down there, even in midwinter, and there is always hot stew or broth, or at least chay to comfort the stomach."

So down there in the dark, there must still be a source of power! Obviously not the main generators of the ship; they must have been smashed in the landing, she could tell from the glimpses of the inhabited areas she had had already. But more than likely something jury-rigged by the original occupants of the ship, perhaps to see them through the winter of their first landing. And still operating!

If she got a chance, she was going to investigate this.

She accompanied Saikmar back to his cabin to eat their meal. The food was oddly flavored, but the stew was hot and the coarse bread was very filling. The dried fish was stale and smelt putrescent in spite of its heavy salting; she took only a nibble and put the rest by.

"Why did the other refugees resent my coming?" she said.

He explained that the caravans that usually supplemented their food stores during the summer had not come at all this summer; the refugees had decided that Carrig, the northernmost city on the caravan route, must have seized



the provisions for itself. Having no other outlet for their anger, they had turned on him because he came from Carrig and was of nobler birth than any of the rest of them, and had not sunk into their hopeless apathy.

Fired by the memory of his home, he went on further, to tell how Belfeor and his fellow Pargetty, leagued with the traitor Ambrus who had renounced his clan, had conjured some secret banditlike horde presumably from a hiding place in the hills, armed them with magical powers, and enforced their right to rule Carrig on the reluctant people.

Listening, Maddalena was partly disappointed, partly horrified. Horrified because knowing what she did, she could see that Belfeor was a stranger from space who had cleverly taken advantage of the king-hunt to establish a pseudo-legal claim to the lordship of Carrig, and then exploited the natives' superstition and the unchallengeable power of energy guns to stifle all resistance. Moreover, a long time had passed since then—long enough for a determined man to have made himself absolutely powerful in the territory. And she was disappointed because Saikmar had no news of his home that was less than a year old.

Worst of all, she was trapped now till the spring, and with the hostility all around, and the risk that Nyloo might decide she was lying about her origin and the way she had arrived, she might not live to see the spring come at all.

## Chapter 11

A DAY OR TWO passed. Maddalena began to set herself into the context of her environment. If what she was seeing was a fair sample of the sanctuary's routine, during winter at least, then clearly the people here dropped into a kind of hibernation—wakeful, but so low in their vitality they were apathetic.

Twice a day the great gong boomed to announce an issue of food, and that was the only real event so far as most of



the refugees were concerned. Shortly after the day's second meal, the light in the sanctuary ship faded to a twilight level; two-thirds of the way towards the first meal of the next day, the brightness increased again. She was so used to sourceless illumination that until Saikmar mentioned this night and day cycle, she had not realized that here was another proof that amid the wreckage a good power source was still functioning after seven centuries.

When she got the chance, she decided, she would investigate.

Moreover, she thought that she might have that chance quite soon. If Saikmar's behavior was anything to go by.

At first she had been worried at the prospect of having to stay indefinitely in his company, but as it turned out he treated her with a rather touching shyness, very far from the patronizing barbaric attitude with which according to her briefing most of the natives regarded women. It did not take her long to see that this was due to his being in awe of her. As the priestess had said, her being found in a paradise's lair smacked of an omen, and since Saikmar must be the person the omen was directed at, he looked on her without question as slightly supernatural herself.

Likewise, once the lesson of what had happened to Graddo had sunk in, the refugees began to treat her the same way, which was a relief.

She was still intrigued by the mysterious source of emergency power which had served the sanctuary for hundreds of years and was still operating.

She would have to sneak down inconspicuously. To Saikmar all such matters were magical, and he refused to speak of them, and there was small chance of the priests or priestesses telling her anything, for the mysteries of the sanctuary were jealously guarded.

She planned with care what she must do. First of all, she must persuade Saikmar to show her all the parts of the sanctuary that were permitted to the refugees—perhaps a third of the original hull volume. A further third, or slightly less, was the private precinct of the staff.



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And the last third of the original ship had been smashed on landing, or had been ripped open and was now unusable because of the effect of hundreds of winters' drifting snows on the interior.

Somewhere on the borderline of the uninhabitable part and the private quarters of the priestly staff she must look for resources to help her.

Accordingly, several days after her arrival, she waited patiently in the dim cabin till she was sure Saikmar was asleep, and then crept from her own bunk. She had managed to remove the headlight from the helmet of her spacesuit and hide it in her bedding; it would run for several months without attention, and its beam could be narrowed to give a fine point of light which was ideal for her surreptitious wanderings.

Using blankets, she got the metal frame to the floor without waking Saikmar, and stole out into the corridor. Somewhere a fractious child was crying ill-temperedly, but aside from that everything was quiet.

Seeing and hearing no one, she made her way to the canteen where meals were given to the refugees. A scent of food still slung around the passage here, and her mouth watered without warning, reminding her that like all the refugees she was on a bare subsistence diet now and was always hungry.

The canteen door was locked from the other side, and no matter how hard she leaned on the sliding panel she could not budge it. She had half expected this. But the frame of the hull was so badly buckled hereabouts that any door which still operated must have been loosened in its grooves just as those that did not work had been jammed in them. Playing her flashlight on the frame of the door, she saw she was right in her guess. There were places where she could easily slide the blade of her survival knife, which she had also removed from her spacesuit and brought with her, between the door and the wall.

Five minutes' fiddling work with the knife enabled her to



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press the catch of the lock back into its socket and free the door.

Having made certain no one was keeping overnight watch in the canteen, she crossed the floor soundlessly and went behind the service counter. She inspected the big urns where the thin soups and stews forming the mainstay of the refugees' meals were cooked. As she had expected, they were heated by steam pipes—mostly leaky, corroded and plugged with the same pitchlike material that had closed gaps in the hull. All the pipes led back through holes in the wall beyond. Studying the edges of these holes, she saw that they must indeed have been made when the ship first crashed; to protect the exposed edges of the metal from rust, plastic had been sprayed on, and some of it remained, black and brittle with age.

So down there . . .

She played her sword of light through the largest hole, one big enough for her to crawl through if she wished, and saw that there was a large compartment beyond containing a confused array of machinery. Promptly she decided she *was* going to crawl through.

Once again she made sure there was no one sleeping here to guard against intrusion; then she wriggled with maximum patience past the steam pipes, fortunately cold now, and into the new room. She had a twinge of alarm as she realized what she was looking at. The entire arrangement was incredibly makeshift. She calmed herself by reflecting that if it had worked for so many centuries it probably wouldn't explode now, and if it did, there was nothing she could do about it anyway. Cautiously, inspecting everything with her flashlight, she walked around the room.

What must have happened was that the original occupants of the ship, those who lived through the crash landing here, had assembled such devices as they could salvage and made their existence supportable with them. A fusion reactor—an antique four times the bulk of current models elsewhere in the galaxy—was in the center; a big pipe to the outside presumably indicated where snow was shoveled in, melted



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snow or ice being close enough to pure water when filtered to operate the reactor. A little of the water was fused, and the rest flashed to steam in order to heat the sanctuary and to power a small turbo-generator situated across the room and thus provide lighting. Presumably, when a meal was due they would turn a stopcock and release steam into the pipes heating the stew urns.

Was there anything else here, though? She broadened the beam of her light and looked around. A moment later she thought she was going to faint. Because the devices in use were not the only ones in this room. Others were pushed back against the wall, covered in dust as though they had not been used for centuries. And at least one of them she recognized instantly.

She recovered herself quickly, but she was still trembling with excitement as she wiped away dust and fumbled open inspection covers, for as far as she could tell the thing ought to be in perfect working order. Provided she could connect it up.

A length of cable found discarded behind another machine was the answer to that. She attached it to the output terminals of the generator and pressed a switch next to the plate that labeled the machine as a diet synthesizer built on Zarathustra nearly a thousand years ago. Its trace-element hoppers were three-quarters full; calcium, phosphorus and iron were lower than the rest, but dried fish and salted meat might make up the balance for this winter at least. Her thoughts raced on, while out of the air the machine, whining a little, sucked available carbon dioxide, nitrogen and hydrogen comprising the four basic elements of living matter, hammered them together in a fashion she understood only vaguely. She had been taught in Corps indoctrination how to repair and service these machines that sometimes stood between death and a stranded spaceman.

The machine being old, ran noisily, but she did not care. When a door on the far side of the fusion reactor was flung back, she paused to open the machine's delivery hopper before turning to see who had come in. It was the old woman



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Nyloo, her face pale with fury as she held high a smoking torch. Obviously the secret of increasing the sourceless light had been lost; only the time-control governing the night-day cycle still ran by itself.

Angry words died on the priestess's lips as she came wondering forward to look at what Maddalena held in her hand: a damp succulent cake of brownish color, the same consistency as doughy bread, containing—if the machine had worked properly—proteins, starches, sugars and several vitamins.

After a long incredulous pause, Nyloo lowered her aged body to her knees and bowed her head to the floor.

### Chapter 12

AFTER THAT the only problem was to fabricate a convincing story to account for the way she had set in operation a machine that had stood by idle for centuries.

She told what she thought was a reasonable lie: that in her grandmother's home there had been some ancient documents which she had found as a child, and that her grandmother had been able to read and explain some of them to her. Nyloo had been so overwhelmed by having the food problem solved, she decided instantly that the omens attending Maddalena's arrival had been fulfilled, and what she said in the sanctuary, everyone else took as gospel.

To the refugees, the food came as manna. Some of the children here had never known what it was to eat as much as they liked, and for the first time in their lives slept the nights through without crying out from hunger; the whole atmosphere lost its hunger-induced tension, and people smiled more often and forgot their pinched, moody expressions.



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Even the priestly staff regarded Maddalena with great respect, giving her a cabin of her own and many presents of cloth and furnishings from their own quarters. As for the refugees, their old hostility vanished utterly.

Saikmar was the one person who seemed badly upset by what she had done. For several days he avoided her completely, even coming late to the canteen to make sure she would have returned to her new cabin. Maddalena had no idea why he should behave that way, and since he was her only friend of any kind at the sanctuary she was worried by it.

Finally she resolved to face him directly, and went to his cabin. The moment Saikmar saw her, his face froze. With dignity he said, "What service can I do Melisma?"

That was in the formal third person, the type of address used for aged parents, very noble persons and the gods themselves. But there was no politeness in his tone; his voice cut like a whip. Maddalena flinched. Keeping her voice steady with an effort, she said, "May I talk to you for a moment?"

He stepped aside and gestured her to come in, though he made it clear he was acting against his will. Maddalena suspected that in the days since she moved to her new quarters many things here had not even been touched, suggesting that Saikmar spent all his time sitting and staring at nothing.

She sat down on her old bunk and looked at Saikmar. She said, "Saikmar, have I offended you? Have I made you angry? You have avoided me for so long, I want to know why."

He remained standing. Not looking directly at her, he said, "There is nothing. You have not offended me. Indeed I am obliged to you, for since the miracle you worked with the food machine those who once reviled me for bringing a new and hungry mouth into the sanctuary have blessed me for aiding you, which makes my life far more peaceful."

"But a lonely life is not truly peaceful," Maddalena said reasonably. "I had rather have died in the snows than spend



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my life as you do yours, alone, thinking sad, empty thoughts and hating my existence. They speak of an omen and a miracle which brought me here. Of miracles I know nothing and care less. I only know I am in a strange place and you are the one friend I have. Is that also to be lost to me?"

"I am not the only person in the sanctuary," Saikmar said.

"The other refugees will not believe that I am a person like themselves; they treat me like an idol, and when I try and talk to them they are frightened. You are the only person who is not so foolish."

"Friendship does not concern me," Saikmar answered stolidly. "I have a duty to my home and my people, and that is all."

Appalled at her own blindness, Maddalena clapped her hand to her forehead. The reason was straight under her nose, and she had failed to recognize it. Of course! The parradile was a sacred animal in Carrig, and things associated with parradiles were to Saikmar associated with Carrig. He had taken the omen of her coming as referring to himself. When Nyloo declared it to refer to Maddalena's connecting-up of the diet synthesizer, he had suffered a tremendous psychological blow. It reduced his part in the matter from a leading one to a merely incidental one. Small wonder he was so bitter towards her!

The best approach she could improvise in order to thaw Saikmar's coldness was to suggest that, had she not turned up providentially, the hunger-maddened refugees might have turned on him before the end of the winter, and then what hope would there be for Carrig? But she did not really believe that in Saikmar reposed Carrig's only hope, and apparently neither did he, although he had to act as if he did to give himself a purpose in his isolated life. She did not press the point too hard.

Accordingly she left him, rather downcast, and instead of going back to the dreary cabin she had been allotted, she began to wander absent-mindedly around the passageways, scarcely noticing where she went or whom she met.

She came at last to the entrance, where the half-dome of



the snow wall closed off the interior of the sanctuary from the arctic night, and where it was customary for young children chosen from those who were learning the secret of the mysteries to spend an hour or two daily by themselves, on guard, as a test of their ability to concentrate. Before she discovered how strictly disciplined the children were, Maddalena had tried speaking in friendly manner to one or two of them while they were on duty, and had been dismayed at the stony silence they maintained. Saikmar had explained why, though, and this time she merely paused and looked to see which of the children occupied the post.

It was Nyloo's young companion, the little girl with old-wise eyes whose name she had found to be Pettajem or Little Jewel. Pettajem was usually so self-possessed and mature for her age that Maddalena was astonished to see that she was actually crying, although she was bravely fighting the tears and snuffling hard when they threatened to flow too freely. Thinking that maybe Nyloo had punished her for some carelessness, Maddalena forgot the frigid reception she had had from other children keeping watch here by the entrance, and spoke before she realized.

"Pettajem! What's the matter?"

The girl's mouth worked, but she only turned her big dark eyes on Maddalena; she said nothing. It was probably better not to interfere, Maddalena decided, and was going to turn away when a curious scraping sound caught her ears. It seemed to come from beyond the snow wall. It suggested that something out there might be trying to burrow its way in.

Maddalena stared at Pettajem. If that was a wild creature out there trying to break the wall down, something ought to be done about it! She said, "Does Nyloo know about that?"

Pettajem's obstinate silence gave way at the question, and in a tear-choked voice she answered. "Y-yes! She says it is the sound of the spirit of him who was lately accursed, trying to get back in!"

Graddo, of course, who had been driven out for breaking the sanctuary's laws. It was nonsense; the poor man must



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have frozen to death within hours of his expulsion. Indisputably she could hear *something* scrabbling at the hard-packed snow and ice.

"Are there wild beasts here?" she asked Pettajem. The child shook her head.

A thought suddenly struck her. Could it *possibly* be human, the source of the noise? Could it specifically be Gus Langenschmidt, having survived the crash of the landing craft and somehow found his way here? She strode forward to the snow wall despite a horrified cry from Pettajem, and rapped three times on the hard surface.

There came three knocks in answer. She jumped to the conclusion she had been right, more from eagerness than from good judgment, and snapped at Pettajem.

"Go tell Nyloo this is no spirit!"

She did not wait to see if the child obeyed, but took out her knife which she now kept always by her against emergencies, and began to slash at the snow wall. With a wail of dismay Pettajem took to her heels.

The unknown burrower had worked well. It was only moments before the wall was breached and the arctic wind came through the gap, stinging her eyes and blinding her for a few seconds. She had to blink, gasping as the chill bit her throat. Blocks of compressed snow weighing twenty pounds and more were smashed loose from the wall as the intruder widened the hole violently.

Maddalena opened her eyes again and began to laugh. She was still at it when people began to hurry down the passage behind her—Nyloo, others of the staff, several of the refugees who had been alarmed by Pettajem's shouts for help, and even Saikmar, startled from his despondency. It was to Saikmar that Maddalena spoke.

"Here's *your* omen, the one that's meant for you and no one else!"

Saikmar nodded and began to smile against his will. So did many of the others. You couldn't really take the intruder very seriously despite its vast bulk, for it looked so woebe-gone, its hide dull with frost, its neck drooping, its shoulders



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—which could just be seen poking through the enlarged hole in the wall—shaking with the cold.

It was the friendly parradile, driven by the cold from its lair, seeking the shelter it had not found in its cave in the icy cliffs.

Strangely, there was less wrangling over the admission of the parradile to the sanctuary than there had been over letting Maddalena in. Partly because the refugees were chastened by what had happened to Graddo and partly because they and the priestly staff as well were shaken to their mental foundations by the succession of miraculous events. Certainly the peaceful behavior of the parradile, that most of them knew only as a wild animal, and the affectionate way in which it treated Maddalena and Saikmar, suggested that strong magic had been at work.

Saikmar, who had, of course, made a study of parradiles as all contenders in the Carrig king-hunt had to, declared at once that it must be the cold which had driven it from its lair, and Maddalena questioned him closely on the habits of the species. Saikmar answered with eagerness, the parradile's arrival having snapped him clear out of his morose depression.

What Saikmar told her was naturally based on mere observation, without scientific analysis, but he gave enough detail for her to work out, with the help of her lay knowledge of biology, a clear picture of a parradile's needs.

"I was astonished," Saikmar declared, "when I saw that this parradile had made itself a nest! Such a thing had never before been heard of!"

He looked at Maddalena, who had turned suddenly pale, standing beside the parradile and stroking its blunt head absently. The parradile seemed to like that. "Is something wrong?"

"N-nothing," Maddalena said with an effort. But what Saikmar had said was startling in its implications. If this beast beside her had been capable of figuring out for itself that it needed insulation against heat loss in this cold climate, that indicated perhaps the highest order of intelligence ever



encountered in a nonhuman creature! Saikmar had spoken to her about parradiles several times since her arrival, mentioning the notion that they had copied from men's gliders the trick of using the hot air rising over volcanoes as a means of gaining height, and although he tended to dismiss it there was a lingering doubt. That also was indicative of intelligence.

Briskly Maddalena pulled herself together and began to issue orders, which were obeyed mainly because everyone was too dazed by the parradile's coming to question them.

There was a cabin near the canteen, which had probably been a food store when the ship was still spaceworthy, but which had not been used for a long time because its external wall was split. She ordered a panel of basketwork to be forced into the gap and calked with the pitchlike stuff that was regularly used to seal hull cracks. Then she instructed one of Nyloo's deputies to run a new pipe from the fusion reactor's steam output into his cabin. There was some objection raised to this, but she got her way.

"Parradiles are clean beasts," Saikmar warned. "They do not foul their lairs. We must arrange for that also."

A curious feeling of elation overcame Maddalena. She said, "Let us see whether a parradile can be taught to use human sanitation!"

She would have thought that Nyloo was too old and world-weary for anything to shake her now. But when the parradile had been successfully taught—it took minutes, merely—they found the priestess sitting in a corner by herself, muttering over and over again the same words.

"Miracle upon miracle," she was saying. "Miracle upon miracle. That I live to see these days."

Saikmar, pale-faced, his eyes bright and round, kept shaking his head. He too was incredulous, and his manner towards Maddalena was half-fearful, half-adoring.

"But that parradile is near to human now!" he burst out. "It has learned in the space of a few hours how to conduct itself! Even children may come close and stroke its head!"



And these are the fierce beasts we have hunted in the air since no one knows how long!"

Maddalena, sitting again on the bunk in Saikmar's cabin where she had slept the first few days after her arrival, said quietly, "Saikmar, tell me, have your people always hunted the parradile as they would hunt a dangerous meat-eater and man-killer?"

Saikmar sat down abruptly and gave a shrug. "No, I think not. Not in Carrig. To us the parradile has been different. The king-hunt is a ritual. We always respect and admire the parradile even in the act of slaying it. It seems a most noble creature. I think it is this respect which has led us gradually to confine the king-hunt to our best and most skillful young men, as though only those who themselves are noble are fit to go forth against it."

That was a remarkably acute piece of analysis for someone who could not take a detached view, Maddalena thought.

She said, "Would you say that the parradile is killed, not because it menaces men, but because by magical association its nobility comes to him who kills?"

Saikmar looked unhappy. He said after a pause, "Yes. Yes, I think that must be true. Although magic in Carrig is the prerogative of Clan Parradile, as here it is of the priests and priestesses. So I know very little of such matters."

"Are parradiles ever a menace to human beings?"

"Oh yes! The species that lairs in the Smoking Hills is merely the largest of several kinds of parradile. It is believed that there are very many across the ocean to the west, perhaps in a land men have never visited—or, as the ancient legends suggest—in a land from which men were expelled for their arrogance towards the gods." Maddalena had read the accounts in the books Saikmar had lent her of man's legendary origin, and did not have to ask for explanations.

Saikmar went on, "The fisher folk who work the western seas tell of seeing parradiles flying far to the west, sometimes coming to look their boats over and then returning below the western horizon. Once or twice boats have been attacked. And there are, moreover, those species which fly



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south for the winter, which seldom come near Carrig because the king is jealous of his rights in the Smoking Hills and beats off all intruders. They attack domestic graats, and have reliably been reported to steal children. Men in the lands where they are common do not regard them as sacred, and kill them as and where they become a danger."

Yes; clear enough so far. Maddalena felt herself frowning over a difficult question, though. She said, "But these parradiles need vast amounts of food. What keeps them from taking men's cattle and human children?"

Saikmar blinked at her. "Why, on every farm there is a plot of land where parradiles may come if they wish and eat all they find there. When a caravan comes to Carrig, one-twentieth part of all the pickled meats and dried fish they carry is taken as customs toll and set out on sacrificial tables among the volcanoes, for the parradiles to help themselves. This is a very ancient custom, and apparently—"

He broke off. Eyes bright, Maddalena leaned forward and prompted him. "Yes, Saikmar? Yes?"

"I was going to say," Saikmar answered slowly, "that the parradiles seem to understand the arrangement well, and they respect it; for the rest of their food they take wild animals and wild plants. They will eat anything, as you know."

"In other words," Maddalena finished for him, "man and parradile have achieved a working agreement. Is there any reason"—the words tumbled from her in her tremendous excitement—"why from mutual toleration man and parradile should not become *allies*?"

"What?"

"The parradile helped me and you both, carrying us down from its lair to the level ground by the sanctuary. In our turn, we have helped it by giving it warmth, shelter and food. Plainly this is a beast of near-human intelligence, capable of high feelings even as far as gratitude! Why should we not tame it completely, so that when spring comes perhaps it will carry us south to Carrig?"

Saikmar closed his eyes and swayed a little where he sat.



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The idea of such an enormous change was altogether outside his mental range. He said faintly, "No!"

"Why not?" pressed Maddalena, disappointed.

"No!" Saikmar said again. "The parradile is a noble animal, and to debase it to—to a sort of flying graat would be unworthy!"

He broke off. Graat . . . Lines from the *Ballad of Red Sloin* came back to him unbidden, and he remembered his thoughts as he kept watch in the temple in Carrig the night before the fatal king-hunt.

There had once, according to that ballad, been a Clan Graat in addition to the others. He had reasoned then that, since all the other clan-totems were fierce and dangerous beasts, possibly the graat had also been a wild animal in the old days. Now it was the standard meat and pack animal over the known world.

So change of that sort was conceivable after all. And yet he could not get away from the idea that it would be degrading to the parradile to alter its relationship with man in the same way. He said so.

"Has the usurper Belfeor not degraded the parradile?" Maddalena countered. "Did you not say yourself that the only reason for the parradile's presence here in the arctic which you could think of was that Belfeor's men must have driven his kind out of the Smoking Hills? Why should not parradiles and men work together to help each other regain their stolen rights?"

He gave a reluctant nod. "Yes," he said eventually. "It might be done. It might very well be done. But one parradile is not many."

Suddenly it was all clear to her what they must do. She leaped to her feet. "Listen, Saikmar!" she said urgently. "I think I see a way in which even one parradile might help you to win back Carrig from Belfeor!"



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## Chapter 13

TO THE SOUTHLAND CITY of Dayomar, winter came not as a time of storm and snows, like Carrig's winter, but as a season of miserable, unpredictable drizzles and fogs. If snow did come, it was barely more than sleet, and instead of whitening over the dirty streets and the dull, regular houses it merely made the puddles deeper and the people wetter.

Galactic Agent Slee was based in Dayomar, and although his years of experience there had accustomed him to the climate, he could still feel the gray midwinter depression that had overcome him the first time he looked on Dayomar roofed by dank, dripping clouds and walled in by thin, wet mists.

Yet, he had grown used to thinking of himself as a man of this city, and it was rare for him to daydream about other more civilized worlds. Most of the year he was moderately content—and after all, his tenure would not last for ever.

Lately his real situation had been troubling his mind more than it had for a long time, however. Northward at Carrig, he was certain something had gone badly amiss, but he had no news he could trust, and would get no more till the winter snows were melted off the mountain passes and caravans could once more get through.

And there was this mysterious business of the patrol cruiser which was supposed to bring a new agent into Carrig—this girl Maddalena Santos, posing as one of his own employees—which had vanished without trace.

It could have been an accident. Failing evidence to the contrary, it was an accident. The Corps base had been regretful, but Brzeska had said he positively could not spare another operative; Maddalena Santos had only been available because he was thinking of dismissing her back to Earth, and now that she had gone Slee would have to make out as well as he could by his own methods.



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The things that had been going on in Carrig, though, this past summer! He'd heard about them from a dozen sources. The usurper Belfeor and his gang of bandits—well, people said they must be bandits, and it was no news that there were gangs of nomad outlaws at large on the eastern plains of this continent—Belfeor's men, whoever they were, were changing things left, right, and center. It was reported that the people of Carrig were being forced to work some kind of diggings among the Smoking Hills, and this fitted all too well with Slee's theory that someone had discovered gunpowder.

This was going through his mind one afternoon as he plodded down a broad, but muddy and rutted street on the way back from a meeting with a wealthy merchant who wanted to purchase the contract of one of Slee's hetairas and set her up in a house of her own.

Slee's two attendants were passing a deep doorway in the front of an empty house when a voice called out, "Slee!"

That was not the name by which he was known here. Startled, he halted and spun round. Out of the shadows jumped a sturdy beggar—a common sight in Dayomar—clad in filthy wet rags, smeared with mud, but with fine white teeth gleaming in an obsequious smile. Putting out his alms bowl, the beggar began to bow and cringe, uttering singsong cries in the traditional beggar's manner.

"Most noble and exalted, the fortune that smiles on me today is as though the sun had shone at midnight and swept away a great darkness! Your honor will remember without a doubt, for his memory is as all his other attributes, most wonderful and perfect, that this humble beggar's sister Melisma, daughter of Yull and Mazia, was in his service. Will your honor take pity on a man who has found no hope in the beggars' trade, and who would acquire some new skill and serve loyally in the household of a regular master?"

One of Slee's attendants made to beat the beggar about the head with a stick he was holding; Slee stopped him with a curt gesture. "Brother of Melisma?" he said. "Follow, then, and I'll find some place for you—in the kitchen, perhaps."



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"Your honor is the kindest of men!" the beggar yelped, and fell in behind, cavorting with joy like a dancer in ecstasy.

"And what the hell are *you* doing disguised as a beggar on the streets of Dayomar?" Slee demanded, falling into a soft chair.

"I've had the devil of a job getting here at all," Langenschmidt said. "It's taken me more than two months. First, do you know about the ship in orbit around this planet?"

Slee jerked forward. "What?"

"That's right." Langenschmidt sat down wearily facing his colleague. "A ship. The moment my cruiser appeared they shot us down. Fortunately I was already in the landingcraft we were dropping to put down Maddalena Santos, and we were thrown clear. They tried a second shot and gashed the hull of the landingcraft—probably thought they'd put it out of control—but I managed to duck into atmosphere and keep her straight and level. Maddalena bailed out somewhere in the arctic; she might conceivably have made it to a village or just possibly the northern sanctuary, but the chance was a slim one. You haven't heard from her, by any—? Oh, of course not; if you had, you'd know about that ship up there.

"I dropped the landingcraft in the western ocean. I bailed out myself as I was crossing the coast. It was night luckily, and nobody had taken the ship for anything but a meteorite. I stole some native clothing and ditched my own gear, and ever since then I've been begging my way to Dayomar to link up with you. I got here this morning."

Slee, frowning, said, "But a ship in orbit here! That means—"

"That means that your clever theory about someone inventing gunpowder is balderdash. Belfeor who wields the lightning is a man with an energy gun, from off the planet. And more than likely we've got another Slaveworld case on our hands, with the population of Carrig being exploited to mine the deposits of radioactives in the Smoking Hills. Right?"

Slee got to his feet. "Communicator," he said briefly.



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It was local night on the airless world of the Corps base, but Commandant Brzeska came to the communicator, sleepy-eyed, and woke instantly to alertness on seeing Gus Langenschmidt. He said, "Gus! I thought you were dead!"

"I'm not," Langenschmidt said curtly. "Listen to this . . ."

When he had finished, and Slee had added some details which had seemed insignificant before Belfeor was shown to be from off-planet, Brzeska nodded thoughtfully.

"We can take action on this, all right," he said. "And no bones about legality or illegality, either. Shooting down a patrol cruiser—that's cooked them properly. I'll find out where they're from as soon as I can."

"Most likely from a world that's seriously short of radioactive elements," Langenschmidt said. "And which isn't wealthy enough to use fusion reactors rather than fission reactors. Somewhere like Cyclops, for example."

"A good point," Brzeska agreed, making a note. "They've had plenty of time to get a mining program operating. If they keep one ship in orbit, the odds are they have a second one as well and they take turns in ferrying. It'll take us a month or two to fix their origin beyond doubt, but don't worry. From now on this gets highest priority. Slee, what sort of mess have they made of the local culture?"

"As yet, we can't be certain. Without an agent in Carrig itself—and it's winter here, remember, so the passes are snowbound—I'm guessing. I'd say, though, they've been moderately careful so far. Probably they've bribed as much as they've coerced. Whether this will continue, I doubt. After all, they must realize that if they've wrecked a patrol cruiser someone will investigate eventually."

"You mean they'll be tempted to overreach themselves because they're under pressure. Very likely. While I'm fixing things this end, you'd better work out a plan for easing them off the planet with the minimum disturbance to the natives. It won't be simple, but it *must* be done. Gus, how about you? Want I should pick you up?"

Langenschmidt shook his head tiredly. "My crew's gone,"



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he said. "I won't feel up to going back on the beat with a new team. I'll stay here. Slee could do with some help. And when the affair in Carrig is straightened out, I'll claim my pay and retire. I'm well overdue, as you know."

"As you like," Brzeska said neutrally. "And—good luck."

It was less than the month Brzeska had foreseen when he called back—only twenty-seven days later. He said, "Gus, your inspired guess was right. They're from Cyclops. It's a predatory sort of world, just the kind of place where a scheme like this might have been hatched. Over the past year and a half they've been shipping in high-class radioactives, claiming that they'd made a strike in an uninhabited system. So far they've sold six cargoes. But they're not flooding the market, just releasing a little at a time. Since we've been keeping watch on the ships orbiting Fourteen, though, we've seen two flights already. This implies they're caching the proceeds somewhere nearer to Cyclops. Perhaps they're intending to pull out some time soon and just continue to let a flow from the cache trickle on to the market on Cyclops itself."

"Who are they?" Langenschmidt demanded.

"Not sponsored by the government on Cyclops," Brzeska shot back. "If they were, it would be difficult as hell—and knowing Cyclops, it wouldn't have surprised me. No, luckily they turn out to be just a gang of adventurers in business on their own account. About a hundred or so of them, as far as we've been able to discover so far."

"How did they get to know about this planet?" Slee demanded.

"One of them—going under the name of Pargetty in Carrig—is actually called Meard and he's a failed Corps probationer. It was by following him up that we got most of our information."

"Any idea how they're getting the radioactives off the surface?" Langenschmidt asked. "That's been worrying me. They can't surely be landing boats openly."

"They've been flying them by glider. The natives of Car-



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rig are expert glider pilots and the technique of glider flying has probably been with them since the refugees from Zarathustra first arrived on Fourteen. They take them to a lonely spot in the Great Eastern Desert, and the ships put down there to collect them when the natives have gone home. No problem there."

The commandant leaned back in his chair. "And at your end," he said, "have you any plans for getting Belfeor's gang out of the way without indicating outside interference to the natives?"

"The only idea we've come up with is that it *must* look to the people of Carrig as though the forces of nature—the gods, so to say—are working against Belfeor. We can probably foment a lot of unrest in the city even if it doesn't yet exist, and my bet is that it does. And then—well, there are some fine healthy volcanoes in the Smoking Hills."

### Chapter 14

STILL SMARTING with the contempt he had read in the eyes of those who had spoken to him a few minutes before, Ambrus—who could not call himself son of Knole any longer, having disowned his clan—entered the private apartments of the ruler of Carrig, in the base of the high watchtower topping the fortress.

Every day that passed was making him more and more uncertain of the wisdom of the course he had chosen. He had thought he was being clever; after all, the power that Belfeor and his people had—was that not obviously the best of reasons for throwing in his lot with them? Their miraculous weapons! The awe-inspiring machines they had constructed



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among the Smoking Hills! He had been so certain he was right that even when his father threw himself from the parapet of the tower to die on the rocks below, he had felt no guilt.

Now, however . . .

He had disowned his clan and his kinfolk, and Belfeor's men—and the women too, which was worse; in Carrig a noble was not accustomed to contemptuous treatment from women!—made it perfectly clear that to them he was inferior. He was alone. No one would befriend him any more.

He had been hopeful an hour or two back, when it was reported to him that nobles of the Clan Parradile, his old clan, wanted to speak with him. He thought perhaps they were relenting. Not at all. Although they had addressed him politely enough, their respect was sarcastic and he could read their disdain in their eyes.

"This year," old Sir Gurton Knole had said, "the first new moon of spring falls late." Sir Gurton was Ambrus's uncle, the late Sir Bavis's younger brother. The headship of the clan had passed to him when Sir Bavis killed himself.

Ambrus had nodded warily. Sir Gurton would know about these things better than he did.

"We have a new ruler," Sir Gurton had said, and pulled a sour face. Ambrus did not comment. "Last year he held the king-hunt as we instructed him, and killed the new king without even going forth in a glider—from the ground with his lightning bolts! The contest was a mockery. Still, it was held."

Ambrus remembered that shameful happening well.

"But now," Sir Gurton had gone on, "we have sent many times to Belfeor regarding the king-hunt, and we have had no reply. His men have ordered the would-be contenders to work in the Smoking Hills and to forget their glider practice which, indeed, many of them have done anyway, thinking that this year once more Belfeor will stand on the ground and shoot the king from the sky.

"Men are saying—and this, Ambrus, I must emphasize, because although you have disowned your clan you were nonetheless born into the Clan Parradile—men are saying



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that Belfeor is mocking the gods as our ancestors once did, before the fall which drove us into the unkind lands of the icy north. They say further, and I do not disagree, that if he goes on the gods will be angry and will smite the sun again, so that all men are burned from the face of the earth and this time without survivors."

Hearing these frightening words delivered in so grave a tone, Ambrus was alarmed. He said, "What do you want of me?"

"Go to Belfeor. Ask him what arrangements he has made for the king-hunt this year. He will not answer our inquiries. But perhaps *you*"—and Sir Gurton's voice was harsh with contempt—"perhaps *you* can gain his ear."

That was the errand on which Ambrus found himself bent. Ambrus found himself sweating as he knocked on the wall beside the door of Belfeor's private office. Once, it had been his father's.

He could hear voices behind the door, but he had to knock again, more loudly, before Belfeor's sharp order to come in was heard. He stepped into the room.

With Belfeor was Pargetty, the fair, nervous man who had been his companion since the earliest days, and a woman with a brilliant red mouth and eyes like chips of ice who had led the rest of Belfeor's folk from their lair in the mountains down to Carrig when they moved into the city. They were discussing some documents piled on the table at which they sat.

"*What* is it?" Belfeor said in a tone of affected weariness. Ambrus squared his shoulders and looked the usurper straight in the eye.

"I am sent by my former clan, that of the parradile," he said. "I am charged to inquire what arrangements you have made to hold the king-hunt this year, as law and custom requires."

"Go away and stop bothering me," Belfeor snapped, and moved in his chair so that he did not look at Ambrus.

Nervous as always, Pargetty cleared his throat. He said,



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"Uh—Belfeor, is that wise? Out of deference to local custom you must surely—"

"There will be no king-hunt this year," Belfeor said. Ambrus took half a step forward, unable to believe his ears.

He said, "What?"

"You heard me," Belfeor retorted. "What is there for you to hunt? Those damned parradiles were interfering with our work, so I had every last one of them cleared out of the hills and either killed or sent packing. Get out, and forget this superstitious nonsense."

"Belfeor!" cried the woman in alarm. He jerked round in his chair just in time to see Ambrus, his face twisted with terror, raise clawed hands to close on his throat. He jumped to his feet, snatching his energy gun from his belt.

"Out!" he barked. "Unless you want to fry like one of those parradiles!"

Utterly broken, Ambrus turned and left the room.

The rest of the day, the question kept hammering at his mind. What would become of Carrig if the forms and ceremonies were abandoned? The king-hunt was part of the way man's life had been settled by divine decree. To discard it meant to offend the gods. And everyone knew how men had been driven out of a fairer world than this because they had been arrogant in just such a way as Belfeor now was.

The gods' vengeance might be delayed, but it was certain to come. He had aided and abetted Belfeor. Would he be spared? Never!

He made up his mind before the evening what he was going to do. Already peasants from the villages around Carrig were beginning to come into the city for the spring festivals. They had been less touched than the city folk by Belfeor's interference, for the city's food supply depended on their sowing and gathering.

Aside from a regular quota of laborers that they—like the people in the city—had to find for Belfeor's mines, they had hardly noticed the impact of the usurpers. Though they had grumbled at the imposition of this labor quota, as they



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would at a new tax, they had not rebelled. The lord of Carrig decreed it; the lords of Carrig had made their lives safe from bandits, and soldiers from Carrig could be called upon to hunt wild beasts that threatened their crops and their children. Why should they question their rulers' wisdom?

But the news that Belfeor had discontinued the king-hunt, and had even driven the parradiles away from the Smoking Hills—*that* would stir them, he felt sure!

Accordingly, that evening he did something he had not dared to do in many months. He ventured out into the city itself.

Oh, by the gods! How Carrig had been changed!

They had not forgotten him, as he half-hoped they might have. Even the children on the streets knew him, and ran after him shouting his name and flinging mud at him. Before he had gone a mile he knew his purpose was defeated, and if he persisted he might well be beaten to death in some dark alley by the citizens. He turned and made to flee from a gang of children who were hurling not merely mud but stones also, and blinded by some ordure that had hit him in the face he ran headlong into a man emerging from a tavern.

"Steady, now!" the stranger said, catching Ambrus to stop him from falling down. He barked at the children, telling them to give over and go home.

"But that's Ambrus, the traitor!" their leader shrilled.

The stranger detached his arm from Ambrus's grip and caught the boy by the ear. He said, "Did you never hear the proverb 'Whoever durst call me accurst came off the worst'? Get you gone before I take the flat of my sword to your backside!"

Clawing the dirt from his eyes, Ambrus saw that his rescuer was a big man, powerful in spite of having gray hair and a lined face. Though the gang of children were twenty to his one, they hesitated and finally turned away reluctantly. As far as the street corner they looking back, but the stranger out-stared them, and eventually they disappeared.



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"I cannot thank you enough," Ambrus said humbly. "Though I suppose their parents taught them to call me a traitor."

"You're Ambrus, are you?" the gray-haired man said. "Yes, I've heard about you. But 'traitor' is a hard word to call a man, and I'm a newcomer to this city. I came in with one of the spring caravans. Treachery is something I want to hear more of before I'll join a crowd hurling stones. Tell me, though, if that's the treatment you're getting from the townsfolk, what brings you out alone in public?"

Astonished that he felt so humble, Ambrus told him.

"No king-hunt!" The gray-haired man spoke in a tone of amazement, and yet Ambrus would have sworn he was delighted. He had no time to puzzle out why this should be good news to him. "Come with me!"

He turned back towards the tavern he had just left. Ambrus protested feebly that if he was taken into a tavern some ruffian or other would certainly attack him.

"Not in here," the gray-haired man assured him. "My friends who came with the same caravan as I are mostly in here. They'll protect you if you need protecting. Come along!"

And he dragged Ambrus with him.

It was as the gray-haired man promised. Though some of the tavern's clients screamed with rage as they caught sight of Ambrus, and jumped up to go for him, a signal from the gray-haired man was enough to produce two others from among the customers to calm each would-be attacker. Ambrus wondered vaguely who the gray-haired man could be.

"Up there on that table!" the gray-haired man commanded, gesturing. "Tell this company what you have just told me!"

Quaking, and appalled at his own terror, Ambrus did so. He made no secret of his own part in Belfeor's work, but claimed that he had no thought of sacrilege. Now he had discovered that the parradiles had been driven from the Smoking Hills, he had repented, and wanted nothing more to do with the usurper.

A solemn hush followed his statement. It was broken even-



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tually by someone calling down the curse of the gods on Belfeor. To show his sincerity, Ambrus fervently echoed the words.

"Good!" said the gray-haired man. "But you can't just opt out, you know. You'll have to remain in Belfeor's confidence as far as you can. You can make better amends for your treachery than just leaving Belfeor flat. It'll take courage, but it's necessary."

At the implied insult to his bravery, Ambrus drew himself up. "You're a stranger, sir!" he challenged.

"Yes, but wherever I find injustice I hate it, in my own city or anywhere. What you'll have to do is this—listen!"

### Chapter 15

"I THINK you've been stupid," Pargetty said hesitantly. "To disregard the force of local custom the way you have."

Belfeor snorted. "You and your damned Corps conditioning!" he said. "You'll be telling me next that the Corps is right in the way it's treating these barbarian worlds!"

Pargetty flushed. He said defensively, "The Corps is behaving abominably. You know that's my view. That's why I came in with you. And where would you have been, but for my specialized knowledge?"

Belfeor only grunted. Pargetty went on, beginning to sound raucous, "You're willing enough to listen and take advantage when I tell you about untapped resources on this planet! And yet when I warn you in all seriousness about the people—you can't forget the people—you spit in my eye."

"All right, calm down," Belfeor invited. He made an expansive gesture. "Tell us about the people if you want to."



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"You know as well as I do that I think it's disgusting that the Corps should be hiding these worlds where the Zarathustra refugees landed. They're ripe for exploitation. We haven't got so many habitable planets that we can afford to leave these in benighted ignorance and at the mercy of mud-grubbing degenerates. And it would be a blessing to these people to bring them into the ordinary circuit of galactic civilization—"

"Hark at the preacher!" Belfeor interrupted mockingly. "I never knew you felt so strongly about this planet."

"Have you given a moment's thought to our situation?" Pargetty said intensely. "Have you? There are a hundred and two of us, in a city of seventeen thousand. Already the peasants from the surrounding territory are pouring in by the villageful for the spring festivals. How are they going to react to your canceling the king-hunt? We're outnumbered a hundred and seventy to one, not counting the villagers. And what about the people who've come with the spring caravans? Even if they're not local citizens, they're going to be angry and disappointed. The king-hunt is what attracts them and the trade they bring. Have you thought of that, Belfeor?"

Belfeor negligently drew the energy gun with which he had threatened Ambrus. "There's enough charge in the magazine of this thing to fry a hundred and seventy people," he said. "And I'd remind you that I made myself legal ruler of Carrig. Well, didn't I?"

"This is what you're disregarding!" stormed Pargetty. "The rulers of Carrig don't get their power just by performing one idiotic action. As far as the natives are concerned, their power is divinely bestowed and depends on the continued favor of the gods. The real rulers of Carrig, to their mind, are not whoever happens to be currently in charge, but the whole complex of divine laws and ritual which they center their lives on. That's a fact you can't ignore."

"This is a new tune you're playing," Belfeor said coldly. "It's not so long ago that you were full of how foolproof the plan was, and how easy it would be to seize power here,



and how blindly the natives would obey the man who'd made himself legal ruler of the city."

Pargetty fell back in his chair. "I didn't say you could change the people's superstitious nature overnight," he retorted.

Yanna said slowly, "Belfeor, I think you'd better pay attention to what Pargetty said there. After all, he's been right all along the line so far—about the mineral deposits, about making yourself the ruler, everything."

Belfeor slapped his open hand down on the table with a noise like a gunshot. He said coldly, "Now you listen to me! Pargetty, you asked me if I'd given any thought to our situation. I'll ask you the same thing. Those idiots orbiting in the freighter shot down a ship. We don't know what it was—it burst apart and fell into atmosphere and burned up. So we have to assume it was a patrol cruiser.

"You've told us that the Corps's resources are too limited to allow them to come and investigate immediately, but that sooner or later they're bound to show up. And because you and I had the bad luck to run into a Corps agent—Trader Heron—and had to kill him, this doubles the likelihood of their coming back here soon.

"Before that happens, we've got to make our pile from the radioactive deposits. That means driving the natives till they drop to keep the output high. We've just about broken even on our investments so far; having to buy a second ship used up our first year's profit—or hadn't that occurred to you? Once we get clear of here, with enough radioactives cached in our home system to draw on for the foreseeable future, we're well off.

"We can lie till we're blue about the origin of our supplies, and we can live in luxury and maybe we can even buy longevity treatments. Back on Cyclops we're going to be safe. Until then, we don't waste a precious moment. We just mine and ship, mine and ship, till there's enough radioactives in store at home to last us our lifetimes through."

"Fixing up the king-hunt to keep the natives happy isn't a waste of time!" Pargetty flared.



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"Go and fix it, then! Put on your little show for the local people. Though goodness knows where you're going to find a parradile to be hunted! I told them to make a clean sweep of the creatures when they proved to be such a nuisance."

"What were they doing?" Yanna demanded. "You ought to have consulted us before you gave the orders, you know."

"I don't have to consult anyone," Belfeor rapped at her. "They were a constant nuisance to the prospectors. You could hardly walk into a cave in the hills without finding one of them. And what's more they were eating about a fifth of the agricultural products on the local farms. Parasites, that's what they were—not parradiles."

"Was this customary?" Pargetty said. He looked pale and sick.

"What? Yes, I guess it was." Belfeor sounded impatient. "The farmers were resigned to it, at least."

"Then you've probably already cooked us," Pargetty said, getting to his feet. "You've broken local custom open so wide there's more than enough room for us to drop through. I'll go and arrange a king-hunt with Sir Gurton Knole. Maybe that'll give us a breathing space. But your stupidity and incompetence have more than likely insured a rebellion already."

Belfeor was so surprised at this display of spirit by the normally inoffensive Pargetty that he was still gaping with astonishment when the door of the room slammed.

"Good news," Gus Langenschmidt said quietly into the communicator.

"Tell me more," Brzeska invited.

"I'm speaking from a tavern in Carrig that we've more or less taken over. We came in with a caravan from Dayomar. This is not for repetition, by the way. I've sometimes had doubts about Slee's abilities, but not any more. The way he organized adequate cover on short notice for all the sixty men you sent was an absolute model of efficiency. We came in as a group of mercenary soldiers guarding the caravan against bandits; he planted a bandit-scare in Dayomar, and it got to the point where the caravan master wouldn't have put a



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single graat on the road without an escort. Then, of course, Slee provided us, the answer to his prayer.

"We've been here twenty days or so now. I'm not sure if Belfeor realizes—if one of his advisers is a failed Corps probationer, he's certainly been told, but that's different—anyway, he's sitting on a bomb. He's disregarded local custom left, right, and center.

"The other evening I walked out of this tavern and found Ambrus, the renegade son of the man who was ruled here for a record number of eighteen years, being stoned by some kids. He'd just heard from Belfeor that this year there isn't going to be a king-hunt—I'll enlarge on that in a second—and his conscience was pricking him. So I put him up on a table in the tavern and made sure that several gossipy clients heard him announce this with his own lips.

"Sure enough, that was what it needed. The city's on the boil now. They're just waiting for the evening of the spring new moon. Then, if Belfeor doesn't call the king-hunt according to precedent they will go and pull him into little bits, energy guns notwithstanding.

"Possibly it was hearing the reaction to the story Ambrus told, though I'm not sure. Anyway, a day or two later Belfeor changed his mind, a Sir Gurton Knole—the head of the Clan Parradile and thus the high priest of the Carrig religion—announced that there would be a hunt after all.

"If it comes off it'll be a farce. Traditionally, the best young pilots from all the clans are selected to bring down the king; they go out in these flimsy gliders and shoot darts at him.

"After what happened last year, when Belfeor just stood on a nearby hill and shot the parradile with an energy gun, looking inappropriately bored, the young champions are understandably not enthusiastic. Instead of spending the winter practicing and competing with each other, they've been muttering insults about Belfeor when they've been permitted time off from the mines in the Smoking Hills.

"I've managed to plant a couple of agents in the mines, by the way. And they tell me that on Belfeor's orders all the



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parradiles have been driven out of the hills by his men.

"There is no doubt at all now of what Belfeor is doing. He has crushers, grinders, sedimentation apparatus, imported radiation detectors, all kinds of prospecting equipment and mining equipment, up there in the Smoking Hills. They're refining the radioactives down to about eighty-eight per cent pure, and then flying them out by glider to this place you told me about. Presumably they are then shipping them to a cache near Cyclops—perhaps even in the Cyclops system. Don't they have asteroids there which would be a good hiding place? They are storing them, because the output is far higher than what's reaching the market on Cyclops as yet. You said they'd only sold six loads since they began operations. But they're refining four to five tons a day, and have been for months—possibly for over a year. That's a hell of a lot of radioactives."

"We're looking after that," Brzeska said. "As soon as I can detach a cruiser from somewhere else, it's going to scout around the Cyclops system and see if the cache can be found."

"Excellent."

"How about the—divine intervention?"

"All in order," Langenschmidt said. "That's why I planted those agents in the mines. Half Carrig will probably be knocked down by the eruptions, but Belfeor won't be among the people who get up after they've happened."

No matter how widely publicized, a denial never catches up with a rumor. That was Langenschmidt's greatest advantage during the days that followed. Even though Belfeor seemed to have changed his mind and instructed Pargetty to make the necessary arrangements, the chances were ten to one that every peasant arriving in the city for the spring festivals would have heard Ambrus's original story before he discovered that some sort of preparations were after all in hand.

Harshly, suspiciously, the new arrivals inquired about the champions who would take part in the king-hunt, and found



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that no one was taking the matter seriously; they went to have their small annual bet on the result and found that none of the regular bookmakers knew enough about what was going on to offer odds. Logically, this showed that Belfeor's king-hunt was a mere sham. And the gods would hardly be satisfied with a sham.

People began to grumble, at first muttering, then aloud, till you could almost imagine that you heard the growl of complaint vibrating the foundations of the city.

Pleased, Langenschmidt looked about for ways of stressing Belfeor's arrogance still further. The citizens of Carrig were much taken up with omens and portents. Obviously it would help things along if a few suitable miracles could be managed.

Carved in the rock at the foot of the citadel on which the temple and the fortress perched, there was an ancient statue of the god of good fortune, which was very popular with the townsfolk. It was the custom for people concluding contracts about some business venture to go to the statue and pat its plump, jolly face before they set out. Even foreign caravan masters often did so, and no barge skipper would fail to visit the statue before shipping a cargo down river to the coast.

A few mornings after Langenschmidt decided it was time for omens, the skipper and the helmsman of a boat that had come up from a coastal fishing port and who were not concerned to stay for the king-hunt, seeing it would be such a sorry farce this year, went gloomily to touch the statue. They reached up unthinkingly towards its face, on which centuries of gentle stroking had put a high gloss, and discovered to their amazement that the stone cheeks were wet.

Exclaiming, they looked closely, and saw that out of the god's eyes slow tears were oozing.

Going to the never-failing well in the back courtyard of Clan Twyvit's town house—they had country estates, of course, but always moved to the town house before the king-hunt—a brawny cook dropped her bucket twenty feet to the water and drew it up full of scarlet blood. She let it



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fall again, screaming, and twenty scullions, turnspits, skivvies and footmen came to see what was wrong. Gawking, they agreed among themselves that so many miracles in so short a time could indicate only one thing.

Then they turned as one and stared at the high pinnacle of the watchtower atop the fortress. Belfeor was there.

One of them was deputed to take the news to Sir Malan Corrie himself, so he should be fully aware of the serious situation.

When the stories of the omens he had organized came back in embroidered form to the tavern where Langenschmidt had made his headquarters, even he was surprised how efficiently he had managed it. The well in Clan Twyvit's house, for example, had proved to be full of dead bodies—not merely of a scarlet dye that turned its water to the consistency and color of blood. And people swore that a maddened graat in the market had screamed curses in a human voice, damning Belfeor. And the god of good fortune had not merely had tears oozing from tiny sacs concealed in its eye sockets; its whole expression was said to have changed from its merry joviality to one of deep gloom.

Two days later still, with the king-hunt now imminent, the workers in the mines mutinied. According to Langenschmidt's two agents working in the mine, Belfeor looked badly upset for the first time.

He kept his word and sent for Sir Gurton Knole in the evening, presumably to discuss matters of ritual. When this news was reported, the citizens relaxed a little, but remained watchful.

As a last straw, Langenschmidt played his ace of trumps. He had the word passed that no one who had been in the Smoking Hills since the end of the winter had seen a single parradile; what then was Belfeor going to hunt when the time came?



## Chapter 16

AMBRUS TRIED to avoid the eyes of Sir Gurton, standing beside Belfeor on the parapet in his ceremonial regalia, and to concentrate instead on watching the sun set over the westerly end of the Smoking Hills. It was a fine clear evening, and the sun was tinging the few low clouds with pink.

Ambrus glanced at Belfeor, the usurper, standing behind Sir Gurton. His face was dark with anger and he was sweating a little. At his side Pargetty was trying to calm him, but that seemed to be just one more irritation. Finally he burst out savagely, "How much longer do we have to stand around here like dummies?"

Pargetty looked appalled. His eyes burning with disgust, Sir Gurton half-turned.

"Till the evening star appears," he said curtly.

"This—rigmarole!" Belfeor took out a handkerchief and wiped his perspiring forehead. "Stupid, time-wasting. Oh, what's the odds? It's got to be done."

Pargetty made another attempt at hushing him. He took no notice. "And what does happen if there isn't a parradile out there for me to kill, hey?" he demanded.

Sir Gurton scowled and did not answer. Ambrus clenched his hands. How could he ever have been so blind as to throw in his lot with this arrogant babbler?

"I think I see the evening star," one of the youngest servers whispered, narrowing his eyes and staring upwards. He caught Sir Gurton's attention—the old man's eyes were weak—and pointed. Sir Gurton made to raise his staff.

At that very moment, however, something huge and flapping rose from among the smoke that crested the volcanoes. All those on the parapet of the tower exclaimed with one voice.



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"A parradile!"

"Yes, but there is something strange about it!" Ambrus said excitedly. "Look! It carries something in its talons!"

Sir Gurton, peering where the others pointed, hesitated. He said, "Can anyone discern what it is?"

"I think," the young server said, and had to swallow nervously before going on, "I think it's a man. Hanging by some kind of harness under the parradile's body!"

They stared incredulously for a long moment, until Belfeor broke the silence impatiently. "Well, what difference does it make?" he roared. "There's your parradile you were so worried about! Can't we get on with the business now?"

No one took any notice. The parradile was swooping closer, urging itself over the outskirts of the city with lazy strokes of its vast wings. It was clear now that the young server's keen sight had been reliable as ever; a man was indeed hanging under the parradile's belly, cradled in a sitting position in a web of strong cords.

"Oh, this be damned!" Belfeor said suddenly. "I've had enough and more than enough. There's a parradile, and you've been pestering me to kill a parradile, and to me it makes no difference whether I kill it now or later. I'm going to get it over with and end this nonsense."

He pulled the energy gun from its holster on his belt.

Ambrus did not consciously decide what he was going to do. He seemed to be driven by a force outside himself—a force stemming from centuries of tradition, and going beyond tradition to an original divine law. His right arm jerked down; his hand closed fast on the hilt of his ceremonial sword and drew it from the scabbard.

The blade whistled as it slashed the air.

With his energy gun raised in the very act of sighting on the parradile, the usurper's skull was cleft from crown to jawbone. The sword stuck fast and Belfeor's fall snatched it from Ambrus's hand.

Pargetty screamed like a woman and fumbled for his own energy gun. Ambrus snarled at him—no one else had had time to move—and hurled himself into a wild charge. His



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shoulder took Pargetty in the chest and his impetus carried them both across the parapet, over the low ledge, and into the empty air beyond.

When the screaming had ended, Sir Gurton made a sign with his right hand. "He has made amends," he said heavily. "Now may his father be reborn in peace."

As though an enormous load had been lifted from their backs, all those standing around straightened themselves and began to smile.

"The question remains," Sir Gurton said after a pause, "what will Belfeor's henchmen do now? In a moment men will go to see what fell from the tower; they will find Pargetty dead and Ambrus with him. Moreover, it is time for me to declare the king-hunt due. Since there is a parradile, default of another male, that must be the new king. We must go forward."

"Look! See who it is that rides beneath the parradile! It's Saikmar, son of Corrie, that I swear!"

In amazed silence they watched the parradile come sliding down the air towards the tower. And it was Saikmar; no mistaking that long-boned figure, that sharp face and that regal bearing. The parradile brought itself up short, hovering with gentle slaps of its pinions so that Saikmar swung close enough for them to see his face clearly.

"Have you declared the king-hunt due?" he shouted. They had not expected such a question; it was a moment before Sir Gurton could find an answer. He went forward, calling that they had not.

"Do not do so!" Saikmar cried. "We of Carrig shall nevermore kill the king-parradile. Henceforward we are all the cousins of the parradile. Has not this noble creature brought me back to dethrone the usurper? Sound the signal for revolt!"

And as though his words were the trigger, the Smoking Hills blew up.

It was found afterwards that not a single citizen of Carrig was killed in the eruptions. The peasants from the nearby villages had almost all gone into the city for the king-hunt;



the few who had stayed behind to keep guard against wild animals fled as soon as they saw the volcanoes let go. As to the workers in the mines, Belfeor's men had resigned themselves to letting them also go down to the city, knowing they would revolt if they were not allowed to. They themselves stayed to make ready a new shipment of partly refined radioactives.

They were all killed.

Langenschmidt's agents, by showing a quick and alert understanding of their work, but not so quick as to arouse suspicion—had got themselves made crew bosses so as to work with only occasional supervision by Belfeor's henchmen. This gave them an opportunity to filch sufficient partly refined uranium to build six small fission bombs—extremely makeshift, but adequate. They secreted these in old parradile lairs, where the heat of the rock indicated that veins of lava ran close to the surface. Before leaving with the rest of the workers to return to the town, they fused the bombs and prayed. Probably there had never been such weird bombs in history; they were of the primitive missile-and-target type, and it was ordinary gunpowder made of native sulfur, potassium nitrate and charcoal which slammed the two components together.

They worked extremely well. They all went off within minutes of each other.

The earth began to shake, for north of Carrig the snows were still melting and the rivers and streams were swollen. A hundred thousand tons of rock had slid down into the course of one such river, blocking its normal channel and making it overflow into the honeycomb passages of a stratum of pumice underlying the cone of one of the biggest volcanoes. Gas had bubbled through the rocks here while they were cooling. The water spilled downwards for three hundred feet before it encountered rocks at red heat and exploded into steam.

The Smoking Hills shrugged like a giant awakened, and the whole world trembled.



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After Saikmar had shouted to them, the nobles of Clan Parradile who were gathered on the parapet of the tower needed no second bidding. Sir Gurton wrenched Ambrus's sword free from Belfeor's head, chopped unskillfully through the neck of the corpse, set the bloody token on his ceremonial staff as a standard of revolt, and hastened to the great hall where the clansmen were already gathering.

There was a howl of triumph as he marched stately onto the dais and showed that the usurper was dead. Moments later the men and women who had come so gloomily were pouring back down the steep path into the city.

Twenty of the young men who might have been champions in the king-hunt stormed through Belfeor's apartments, routing out the half-dozen of his followers who skulked there and in most cases taking them completely by surprise.

A horde of enraged citizens already flooded through the streets towards the market square, shouting from one to another the fantastic news—that Saikmar, son of Corrie, had returned on the wings of a parradile to liberate his city from the usurper. Most of those who heard did not believe, until they came into the market and saw that Saikmar was indeed there, standing on a tall dais hastily thrown up from bits of merchants' stalls, with a parradile beside him like a resting angel.

Others than the young men who had searched the fortress had come upon Belfeor's followers, and they had not been so gentle. Forcing their way through the crowd they came with gory corpses, cheered by their fellow citizens, until they could hurl them at Saikmar's feet like tribute brought to a god. Twenty or more bodies sprawled at last in a heap.

Saikmar was yelling encouragement and approval, his mouth wide and his eyes bright under his wild hair, but nothing could be heard over the ceaseless cheering of the crowds. At the back of the square, perched comfortably on the porch of a small house, Langenschmidt watched the celebrations. Well, it had come off. And it looked very much as though his interference wasn't necessary. What a master stroke by this young man Saikmar, to tame a par-



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radile and come back to the city on its wings! And Belfeor was dead because his head had been shown to the people on Sir Gurton's staff. Yes, there was Sir Gurton coming to Saikmar now and handing up the staff with its grisly ornament for everyone to see.

The parradile turned its head on its long neck and snuffed at the blood on the staff. Langenschmidt expected to see it snatch and eat the usurper's head, and closed his eyes in anticipation, unable to watch.

Instead, however, the parradile nuzzled Saikmar hopefully. Saikmar laughed, understanding at once, and yelled something to people in the crowd. From the wreckage of the market stalls they began to pass him vegetables, hunks of salted meat, and dried fish on long strings of seaweed. Saikmar began to feed the parradile from his own hand.

Langenschmidt had expected renewed cheering at the sight. But there was a sudden hush, reverent and incredulous, and he remembered that a tame parradile was unprecedented. The natives would regard it as supernatural.

Taking advantage of the near-silence, Saikmar began to shout again as he went on dropping food into the blood-red jaws of the parradile.

"Belfeor the usurper drove the parradiles out of the Smoking Hills, which was blasphemy! He drove the rightful ruler out of Carrig, which was wickedness! Together, I and this parradile returned to claim our rights, and each has helped the other.

"I therefore decree that men shall never again go forth to kill parradiles!"

There was a stir of alarm from conservative-minded listeners, but others in the audience quickly hushed them.

"Does a man kill his friends? We have customarily gone out to slay the king so that his nobility and grandeur may pass to the successful challenger. Did that nobility come to Belfeor? It did not! He was base and not all the parradiles in the world could have bestowed their qualities on him!"

Behind his words, there came a grumbling from the Smoking Hills, and people looked apprehensive.



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"In the northern sanctuary where I found shelter, this parradile also found shelter under the same roof! This is a sign for me and for Carrig. The Smoking Hills are erupting now, and parradiles will lack homes. I say we must give them homes in our city! Let man and parradile befriend each other!"

Something huge and glowing shot across the sky, and a sound like a giant clapping his hands followed it. Saikmar took no notice, but the parradile paused in its feeding and cocked its head, listening. The air was getting sulfurous.

Langenschmidt looked around, preparing to get down from his perch; he had no wish to be caught in a stampede if there was an earthquake and the crowd panicked.

"In future," Saikmar shouted, "our spring festival shall be held not to kill the king but to show our friendship, and the gliders and the parradiles shall fly together among the Smoking Hills for a week on end, with great rejoicing!"

At the promise that there would still be festivals, the crowd brightened, and someone began to call blessings on Saikmar's head. In the midst of this, the earthquake Langenschmidt had been expecting shook the city very gently, and the porch on which he sat tilted under his weight with a cracking noise. He jumped to the ground and hurried away; it would be safer to get over the bridge and out of the town before anything more serious happened.

Another, stronger shock followed as he was running up the paved road towards the bridge. No one else was in sight except a woman who stood near the customs house.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the watchtower on top of the fortress had been shifted on its base and some stones were falling from its circular parapet. There was going to be a hell of a mess in Carrig, especially when the timber houses collapsed and caught fire, but almost everyone was in the market now and could get away by the river route. He hoped none of his agents had been caught in the crowd; it was all too probable.

Still, the purpose of the eruptions was not merely to impress on the people of Carrig that the gods were angry. It



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had the even more important aim of wrecking Belfeor's mining equipment beyond repair.

A sudden cry made him jerk his head round. It was the woman he had caught sight of earlier, waiting by the customs house. She had called him Gus!

It took a moment to convince himself of her identity, but when he did he was so overcome he threw his arms round her. He said, "Maddalena! What the hell are *you* doing here?"

"I came by parradile," she said. She was grimy and her hair was all over the place and her clothes looked as though she had been sleeping in them for months. "How did it go in the city? Did Saikmar's arrival start a revolt as we hoped it would?"

Langenschmidt looked her over incredulously. He said, "Do you mean—that was *your* idea? Taming the parradile?"

"Oh, we didn't have to tame it. Parradiles are probably the most intelligent nonhuman creatures we've ever run into. That one is, anyway. Intelligent enough to be friendly. But yes, it was my idea to have Saikmar ride back to Carrig on the sacred animal and dethrone the usurper. Did it *work*?"

"It's worked all right," Langenschmidt said, taking a deep breath. "Do you realize that if I'd only known you were alive and working on a plan like that I wouldn't have had to come to Carrig and—Oh, the hell with it for the moment. I don't want to be caught in a real earthquake now. Let's get across the bridge before it falls down!"

## Chapter 17

"WE'RE GETTING the picture now," Commandant Brzeska said. "Shimazi was the last of the agents to get away from Carrig. We've had a report from him over Slee's communica-



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tor. He says the eruptions succeeded completely in their objective—all the mineshafts collapsed, all the mining equipment worth mentioning was melted down by the lava, and once they had finished blowing their tops, the Smoking Hills went back to normal. The course of a small river has been changed and about five or six hundred villagers were made homeless, but it turns out that the only people killed were Belfeor's own technicians who were working on the site at the time."

"How about the city itself?" Langenschmidt said. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. "When I pulled out it looked as though it would be badly damaged."

"Apparently, yes. Fortunately it's local summer; there are almost eight thousand people having to camp outside the town in tents made of graat hide, he says. He thinks there will be enough temporary shelter again for them to survive the coming winter, and the whole town should be restored by a year and a few months from now."

There was a pause.

"How about Saikmar?" Maddalena inquired from her chair facing Langenschmidt.

"A live wire, I gather." Brzeska made a vague gesture. "He and his Clan Twywit—which seems to have several extremely able men—had the situation under control even before Shimazi left. It was his idea to requisition all the available hides to make tents for the homeless. And he organized emergency food and water supplies very quickly. I think he'll do a good job."

"What happened to Belfeor's people?" Langenschmidt said. "I saw a few of them being whipped into the square, bound together and hobbled. But at least twenty of them were killed on the spot and brought to the square as corpses."

"The—uh—the ones that weren't killed immediately were taken up in gliders and dropped into the pits of volcanoes," Brzeska said, and had to swallow hard. "It's a traditional punishment for people who profane the temple or images of the gods."

Langenschmidt said, "Maybe I've been infected with



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barbaric notions, but I can't feel sorry for the bastards. What have you told the government of Cyclops, by the way?"

"That a number of their citizens conspired to shoot down a patrol cruiser, killing all the crew but one. That shut them up very effectively. No matter how people feel about the patrol's actions in keeping the Zarathustra refugee planets isolated, they know that that's as serious an offense as you can find.

"When they asked whether we were going to hand them over for punishment by their own planetary authorities, we answered that it was impossible, because having illegally landed on Fourteen they infringed local customs and were punished for that so effectively that we can't produce them. I actually said that they were all dropped into the pits of volcanoes. I doubt if we'll have trouble from anyone else on Cyclops to whom Meard may have let slip news of Fourteen's mineral wealth."

"Did Shimazi say anything about the parradile?" Maddalena asked. "I got really very fond of that animal."

"Oh yes! Much to the dismay of the head of Clan Parradile, who wanted to treat the beast like some sacred relic, it's become a beloved pet of the whole population. It's been waddling around the city being fed and patted by all and sundry, and some of the more adventurous children have been persuading it to give them short flights over the surrounding country."

"He deserves it," Maddalena said. "I'm quite convinced, by the way, that in human company parradiles are going to develop definite intelligence; if they're raised from birth among people they'll probably wind up—oh, I don't know—talking!"

She hesitated. "Uh—by the way, Commandant, can I take it that your next report on me will be a bit more favorable?"

"I think so. In fact, I've already arranged to have you confirmed in lieutenant's rank because of what you did on Fourteen. It was an excellent job in spite of my misgivings, especially since you were under such disadvantages."



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"Congratulations," Langenschmidt said dryly. Maddalena flushed.

"It seems clear," Brzeska went on, "that your natural aptitude isn't for administrative work at base. I'd like to recommend you for a planetary agent's post if you're sufficiently enthusiastic. I warn you, your tour will be twenty year's minimum in the first instance. So think it over and let me know in a day or two."

Maddalena bit her lip. "Would I be allowed to volunteer as the new agent in Carrig?" she suggested.

"You would *not*. I'm very sorry. The reason's simple. Although I concede everything you did was necessary under the circumstances, you did cause a hell of a lot of disruption in both the sanctuary and Carrig. We daren't send you back among the same people. The ideal agent is someone who hears everything and affects nothing. I'd have thought you realized that, and I was surprised you asked." He gave her an inquiring glance.

She shrugged. "Over dramatizing again, I guess," she said. "I was wondering what it would be like to be Lady Melisma."

"And be Saikmar's consort?" Brzeska gave a chuckle. "He must have made quite an impact on you, then—as much as you did on him. Did you know that he hunted high and low for you after the earthquake? He sent out forty heralds to offer a reward for anyone bringing you to him."

"Did he now?"

"So Shimazi reported."

"Well, he was expecting to find me where he left me after the parradile brought us down from the sanctuary. Poor Saikmar."

"I shouldn't worry," Brzeska said with a glint of humor. "If I know these primitive cultures, you've almost certainly been immortalized in a long ballad by now. Everybody is much happier that way, believe me."

He got to his feet. "Let me know about volunteering as a planetary agent, won't you?" he said, and put out his hand.

"I expect I'll take it," she answered.



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"And you, Gus? Are you going to retire?"

Langenschmidt shook his head. "I changed my mind. What in hell would I do with myself for another seventy years?" He checked and glanced at Maddalena. "Something wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong." She shook her head as though to clear it. "I was just surprised to find that I know now why people can say things like that."

She shrugged and went out. Langenschmidt paused a moment before turning away. He said at last, "Look, when I get a new beat—make sure that kid's on it, will you? She's going to make history, I think. I'd like to be around to watch her."

Cautiously, because the stonework had become shaky in the great eruptions recently, Saikmar scrambled up the narrow stairs to the parapet of the watchtower. The masons had done makeshift repairs, but the moment he discovered what they were up to he had sent them off to build barracks for some of the homeless folk; that was much more important. The tower was all right provided it wouldn't fall down on people's heads.

Emerging on to the parapet, he picked his way to the edge. He stared out, shading his eyes, over the city and the hills, straining to see if there was anything large and flapping to be found.

Nothing in sight.

He slammed fist into palm angrily. Where *could* that parradile have got to? No one had seen it all day. Alarming ideas passed through his mind. Possibly some idiot, knowing how trusting the creature had become, had fed it some noxious substance and made it sick, or worse yet, poisoned it. If anyone had done that, Saikmar promised himself, that person would be very, very sorry.

Abruptly his depression lifted, and he let out a delighted exclamation. *There* it was, coming over the horizon—and by all the gods, not one parradile only, but a whole gaggle of parradiles, four, five, eight, eleven of them! What had he been worrying about? It was only to be expected that the



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parradile might get lonely and go hunting for others of its kind.

He waited as the huge graceful flock came down, circling the tower suspiciously, and their leader, who now had subjects under him, came down to perch on the parapet and wave proudly at his companions with a flick of one wing. Saikmar patted the blunt big-mouthed head affectionately. Then he tried to entice the others down too, but they apparently were too frightened.

The king-parradile seemed to shrug. He took off with a blast of air that almost knocked Saikmar sprawling, and out of the hovering flock he sorted a handsome young female, obviously his consort. Prodding her and grunting at her, he compelled her to come close enough for Saikmar to pat her head as she hung in the air, but could not persuade her to settle on the tower.

"Oh well!" the king-parradile seemed to say, and with a final nod towards Saikmar he led his subjects swooping down to be fed in the market square.

Saikmar watched them go enviously. There was no problem for the king-parradile now. He'd found himself a fine mate and other companions beside, and in a little while the parradiles would be as numerous as they were before Belfeor ordered them slaughtered. Whereas he . . .

He had hunted high and hunted low for the girl Melisma, and there was no trace of her. That was a woman worthy to match with a powerful ruler of a great city! He had never met anyone like her. And now she had disappeared.

It was small consolation to reflect that just as she had come mysteriously to the parradile's nest in the frozen north, so she had gone mysteriously when the parradile had carried her south again. Could she have been real? Or was she some special creation of a friendly god, whose only purpose was to help him, Saikmar, oust Belfeor from Carrig?

An idea came to him. Though Melisma had gone, she would not be forgotten. Not if he had anything to do with it.

He hurried back down the stairs of the tower. When he came back into the apartments at the base of it, he sent



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the first servant he saw on an urgent errand. He sat waiting impatiently for it to be completed.

Only a few minutes had passed when the harper came in and gave a low sweeping bow. "What does it please you that I should sing?" he inquired.

"I don't want you to sing. Not yet. I want you to make a new ballad. It will be called the *Ballad of Lady Melisma*, and these are the events that must be included. They are strange and wonderful, and the ballad must be couched in strange and wonderful language to suit the subject. Do you understand?"

The harper seated himself on his red velvet stool. "I hear and obey," he said. "I will do my best."

"It must begin with the arrival of Belfeor," Saikmar said, leaning his sharp chin on his hand. "When he usurped power the gods were angry, and so this is what they planned . . ."