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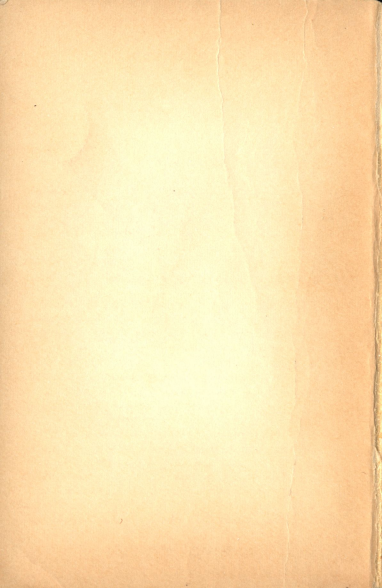
What Chance Had The Earthmen Against...


# THE SUPER BARBARIANS

JOHN BRUNNER



First Book  
Publication






## THE INVISIBLE HAND IN THE GALACTIC GLOVE

Gareth Shaw lived in overpaid ease as steward on a Vorrish estate—serving the conquerors of Earth faithfully. Then came the day when he was sent to the Acre, a few square city blocks where, it was rumored, Earthmen lived autonomously and where no right-thinking person would venture without trembling.

There, Shaw discovered smoldering rebellion against the masters and a devious poverty-stricken plot to create trouble. But his greatest discovery proved to be within himself—for he found that he himself was to be the key of that desperate scheme—and it was his life against Earth's future!

THE SUPER BARBARIANS is one of John Brunner's best.



## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### Gareth Shaw

In bondage to an extraterrestrial feudal lord, he was to be the key man in a daring conspiracy.

### Shavarri

This harem beauty hid intelligence and cunning under her voluptuous languor.

### Pwill

The robber baron was always a bit baffled by the very underlings he had defeated.

### Pwill, Jr.

The wastrel heir was linked to the Earthmen by a craving he could not control.

### Marijane Lee

A resistance fighter in a world where distrust was necessary for survival.

### Judge Olafsson


Was he the masters' agent or the agent for someone unsuspected?

# THE SUPER BARBARIANS

by  
JOHN BRUNNER

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## CHAPTER I

IT'S AMAZING how fast a legend can grow under the right conditions. Fifty years since the armistice; not more than twenty-five since the Great Grip began to relax a little; a mere ten since Earthmen were grudgingly accorded rights on Qallavarra. Yet already the equation automatically balanced itself in the mind: Earthman on Qallavarra equals the fabulous Acre of Earth.

But I'd been on Qallavarra for the best part of seven months and I'd never set eyes on the Acre, let alone a foot within it. I was almost coming to believe that that rumored quarter of the city where Earthmen did as they liked was just a legend. The idea of its existence was pretty hard to swallow, anyway.

Nonetheless, when the Under-lady Shavarri gave me the address, the instructions and the bribe, I felt my heart turn over. Once. Very heavily. So heavily I expected it to give an audible thump as it settled back into place. Because the address she was sending me to—four badly written numerals on a slip of paper—was slap in the middle of the Acre.

I saw the address was badly written. In fact it looked

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more as though it had been drawn—probably copied from a printed original. The Under-lady Shavarri was ninth in line of my employer's wives, and as such she had no social standing bar a courtesy one; her education had not included such refinements as reading and writing, most likely, and if it had she had never had a practical use to put them to. Up till now I had classified her as just another of the occupants of the seraglio, the youngest but one and—to Earthly eyes—the prettiest.

Now here she was handing me five platina, the best part of a month's wages, and telling me to run down to the Acre with an apparently meaningless message. It was a shock. Still, I concealed my feelings, and said only, "As your under-ladyship commands."

I spoke in high-caste Vorrish, naturally; the translation is as close as I can come to being literal. No modern Earthly tongue had the elaborations of formal Vorrish, like the precedence scales that called for me to use the inferior-to-superior male-to-female vocative case in what I'd just said.

She gave the half-turn of her head which corresponded to a nod of dismissal, and I started to back towards the door. I was almost there when she called after me, "Be swift!"

"As swift as possible," I agreed.

She half-closed her golden eyes and moved fractionally on the luxurious heap of furs where she was sitting. She said abruptly, "You are strange. Why are you always so cautious?"

Because she used the inferior plural, I knew she meant all Earthmen generally, not me in particular. "Cautious, your under-ladyship?" I parried cautiously.

"Yes! And what is more, set aside that you are not of my own retinue but of my superior sister-wife's"—Vorrish put

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that in one word, of course—"and note that were any other retainer to say only 'as swift as possible' instead of 'at once' I'd shorten him to the shoulders."

"Perhaps our present circumstances have taught us that we must always reckon with the unforeseen," I suggested, feeling acutely uncomfortable.

"Yet you always seem to know what you are doing so well it is—disturbing," mused Shavarri. "No matter; get you gone. *As swift as possible, remember!*"

Puzzled by her remarks, I went. It was clear I'd underestimated my employer's ninth wife. Something else puzzled me even more: the question of what kind of business in the Acre could be worth five platina to Shavarri. Unless she had no notion of the value of money, and had simply given me what she had handy for a job that rated maybe a twelve-rhodia tip, but not more.

Of course, as she had said, I wasn't one of her own staff but served her superior sister-wife—that personage being the Over-lady Llaq, senior of my employer's wives. In theory this gave me privileged status; in fact, as Shavarri certainly knew, I'd found it easier to obey orders from the junior wives as well. Refusal would have made life unbearable. The occupants of the seraglio were expert at backbiting and petty persecution. Unkind rumor said that seraglio squabbling was the chief reason why Vorrish nobles preferred to spend much of their time away from home.

Soon, though, I was too excited to be puzzled any more. I looked again at the address she had given me as I hastened to my quarters in the basement. Addresses in the city center consisted of a four-part number-code, indicating street north-south, street east-west, building on the block and floor above or below ground level. I hadn't been mistaken.

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The Acre of Earth was said to run between 658 and 664 north-south, and 122 and 129 east-west. Provided Shavarri hadn't made a mistake in copying it down, this address I had to go to was on 660 at 127—particularly dead in the center.

As quickly as I could I shrugged into an outdoor cloak and buckled my shield on my left arm. It was called a shield, but of course it was mere decoration: a disc twenty inches across bearing the arms of the House of Pwill, which retainers wore outside their own territory to identify them and show they were on business for their employer. Most of the great houses were bloodthirsty in the extreme; the House of Pwill was no exception and its shields bore a device of a sword piercing a bleeding heart.

I was about to put five of the platina Shavarri had given me in my personal coffer, when it struck me that perhaps she had not intended all of it as a bribe for me, and that whoever I was going to see might require a fee for his services. Accordingly, I put four of the heavy white coins in my pocket and went to the main gate to check out.

The gatekeeper, an elderly man called Swallo, was by now almost a friend of mine. I was thrown less into contact with him than with other members of the household, and maybe for that reason he didn't seem to share their reflex jealousy. He greeted me with a smile that was as usual horribly twisted upwards at one corner; he'd been injured by one of our wrecking-rays during the Battle of Fourth Orbit shortly before the armistice. But he didn't hold it against me personally.

Using equal-to-equal forms, he said, "Taking time off, steward?"

I indicated a negative. "Running an errand for Under-

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lady Shavarri," I said. "Want to check with her before you book me out?"

He glanced at the timepiece beside him on the wall of his little office, and picked up a stylus preparatory to scratching an entry in the ledger before him. "No need," he said. "But watch the time! Himself and the Over-lady are due back at sunset less an hour, and you'd best be here when they arrive. Where are you going, anyway?"

I hesitated. "Down the Acre," I said finally.

"Are you now? Are you really? Well, I wouldn't want to interfere, of course, but maybe I should ask you what you're going to do with your shield when you get there?"

Blinking, I said, "Wear it—I guess."

He shrugged. "Well, be lucky. You know what you're doing, I reckon."

He marked up the ledger and slapped it shut. I went on out of the gate, frowning. Coming from someone as uncomplicated as Swallo, that was a peculiar remark.

Since my arrival on Qallavarra I'd had practically no contact with other Earthmen. I was the only one in the employ of the House of Pwill, and had the Over-lady Llaq not taken an interest in me I wouldn't have got here at all. But before leaving home I'd heard it said that in the Acre Earthmen now did more or less as they pleased. And they didn't approve, it was murmured, of Earthmen in my position—employed by one of the great houses.

I stamped down my apprehension. What did Swallo know about that? Surely those in the Acre wouldn't prevent an Earthman from going about his business just because he wore a shield?

Besides, how could they?

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Once beyond the formidable gate, I followed the fused slag road down between the brownish-green hedgerows toward the highway. In the fields on the left, cattle were grazing—lop-eared, with coarse gray coats; on the right where the food-crops grew in tight orderly lines, tenants of the House of Pwill were weeding. They were small brawny men and women who sang in eldritch voices to keep the rhythm of the work. I tried to catch the theme of their song, but they used the abridged common dialect of the locality, and it was so different from the formal language of the upper classes that all I could make out was something about the greatness of the Vorra who had reached out to conquer even the stars in the sky.

At a point where the road joined the highway I paused and looked about me. Today the air was exceptionally clear, and under the high sun I could see right over the city set in the bottom of its bowl-shaped valley. I could even see the glint of light on the glass dome of the House of Shugurra, largest of all the great houses, a good twenty miles distant. Llaq had taken me there once on an annual visit dictated by some custom I hadn't quite fathomed; since the name of it meant literally "axes being blunt" I assumed it was some ceremonial show of friendship left over like many Vorrish customs from the days when civil war between houses was commonplace.

I had only been waiting a minute or so when I heard the hum of the bus's solar-powered engine approaching down the highway. I threw out my left arm to display the device on my shield, and the driver pulled up for me to get aboard. There were only four other passengers aboard—two unprosperous-looking private individuals and two retainers wearing the arms of the House of Shugurra, a cleft skull on a

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black ground. They were all Vorrish; accordingly I took the rearmost seat as befitted an Earthman.

The driver, hand hovering over a fare-charge button which bore the same device as my shield, called to me. "On House business?"

"In the name of the Under-lady Shavarri," I confirmed. He grunted, punched the button to charge my fare to the house account, and let the bus roll forward.

As the outskirts of the city itself began to close in around the highway, I found myself gripped by a sense of keen anticipation. I looked on the sidewalks for other Earthmen; I hoped at each stop that someone from my own planet would get aboard so that I could shake his hand and speak an Earthly tongue for a change. The strength of the urge surprised me. I'd thought myself pretty well resigned to doing without Earthly company until my two-year contract expired.

But I saw precisely no Earthmen at all, even when the bus passed 640 north-south and we were within walking distance of the Acre. By then my excitement had begun to give way to cynicism. After all, these rumors about the Acre of Earth were ridiculous, and sure to be exaggerated by wishful thinking. Probably the most I'd find would be a sort of ghetto.

Nonetheless it would be wonderful if . . .

## CHAPTER II

I TRIED TO look at the matter objectively. We were a defeated subject race. That was the crucial point. No matter

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how we tried to disguise the unpleasant truth from ourselves—by pretending that the war between Earth and Qallavarra had been a sort of draw, by referring to the end of it as the armistice instead of the conquest as the Vorra called it—we had to face facts eventually.

I was fifteen years too young to remember the war, but I knew well how tight the Great Grip was up to the time I was ten or twelve years old. Of course, I'd learned about the war—official version—in school, and I'd had plenty of opportunity to talk with old men who had fought in it. A considerable fraction of all humanity had fought in it. Moreover, since coming to Qallavarra I'd managed to piece together a Vorrish view of the most important engagement—the Battle of Fourth Orbit—from talking to the gatekeeper Swallo.

All kinds of subtle things reminded us of our defeat. For instance, we ourselves now called that engagement the Battle of Fourth Orbit instead of its original Earthly title, the Battle of the Martian Sphere. The Vorrish, naturally, referred to the Solar planets by numbers, not names.

Not being a subspace physicist, I knew nothing of the reason why the battles of that war had taken place in such well-defined volumes of space except the parroted phrases that went with history lessons; it had something to do with Keplerian harmonic relationships in the vicinity of suns which made it impossible for large numbers of ships to emerge simultaneously into real space except at roughly the distances represented by the orbits of major planets. Being anxious to take maximum possible advantage of the fact they had subspace drive and we didn't, the Vorrish forces always concentrated their attacks on these vulnerable points of arrival.

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Subspace was merely a hypothesis to Earth physicists at the time of the Vorrish onslaught. Our ships were getting around the system on ion-drives and a somewhat erratic form of inverse gravity which by negating inertia permitted speeds fairly close to the speed of light, but which sometimes blew up unexpectedly. Oddly enough, we could find one of our few crumbs of comfort in that. The first time I broached the subject of the war to him, Swallo mentioned it without prompting.

Despite the apparently disastrous technical gap between our ships and those of the Vorra, we managed to get out a computer analysis of their attack patterns and discover this relation between planetary distances and points of emergence. So when the Grand Fleet turned up at Fourth Orbit we were waiting, and managed to hit them very badly indeed. We were out-numbered, and our chief weapon was a wrecking-ray with a range of a mere thirty thousand miles; nonetheless, thanks to getting there first and being able to take advantage of the mechanical hangover which electronic equipment suffered after being dipped into subspace, we destroyed about sixty per cent of their total forces before we were rolled up. On the other hand, we lost eighty-five per cent of our own and we hadn't any more, whereas the Vorra had.

It turned out that they were logical fighters; they were in business for what they could get out of it, and while they were prepared to make Earth a planet-wide desert if we insisted, they regarded that as a bad investment. So, acting on the principal that he who fights and runs away . . .

They never did calm us down completely, of course. But after fifteen or twenty years of sabotage, underground resistance, assassination and other jabs where it hurt, we

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came to a tacit mutual tolerance. On the Vorrish side it was tempered with a kind of puzzlement. I'd been surprised to learn of it, but I had no room for doubt, because I had it direct from my employer, Pwill of the House of Pwill himself.

Conversely the Vorra puzzled us. Once things relaxed to the point where Earthmen were granted minor rights on Qallavarra itself, we had plenty of opportunities to investigate their society, and what shook us was that it was practically feudal. All power resided in the great houses, which combined in themselves the functions of nations, ethnic groupings and business corporations. There were about sixty of these houses, whose seats were in the southern temperate continent, but whose influence was more than planetary. At any given time perhaps half a dozen of the sixty shared an ascendancy over the rest. Currently the House of Shugurra was most powerful of all, but the House of Pwill was due to tip the balance if things went on. That was why Pwill of the House of Pwill came to Earth as lieutenant governor for a five-year period, bringing with him half his private army, three-quarters of his space fleet, an enormous retinue of attendants and his four senior wives.

Much to our amazement, Pwill decided on arrival that he wanted an Earthly tutor for his heir, the eldest son. I was selected for a peculiar mixture of reasons. I was two inches taller, I could outrun, outswim, outwrestle and outthink Pwill heir apparent. And what mattered most, by coincidence I was twice the boy's age on the day I was engaged, down to the very day. To Pwill, this was important.

I gradually found out that Pwill believed he could find on Earth the secret of making his house the dominant force on Qallavarra; that was why he'd taken the dangerous

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gamble of absenting himself from home for five years. He wanted his heir to see things the same way, but that young bastard (figuratively; the Vorrish noble families made damned sure the heir was really the heir) preferred to spend his time whaling, gambling and running after women. So I didn't teach him much.

However, Llaq took a fancy to me. When the time came for the family's return to Qallavarra, she asked if I wanted to join her personal retinue for a couple of years.

I couldn't kid myself I was of the caliber of the independents who had got to Qallavarra because they had valuable skills they could sell. This was my only conceivable chance to make a trip everyone wanted to make. So I accepted.

What was it that had caused this sudden interest among the Vorra in the people of Earth—a planet they had conquered and whose people they had reduced efficiently and thoroughly to the status of a dependent satrapy? I assumed that the Vorra themselves knew.

It was quite a surprise to find they didn't.

They were only convinced that we must have something they hadn't, which had enabled us to inflict immense damage on the Vorrish fleet against hopeless odds, which had enabled us to put ourselves together again after the armistice. The nearest comparison I could think of was the way the Romans felt about the Greeks after they had added Greece to their empire. The Greeks had been well and truly beaten; nonetheless they gave the impression of retaining some secret the Romans couldn't take away because they were too coarse and material-minded to know what it was.

So eventually the Greeks became the most highly prized of slaves; a well-to-do family would buy an educated Greek

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as a teacher for its children, and Greek became the sophisticated language with which to salt your conversation.

Whether we actually had this important mysterious *something* or not, we were quick to see the advantage of the Vorrish belief that we had. Back home, a man who had actually spent some time on Qallavarra had come to see me when he heard I was going to be tutor to Pwill Heir Apparent. He told me that the chief feature of Vorrish society was its noise. Not actual, ear-battering noise, but noise in the technical sense of wasted efforts and power squandered without reason.

"They may have the subspace drive," this man had said. "But their social organization is practically Neolithic! Look at the time they spend jockeying for position and doing one another down.

"Another thing. How many Vorra have you seen wearing a watch? Only the nobles and officers. I hear they have to teach their soldiers to read a timepiece when they join up. Things like that. And medicine—they're ignorant. And social sciences they haven't *got*, nothing more than empirical notions of how to keep down a conquered people and exploit their productivity."

"Put like that," I said wonderingly, "it seems impossible they should have conquered us. But they did."

Conquered or not, we'd made an impression. It was becoming fashionable among the nobles to read translations of Earthly literature and to acquire some facility on an Earthly musical instrument. The violin was the most popular because it could readily be tuned to a Vorrish scale instead of ours.

There were all kinds of fields which the Vorra had ap-

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parently regarded as beneath their notice where we were superbly efficient. This bus I was riding in, for example, was built on Earth and powered with Earthly solar cells; fifty years ago the Vorra had subspace ships but at home they made do with draft animals for anyone below noble rank and rather inefficient steam buggies for the rest. This road had been slagged with an Earthly machine which fused silica soil—this part of Qallavarra was sandy—into a rough but serviceable surface for highways. They'd built the Sahara Highway with it.

I had a lot of reasons to be glad the Vorra *were* so impressed, myself. Otherwise I wouldn't have been here.

Not, come to think of it, that it was doing me a lot of good. I'd had visions of being able to get about on Qallavarra and see this alien world. Instead, I'd seen—after nearly seven months—the estate of the House of Pwill, one or two other houses where Llaq had taken me on courtesy visits, and part of the capital city.

Oh, I was fairly content. The pay was good; I had comfortable quarters. My duties consisted largely in administrative tasks and occasional instruction of the younger children in a few Earthly accomplishments to let them keep up with, or a few steps ahead of, the Vorrish equivalent of the Joneses. But I had no friends, and I suddenly realized that was getting me down.

The estate, of course, was enormous. There were three great houses situated near the city—Pwill, Shugurra and another of less power. Each house was almost a town in itself; the population of Pwill numbered upwards of eight thousand in a great complex of buildings surrounded by a wall, and beyond that twelve thousand or so vassal peasants, the army, the spacecrews, all the technical staffs from miners

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to metallurgists whose townlets scattered across the four hundred thousand square miles of the estate clear to the sea's edge two hundred and twenty miles from the house. None of the estates controlled by the six largest houses was much smaller than that. And it didn't stop with the sea, of course; on other continents the device of Pwill looked on mines, plantations and resources of manpower.

Altogether something like two and a half million people owed direct allegiance to the House of Pwill. And at least as many again only enjoyed status as private individuals by paying off installments on a manumission debt.

Some ninety per cent of the population of Qallavarra was nominally free; they controlled their own lives and nothing more. Those in bond to a house had to jump when ordered, but were better off in the sense that they got a slice of whatever was going before anyone else did. People in the cities were almost all free, and the mutual jealousy of the houses assured they would stay so. A few centuries before, powerful houses had tried to seize prosperous cities for themselves, but the habit had died out in favor of exploration of other worlds. How many others, we couldn't be sure; we thought four, besides Earth, and possibly others controlled by small alliances of houses and jealously guarded.

Earth was the only one which had had to be reduced by all the houses working in unison. This was another point they bore in mind when thinking of us.

And that was why Earthmen were the only subject race of the Vorra permitted to walk occasionally on the surface of Qallavarra. That was why there was an Acre of Earth and not an Acre of any other planet. That was why there were rumors about Earthmen having literally taken over the city blocks in which they lived until Vorrish police didn't

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dare enter the streets. Vorrish nobles had to come in person if they wanted to do business, and the human languages were the ones spoken.

But I told myself that after a mere ten years such notions were incredible. I prepared for a complete disappointment; I was ready to find not a grain of truth in all those tales.

That was why it shocked me so to find they were absolutely true.

### CHAPTER III

THE BUS HAD gone straight as an arrow through the city, picking up and dropping the occasional passenger; none of my original companions had stayed on. It made a turn at 656, though. The reason for this turn came to me at once—and I dismissed it.

Refusal to run through the Acre? Absurd!

Nonetheless, this was apparently as close as I was going to be brought. I worked my way to the door at the next stop and got down on the street, blinking.

By now, I was fairly used to the city's unchanging provincial look. The buildings—say houses, and the idea is clearer; the houses, then, were mostly rather mean, few of them more than three stories high. They were built of a dull sandy colored concrete. At ground level there were trading establishments. Butchers, clothiers, trinket shops, and frequent taverns predominated in this district. The streets were narrow and although well paved were muddy, because the drainage system was poor and refuse from the houses generally choked the soakaways. Moreover, most of the wagons

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and carts were drawn by draft cattle, and their droppings were rather seldom washed away completely by the rain.

Many of Earth's finest cities had been razed during the war; it had been a shock to me, though, the first time I came here to find a difference between this city and any I had known at home. Through the poverty of an Earthly city, caused by the generation-long drain of our manufacturing potential to satisfy the greedy Vorra, a certain sophistication had survived. An Earthly street was colorful, and often had a basic rhythm of design. Vorrish streets never did. Everywhere the colors were drab, and the houses looked as though they had just been dumped where they stood, without thought.

The streets were busy, which cheered things up a little. As I stood checking the gridiron pattern in my mind to decide which way I had to go to arrive most quickly at my destination, women with big-wheeled trolleys pushed past me to fetch their family's provisions, men on business errands, couriers with their red helmets providing a splash of brilliance, police in black with white-painted harness, and draymen cursing their obstinate oxen all went by.

But no Earthmen, it seemed. That was still puzzling.

I shrugged, and made to cross the road to where I had to go. A sharp voice bellowed at me, telling me to stand where I was, and as I drew back a group of trainee soldiers came doubling around the corner, wearing insignia I could not place.

Like magic virtually everyone stopped what he or she was doing and jumped to the nearest doorway; failing a doorway, they pressed to the wall or ducked behind a cart. The same harsh voice that had bellowed at me—it belonged to the squad commander—ordered halt, dress, test weapons.

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The Vorrish method of testing weapons was beautifully simple; each man raised, sighted and fired. A wall they happened to be facing when they halted, which fortunately had only one small window in it, was instantly stuck full of bullets. I had heard veterans say how childishly Vorrish infantry seemed to enjoy using their weapons after their landing on Earth, when mopping up pockets of resistance, and in particular of their fondness for spectacular blazes. They would happily spend half an hour watching a building burn down while Earthly troops took advantage of the delay to make good their escape.

Well, this was spectacular enough; they had fired magnesium bullets, which were ignited by the charge in the breech and leapt out like fireworks to become brief, blinding pockmarks of silver glare on the wall.

A little shamefacedly, the people who had ducked for shelter began to move about again. Conscious of the impression he had created, the squad commander stamped up and down in front of his men snuffing the barrels of their guns to make certain they had all fired.

Unless they were going to start popping off again, I didn't see any further reason for hanging about. I began to cross the street, and it was that which made people look at me closely for the first time.

Most of the Vorra were thickset, light-eyed, and shrouded in outdoor cloaks like mine; about one in eight or nine of the men going out and coming on the streets wore a house shield as I did. At first glance it wasn't obvious that I was an Earthman. The differences that signified were mainly internal.

Nonetheless, an Earthman would always give himself away if he didn't consciously imitate the Vorrish way of

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walking, the angle at which a Vorrish head set on Vorrish shoulders, and the hang of the empty hands; the Vorra kept their fingers straight by their sides.

Someone behind me said in a tone of vague disbelief, "Earthman . . .?"

The squad commander caught the word, glanced at me, and stiffened. Under his bristly-whiskered upper lip, I saw his teeth show.

I stopped dead in my tracks, not liking the sudden air of hostility which surrounded me, not liking the way everyone in the street had turned to stare at me.

"Squad!" said the commander. "'Bout turn!"

Like mechanical dolls the men spun where they stood. At each man's side the recently fired gun caught the sunlight.

"Aim!" said the squad commander, and the guns sprang to firing position.

Maybe he expected me to stand where I was—I don't know. I think perhaps I would have, because I was so astonished. But some overenthusiastic person in the crowd picked a big tuber off a wagon of vegetables and flung it at me, and that broke my trance.

I took to my heels.

There was a note of savage anger in the commander's voice as he screamed, "Fire!"

But I had just got around the corner of a house, and the only bullet to come close to me caught the hem of my cloak.

What in hell was all this for? A joke?

But it sounded like a very serious joke. As I went charging and leaping along the streets, mob noise followed me. I wasn't shot at again, but things were thrown at me, and one or two eggs landed and made my cloak a sticky mess. For-

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fortunately I was past most of the people I encountered before they caught on to what was happening and joined in the chase, but one quick-witted stallholder rolled a barrel into my path and sent me sprawling.

With battered knees and filthy hands—for this street was thick with market refuse—I picked myself up and hurried on, heart pounding.

Unconsciously I was heading for the Acre. I had only a couple of blocks to go, but they seemed like miles. When I risked a glance back I saw that I had at least a score of pursuers.

What *had* I stumbled into?

Suddenly I saw ahead of me, hanging above a mean little alleyway, a store sign in Earthly lettering. *Miracle!* I thought, and dived towards it. A few paces ahead of me a youth—maybe twenty or younger—who had been attracted by the shouts behind me, stepped into the alley. I practically fell over him.

“Earthman?” he said, quite calm, as though this happened every day.

“Yes!” I gasped, having hardly enough breath to pronounce a single word.

“In the alley. Gustav! Marijanel!”

I went past him. From the same doorway where he had appeared, another youth and a girl with untidy fair hair came out. They seemed to size up the situation in an instance. Linking arms with my rescuer, the girl in the middle, they blocked off the end of the alley with their bodies.

I thought at first they were insane, for when my pursuers came to the alley mouth they were ranting and waving cudgels. Yet the sight of the three young people calmly waiting seemed to act on them like a dash of cold water.

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Only one hothead came forward, ahead of the rest, to point his club threateningly.

"What have you done with him?" he demanded in Vorrish, using superior-to-inferior forms.

My rescuer's face was turned away from me, so I couldn't see his expression, but I heard his scratching voice. "The Acre starts here," he said. "If you want to come in, you come alone and with empty hands."

What he actually said was "empty paws," in effect, because he used the human-to-animal forms which were reserved for pets, domestic cattle and the filthiest insults. Huddled in the doorway of the shop, I closed my eyes. Surely no Vorra was going to take that from anyone!

Only there was no noise of fighting. When I looked again, someone else from the crowd had stepped forward and was leading the hothead away, fuming and casting angry glances back over his shoulder.

The three of them waited till the crowd had dispersed unwillingly. Then they dropped their linked arms and dusted their hands with an air of satisfaction. As they returned to where I was skulking, I stood up feeling curiously ashamed.

"Thank you," I said. "I wasn't ready for that."

"What happened?" the one called Gustav inquired.

"A trainee army squad—wanted to use me for target practice." I tried to sound as offhand and casual as they did.

"You shouldn't have been out on your own, then," Gustav retorted. "They've been making shows of strength all round the Acre for a good thirty days now."

A puzzled look came across his face. "How come you *were* on your own, anyway?" he said. "And who are you? I don't think I've seen you before."

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"Ken! Gustav!" The girl Marijane spoke in a commanding tone. She threw out her arm and pointed.

I had been standing half in the embrasure of the shop door, and my left arm, with my house shield, was in shadow; it was dark in the alley anyway because the buildings were too close set for such sun to pass between them.

The youths followed the pointing arm. One moment later, and an expression of more hostility than I had seen even in the eyes of my pursuers lit their faces. Ken strode forward, taking my right arm, twisting it savagely behind my back and levering me into the middle of the alley; from a sheath behind him Gustav produced a knife and presented it to my goggling eyes, while Marijane caught the rim of my shield in two hands and jerked it around for the others to inspect so sharply my elbow was almost sprained.

"House of Pwill!" said Gustav thoughtfully. "Well, he sold himself to a high bidder, obviously. I didn't know we had anyone in service there."

Marijane let go of the shield as though it were red-hot, and gave me a disgusted look. Hell and damnation—what had I done that the first Earthly woman I saw in seven months was so revolted by me?

"Don't be so cynical, Gustav!" she snapped. "High bidder, high schmidder—he's still a dirty serf! Should have left him to the mob out there, if you ask me."

Abruptly Ken let go my right arm. I straightened up, rubbing the sore place where his hands had closed; he had muscles, that young man.

"Calm, Marijane," he said. "Well, serf? What brings you?"

Helplessly confused, I said, "I have to—have to do something for my employer's ninth wife."

"Such as what?"

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"I'm not sure! I just have to go to this address in the Acre and repeat a message she gave me, and—"

I broke off. Ken had pursed his lips and was nodding his head back and forth. "I see," he said. "I see. An address on 660 at 127 by any chance?"

"Why—yes!"

"That's Kramer's place," Ken said to his companions. Gustav nodded.

"It is well known?" I said. "I never came here before—"

"That's obvious!" snapped Marijane. "We all know there are bastardy serfs like you, but we don't like our noses rubbed in it! *If* you get let out of here, and *if* you pluck up enough nerve to come back, stuff that perditionous shield first, and don't wave it around the Acre."

She looked at Ken. "You're not going to just let him loose in the Acre!" she challenged. "He might be lying—he might have sold out all the way!"

Gustav nodded. "I agree with Marijane," he said in his rather soft, pleasant voice. "Since we got hold of him, it's up to us to clear him with the folks on top."

"That's settled, then." Ken gestured sharply along the alley. "Move, you! And go exactly where we say, hear?"

## CHAPTER IV

I WAS EAGER enough to cooperate and do what I could to set the record straight after my idiotically clumsy entry into the Acre for the first time. But I had no choice anyway. Gustav kept the knife in his hand.

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Belatedly I thought of my shield, and fumbled it off my forearm to bundle it up in my cloak.

"That's better," Marijane said scornfully when she saw what I was doing, and I felt slightly more cheerful.

There was none of the random bustle I had seen outside in the rest of the city. Here in the Acre people moved with a purpose, and not very many of them were moving. We traversed several blocks and saw perhaps a dozen people, not counting some toddling children. What had been shops on the ground level of the ramshackle houses seemed in general to have been turned into workshops; at any rate, as we passed by there was a hum of machinery from many doors and windows. Of course, the human community couldn't support itself without some basic services; there were shops here and there, such as barber shops and one or two grocery stores, but fewer than I would have thought necessary to support the supposed thousands of Earthly inhabitants.

I didn't ask questions, though.

We had been walking for perhaps five or ten minutes, following a twisted path, when we came to a house finer than most of the others, facing the broadest street traversing the Acre—125. Already my consternation at the way I had been treated was yielded to relief at once more being among human people: taller and thinner than most Vorra, with skins of familiar Earthly shades from blond through tan to chocolate, instead of the eternal sallow-brick of the Vorra; speaking Earthly languages, and signing their shops with Earthly lettering. But this fine house I was brought to was a shock.

It had large glass windows at street level, without shutters, and on these windows was painstakingly written in gold

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leaf or something similar, the words CENTRAL EARTHLY BANK AND EXCHANGE.

At the door a man of about my own age, smartly dressed by comparison with my companions—who didn't look as if they worried much about their clothes—challenged us. Ken spoke for the others.

"Serf. First time in the Acre. Claims he's on innocent business. But you never know with serfs."

The doorkeeper nodded. "So you brought him round for a check?"

"That's right."

"Go on in, then. Wait till you're sent for. Wait on the seats at the right of the hall."

They took my arms and steered me inside.

Now this was nothing like anything I'd seen on Qallavarra before. It was a hall, rather dark, with a curving stairway rising to the upper floors from opposite the entrance. There were pictures of Earth on the walls—one of a city I didn't recognize, two of hills and forests. There were benchlike seats, hard, plain, probably hand-carpentered from local wood, but indisputably of Earthly rather than Vorrish design. On the floor was a bluish plastic finish, and the walls were red and gray.

That was a jab at the Vorra, though it wasn't likely many of them were ever in a position to appreciate it. Red, blue and gray together was a combination of colors reserved for the high nobility, and anyone else using it was apt to suffer.

The guard came in with us, spoke to a hard-eyed man in a black suit, received a curt grunt of agreement, and turned to Ken.

"You'll have a few minutes to wait; they're engaged with

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a visitor. But he says things are going well and you won't have long to hang about."

"Fair enough."

There was silence after that. Gustav took a whetstone from his pocket and began to hone the already razor-sharp edge of his knife. Ken and Marijane just watched me—the former with expressionless calm, the latter with distaste. I tried to say something to excuse myself a couple of times, but they merely ignored me.

I began to feel indignant eventually. What right did they have to treat a fellow-Earthman this way?

Before my impatience boiled to a head however, there was a commotion at the head of the stairs. A door slammed back on its hinges. There was a trampling of heavy feet on the landing, and the sound of voices raised in anger.

I looked up, craning my neck, and saw a Vorrish noble come stamping down the stairs.

Sheer reflex brought me to my feet when I recognized who it was. I had barely stood up when I was violently hauled back into my seat and my cloak was flung around my head suffocatingly.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at?" hissed Marijane's voice from close to my ear. "You're in the Acre. Hasn't that dented your thick skull yet? When one of the perditious Vorra goes by, you *ignore* him, catch?"

The heavy footsteps crashed across the hall and out of the door; I couldn't see, but I heard perfectly because everything was done with the slam-bang lack of control stemming from pure rage.

"All right, take him upstairs," I heard someone say.

When the cloak was dragged off my head again, I looked

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about me apologetically. "I didn't mean to stand up," I said. "I was just so shaken to see who it was."

"What do you mean?" Gustav demanded.

"That was—uh—my employer. Pwill."

"Don't hang around!" That was the hard-eyed man the guard had spoken to when I was brought in, leaning over the balustrade of the landing above the stairs. Ken and Gustav hustled me roughly forward.

"His Honor Judge Olafsson," Ken said to me out of the side of his mouth as I was escorted into the office. "He matters around here—not Pwill or anyone else."

Olafsson looked up from behind his rough wooden desk. He was a man of great height, even when sitting. I guessed him to be about sixty, but he wasn't old. His face was firm and unlined, and his eyes were bright, the lids unwrinkled. He was going bald on top of his high forehead. When he spoke, he revealed a resonant baritone voice.

"I gather this is a serf who's come to the Acre for the first time—correct?"

"That's right, your honor." Ken and Gustav spoke together.

"What's your name?" Olafsson jabbed his index finger towards me.

"Shaw," I said. "Gareth Shaw—uh—your honor."

His expression didn't change, but the tone of his voice did. "Whose service are you in?" he barked.

"The House of Pwill," I said, blinking.

Olafsson's frosty glare swept my companions. "Out!" he said. "And don't mention this again, in the Acre or out of it. Understand?"

Completely baffled, my escort stuttered objections. Olafsson cut them short.

"Out!" he repeated crisply.

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When they had gone, leaving only myself, Olafsson, and the hard-eyed man who stood at Olafsson's right and seemed like some kind of personal assistant, the judge indicated a chair. I sat down gratefully, because my flight from the mob, my fall over the barrel and my rough treatment at the hands of Ken and Gustav had left me aching all over.

"I'm sorry to have caused so much trouble, your honor," I said. "I've never been to the Acre before, and I made the mistake—uh—of not taking off my house shield before—"

"How long have you been on Qallavarra?" Olafsson didn't appear to have heard what I just said.

"Seven months, about," I said, swallowing.

Olafsson half-turned and cocked an eyebrow at the hard-eyed man. "What do you make of that, Sessions?" he said.

The hard-eyed man shrugged fractionally.

"Why is this the first time you've been to the Acre?" Olafsson went on, turning back to face me.

I couldn't think of an answer I wasn't ashamed of. I said nothing.

"Very well. Shaw. In service with Pwill. How did you manage to get this cushy post? I suppose it must be cushy, or we'd have seen you before."

I said, "I was—uh—back home I was tutor to Pwill Heir Apparent."

Sessions grunted. I didn't like his expression at all.

"I see. So yours is a pretty responsible post? A position of trust?" Olafsson folded his huge hands on his desk.

"No, not very." I was glad to seize the opportunity to explain. "You see, Pwill Heir Apparent was absolutely impossible to teach and on returning to Qallavarra they took me off that job. I just sort of act as steward and supervise household affairs and—"

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Olafsson grunted. "So you have a lot of free time?"

"Not much, no."

"Some?"

"Well—yes."

"And this is your first visit to the Acre. Well, well. Tell me, Shaw, what did you come to Qallavarra for?"

I felt miserably like a naughty schoolboy being told off by a stern grandfather. I had to lick my lips before I could speak.

"To—to see it for myself and—and the job is well paid and not very demanding really, and—"

Sessions put on an expression the twin of the one Marijane had worn when she first spotted my house shield on my arm.

Olafsson, though, seemed quite calm. He said, "And you're well treated? Comfortable? What are your quarters like?"

"Quite well treated. Uh—I have a room with water and heating and I have it to myself."

Olafsson got to his feet. He towered over Sessions and myself; he must have been nearly two meters tall, I judged. He beckoned me as he went to the window.

"See that?" he said, pointing. "That's the Acre out there. Fourteen thousand people in a few square blocks. There may be someone here who has a room with water and heating to himself; I don't know of anybody. Water you hump in two-gallon cans from one of the six wells in the Acre. Food you get by trade with the few merchants on the fringes of the Acre who've not been intimidated out of trading with us. But Vorrish food lacks a few vitamins and has a few of its own we're allergic to. How do you make out?"

I looked at the floor. "They brought some Earthly vegetables for me—I use a few of them I tend myself."

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"There's no garden space in the Acre. We have to rely on pills." Olafsson made it a fact, without hostility. "Now you have a piece of the picture. On the other side, we're our own masters here; when your boss Pwill comes to see me he comes alone, without retainers, and likes it."

"What for?"

"One of his family acquired some Earthly tastes during his spell as governor of Earth," Olafsson said. "And they're expensive here."

"I—see."

"Now we're straight on the background. Why did you come to the Acre today?"

I repeated the explanation I'd given before, in detail.

Olafsson made no comment beyond glancing at Sessions and cocking his eyebrow again. He went back to his desk, apparently through with me.

"Well, carry on with your little errand," he said. "I trust you'll call on your less prosperous cousins occasionally in the future, before you retire to your country estate or whatever you'll be rich enough to buy when you go home."

Appalled at myself, I said, "Is there anything I can—can do? Like maybe bring in my vegetables, or *something*?"

"You seem to be doing very nicely," Olafsson grunted. "A comfortable, responsible position with one of the great houses—what more could you want? Out! I've got business to attend to!"

## CHAPTER V

THANKFULLY I beat a retreat down the stairs and back into the street. The guard on duty by the door gave me a curious

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look, but said nothing. Trying to seem composed, I walked till I found a corner where the streets were numbered so that I could work out where I had to head for now.

There seemed to be more people out and about than when I arrived; I checked my watch and figured that it was probably the midday break in work. Everyone seemed peaky and shabby, especially the young people, but there was a spring in their walk and a keenness in their faces which contrasted with the manner of the Vorra I had lived among so long.

I found my landmarks and started off towards—what was the name they had given to the man I was going to see? Kramer, Ken had said. I wanted now to finish my errand and get the hell out, and come back when I'd recovered from my shock.

I hadn't gone very far, though, when I felt that someone was coming close behind me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw I was being dogged. I looked round.

"Keep walking!" instructed the now-familiar voice of Marijane. "Olafsson said not to talk to anyone about you. But he didn't say one of your new friends shouldn't come along and make sure you don't miss your way."

Her sarcasm was biting. I said, "Look, I know you don't like me because I'm what you call a serf. All right, I understand that. But what the hell makes you so suspicious of me? I came here to do just what I said—want I should take oath on it, or something?"

"Oaths are for Vorra," she answered. She had fallen in step beside me now, striding along with a kind of mannish determination. I couldn't help looking at her; after all, she was the first Earthly girl I'd seen all these months. I'd hardly noticed any others among the people of the Acre so far; men seemed to be in the majority by four or five to one.

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Not only the way she walked was mannish. Aside from her loose fair hair and a certain delicacy in her face, and her underdeveloped bosom, she could have been a brother to Ken and Gustav in her coarse shirt—torn on one shoulder—work pants and sandals.

How old could she be? Eighteen?

"Don't stare at me," she said curtly.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm much sorrier—for you. I don't like to have to hate one of my own kind. But get this through your solid skull, will you? Any of us in the Acre, like my own parents here, could be comfortable the way you are. They were pretty special people who carved out this foothold for us on Qallavarra. They had skills and talents the Vorra didn't, which was why the perditionous bastards wanted them here. Difference between them and you—they also had guts. So instead of selling themselves and getting privileged places on comfortable Vorrish estates they stuck it out for years in the Acre, till they got things the way they wanted them. Till the Vorra wanted what they had so bad they were prepared to treat with us on our terms. You got the picture yet?"

I nodded. "I know all this," I said.

"Yes?" Her lip curled a little. "Then how come you're acting as you are?"

A sudden blinding inspiration hit me. I wished I'd thought of it in time to parry Olafsson's cold disdain of a few minutes before.

"Look!" I said, feigning exasperation. Hasn't it hit you that not everybody can be on the outside looking in? What's the ultimate aim? To fix things all over Qallavarra—and back home, what's more—so they're the same as in the Acre. So

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that the Vorra ask *our* permission; so that *we* say what goes. How the hell do you think that's going to come about if none of us sounds out the Vorrish way of living from the inside to know what makes it tick?"

Almost I'd convinced her. She was hesitating over what to say next. I waited.

"Then, if you're—but what possessed you to walk into the Acre with a shield on?"

"Walk into the Acre?" I exploded. "I didn't walk—I was chased! I know it was undignified of me to start running, but I'd like to see the man who could stand his ground with a hostile crowd and a squad of eight armed soldiers out for his blood."

One more push, and I'd won. I hurried on, "And what's more, how long do you think I'd hold my position of trust with the House of Pwill if I was spending all my spare time in the Acre? The Vorra don't *like* having us here; they're beginning to catch on to what the Acre actually means. Why else do they go to the trouble of making these shows of strength around in the city? Not to impress their own people, but to stop us from getting ideas."

My mind was really turning in high gear now. The more I thought about what I was saying, in fact, the more I was sure it wasn't all comet-dust.

"Well—I'm sorry," Marijane said at last. "I see what you mean. It can't be very pleasant to have to pose as a serf, I have to admit. The mere idea turns my guts over. So you'll forgive me for jumping to conclusions. I thought anyone low enough to be a serf was low enough to sell out his own kind, spy for the Vorra—anything!"

"Well, I'm not that low," I said curtly. "I wouldn't have come here if I hadn't been genuinely sent on a genuine

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errand. If I'd refused, that would have made worse trouble, though."

Her eyebrows drew together. There was a trace of black on her forehead as though she'd wiped away perspiration with a grimy hand. With six wells to all these people, probably you didn't get to wash very much.

I could tell it cost her an effort to throw her original view of me away; still, she did it, and I was grateful. She said, "There's Kramer's—over there, next block. I won't bother you any more. Good luck, anyway."

She was turning to leave. "Just a moment!" I said. "In case things get better, can I know your name, and where to find you?"

"I'm Marijane Lee. Ken's sister. You'll usually find me around the alley where you came into the Acre. But for choice I'd rather you didn't."

She didn't have to state a reason in words. I shrugged. "Fair enough. But maybe things will get better, hey?"

She shrugged and went on walking away.

### KRAMER. ARCANES LORE.

I looked at the hand-painted sign swinging from an iron peg driven into the wall of the house. That was the place all right. But—*arcane lore*?

Frowning, I pushed open the rickety door and found myself in a dark waiting room, stinking of some sort of incense and lit with candles in glass chimneys. Their flickering glow showed me cushions on the floor, heaped up in untidy piles, skin rugs, whitish squares pinned to the walls. I went to examine one of these squares more closely. It was a chart of part of the Vorrish night-sky, the constellations represented by dabs of red ink and the paths of the local planets

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indicated by dotted black lines. There were Vorrish inscriptions against some of the star groups: fortune, malevolence, health, rivalry.

There was a creaking noise behind me. I started and swung round. A doorway—a vague yellowness in the murk—had appeared in the far wall. Something huge and humped and black moved indistinctly in the frame of twilight.

In perfect Vorrish a booming voice asked me my business.

"I—I'm Gareth Shaw," I said. "The Under-lady Shavarri sent me."

"Earthman?" the booming voice demanded.

"Yes!"

"Oh, that's all right then. We needn't waste time on the mumbo-jumbo. Come on through to the back." The boom had gone from the voice, as though an echo chamber had been switched out of circuit. Perhaps it had.

Because when I went through the doorway I found myself in a perfectly ordinary room, the walls lined with tables on which were stacked cans, jars and jugs capped with plastic membranes. There was a thick animal smell which I couldn't identify.

"I'm Hans Kramer," the humped shape said, shrugging off a black cape from his head and shoulders and revealing a round face, pasty in complexion, with eyes in it like currants stuck in a bun. "What can I do for you? Shavarri! Isn't she one of the Pwill wives?"

He suddenly quickened with interest. I nodded.

"Did you have anything to do with organizing this?" he pressed me.

"No, I'm afraid not. I don't even know what it's all about."

"Hrm! I wonder who fixed it, then. Well, never mind. I suppose you're in a hurry?"

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Before I could answer, there was a faint moan from a room beyond the one in which we stood. Kramer's face showed alarm. "Hope that isn't bad," he murmured.

"Uh—do you want to go see? I can hang on if you like."

"Can you?" He sounded grateful. "Well, why not come through? Do her good, maybe—see a strange face." He pushed aside a thick drape and led me into the third room.

Here a woman lay ill. She was very much like Kramer to look at—plump, round-faced—except that her cheeks were wasted and beginning to be hollow, and her skin gleamed with sweat.

"*Liebchen*, are you all right?" Kramer demanded. "I heard you moaning."

With lackluster eyes the woman regarded him. Seeming to come back from a great distance, she answered in a whisper. "I'm sorry, Hans. Sometimes the fever makes my mind wander. I hope you did not have a client—" She realized that I was present, and broke off.

"Only a new friend, an Earthly friend!" Kramer exclaimed with false heartiness. "Friend Shaw—my wife, of course."

I nodded and licked my lips, not knowing what to say. Kramer went to the side of his wife's couch, felt her hot face with light fingertips, and frowned. He poured a little more water from a jug into a cup on a low table beside her, and then apparently could do no more.

"Don't worry with me," his wife said faintly. "See to your business. I shall be well soon."

So we returned to the room with the stacks of cans and jars.

As the drape fell behind Kramer, I said, nodding past him, "What is it?"

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"The sickness? Oh, the usual mixture." He sounded bitter. "A mutated germ, plus impure water, plus trace-element deficiencies, plus allergy to Vorrish food, plus simple weariness. What's to be done? We aren't the first to be troubled, nor will we be the last. Your business, then!"

His tone warned me not to ask any more questions. I simply recited the message Shavarri had given me to bring here. It made very little sense. In actual fact, I'd wondered at first if I was bringing a kind of coded message to a lover of hers, before I noticed that I was bound for the Acre.

"Does she now!" Kramer said, apparently understanding what I had said better than I did. "Well, that'll be five platina. Does she know that?"

Guiltily I produced the four I had brought with me. "I'll dig the other one out of her before I hand over," I improvised.

"Yes, do that," Kramer agreed, unsuspecting. He clinked the coins together. "Cash on the nail is our inflexible rule. Still, she's a new customer—I'd dearly like to know who put her on to us! Try and find out, will you?"

"It'd be easier," I ventured, "if I knew what I was taking her."

"Don't you already?" He regarded me with astonishment, before reaching for a pound-size can without a label from one of the stacks beside him. "A love potion, of course! Here you are. And here"—he felt in his pocket and produced a slip of rather tattered paper—"are the directions for use. You might as well read them yourself before handing over."

"I'll have to read them anyway," I said. "I don't think she knows how."

Love potion? Arcane lore? What in—?

"Look," I said, "is this serious? About a love potion, I mean?"

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"Where've you been since coming to Qallavarra?" Kramer demanded. "I thought everyone knew about—"

And I saw the darkening of suspicion in his eyes. Hastily I interrupted, "I'm sorry, I haven't been here long."

Then, by a miracle, the outer door was opened again. Kramer pointed curtly. "Out the other way!" he whispered. "And quickly!" Meantime he was grabbing his black cape again.

As I departed through the back entrance, I faintly heard him demanding, in Vorrish, the new customer's business.

### CHAPTER VI

I MADE A SORT of pouch out of my cloak and slung it over my shoulder with the can and my house shield in it, and got out of the Acre without further trouble. But I waited till I was well outside the boundary before I put my shield back on, and both before and after I was careful to imitate the Vorra in head angle, walk and position of my fingers.

I got my return bus safely. Once in the back seat, with a journey of almost an hour before me, I was able to start thinking over what had happened.

The most extraordinary thing out of a lot of extraordinary things was this. Why—being as far as I knew a loyal Earthman—why hadn't I actually taken advantage of my privileged position the way I'd given Marijane to understand I did?

It was never advertised, but everyone understood that

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there was one single reason for taking up a chance to go to Qallavarra. That was to get our own back on the Vorra.

You didn't have to say it aloud. You just realized that the people in the Acre weren't there for the fun of it, or to make their fortunes before going back to Earth. They spent their time figuring out ways of getting at the conquerors and bringing them down. How well they'd succeeded already I'd seen for myself.—Pwill of the House of Pwill, Himself, leaving Olafsson's office in a towering rage because, presumably, one of his demands had been refused.

How could a handful of Earthmen exploit the weakness of the Vorra? I hadn't seen it at the time, but once I could reflect about it I realized I'd just had firsthand experience of one possible technique: Kramer's.

I weighed the can of "love potion" in the folded cloak.

Not to put a fine point on it, Shavarri was ignorant. She couldn't read and write her own language, let alone an Earthly one. She was probably superstitious too. The Vorra went into battle with chants, charms and rituals; there were a dozen conflicting cults that claimed the loyalty of the tenants on the Pwill estate, as I myself had seen. Swallo, the gatekeeper, belonged to one of them and claimed it had saved his life during the Battle of Fourth Orbit.

The high-ranking nobles pooh-poohed such beliefs. Nonetheless, they might well be a trifle hesitant about dismissing them altogether. And their wives, far less educated and far less exposed to the outside world, had certainly heard of the indefinable regard their menfolk had for Earth and things Earthly—especially in the House of Pwill, whose head was so convinced that Earth held some secret he might use himself.

I almost fell off the seat in my excitement. Fortunately,

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no one took notice of my start. Why, there were hundreds of ways you could exploit the superstitious attitude of a noble lady! And indirectly that would work on her husband, and his kinfolk; junior wives might not have much official status, but they undoubtedly had some influence.

And here I was taking a "love potion" to Shavarri! For whom did she intend it? For some lover around the estate, a space crew officer perhaps? Or for Pwill himself? That wasn't inconceivable; an ambitious younger wife, jealous of her longer-established sister-wives, might well try using a potion to make her husband lavish more attention on her.

The more I thought of it, the more likely that seemed. It was quite a hobby of the junior wives to have lovers; only Llaq herself was able to travel about with her husband and have much to do with affairs of the world, whereas the rest, except when they were permitted to visit other houses, which was not often, generally remained at home in the seraglio and quarreled with each other to pass the time.

No, it wasn't likely that Shavarri would have to employ a drug to persuade a man she fancied to become her lover. She was youngest but one and by Vorrish standards one of the more attractive of the Pwill under-ladies. (In my Earthly view she was far and away the most attractive, but Vorrish tastes preferred the moon-faced type also favored by many harem cultures on Earth in the past; for the Vorra, Shavarri was too thin-featured, although shapely otherwise.)

My wandering mind passed from Shavarri to Marijane, and a new peculiarity struck me. Marijane—and her brother and Gustav, for that matter—had been vehement in their disgust at people like myself in cushy jobs with the houses, calling us serfs and insulting us. How had that been back home? I frowned as I tried to recollect. Put it this way: I

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was a normal man as far as I knew—certainly normal enough to have had my imagination set working by Marijane after not seeing an Earthly woman since reaching Qallavarra. So presumably I'd not been completely celibate during the five years I'd spent as tutor with the Pwill family on Earth. I must have had friends and social contacts . . . ?

And yes, there they were, distinct in my memory.

Surely, though, back on Earth where the passage of two generations hadn't sufficed to wipe out the scars of defeat, a person like myself in a privileged position living as the Vorra did off the fat of the planet, would have been hated still more vigorously and decried as a traitor?

Yet as far as I could remember no one had ever accused me like that. I'd enjoyed my five years as a tutor, setting aside the sheer impossibility of ramming sense into the solid bone head of young Pwill.

Paradox. I couldn't resolve it. I gave up after a moment and let my mind wander on, still at random.

Marijane. Shavarri. The whole question of women. It seemed like a long time since it last bothered me. I pictured Shavarri to myself and gave a critical nod. Yes, she was definitely pretty by anyone's standards. Purely as a matter of interest, I reminded myself, there was no physical reason why Vorra and Earthfolk shouldn't make love together. There was more difference between the males than the females, but the essential functions were the same. Mark you, I went on informing myself, you couldn't mistake one race for the other without clothing, and a union couldn't be fertile, and actually humans didn't find Vorra stimulating because they lacked some skin-secretion with a particular scent which formed part of normal human stimulus patterns. But Vorrish soldiers were much like any other soldier, and

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during the years directly after the armistice when Earth was heavily garrisoned and no such luxuries as camp-followers of their own race were permitted they'd established the physical feasibility of it beyond doubt—

I checked myself and began to chuckle. The story I had spun to Marijane to calm her down was working altogether too fast on my imagination. Here I was seriously considering the possibility of seducing Shavarri in order to make use of her to foist my ideas on Pwill! This was ludicrous, mainly because I hadn't any ideas worth foisting.

At once I was grave again. Why not? Why *was* I wasting an irreplaceable opportunity like the one I had? I was an outpost of Earth in the very heart of Qallavarra, in the second most powerful great house—likely soon to be the first, if the schemes Pwill was now weaving came off.

As soon as possible, then, I was going to have to return to the Acre. I'd seek out Olafsson, put it to him frankly that I realized I'd been neglecting my duty as an Earthman, and ask what use I could be.

To be going on with, anyway, I could improvise something along the lines Kramer had shown me. I could make myself appear more of the "mysterious Earthman;" I could invent a few mystic powers to impress—well, Shavarri to begin with, because I knew she was already hooked; then some of the other wives and perhaps senior officers and retainers among my colleagues. And finally Llaq herself?

I grunted. That would take a *lot* of work. Old Llaq was probably the hardest-headed woman on the planet. I was sure half her husband's advancement was due to her initiative.

But I didn't have to begin with Llaq.

Plans began to blossom in my mind, as though they had

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been waiting in my subconscious and needed only the right stimulus to develop.

I walked up the road towards the house, admiring the way its glass domes and windows caught the slanting afternoon sun. It was quite an achievement in its way; all the houses were, especially compared to the slapdash overgrown villages which here substituted for cities. A house was a complex of barracks, factories, recreation facilities, palace, every kind of service from food and clothing to education and medicine—what there was of it on this planet! From a distance it gave the clear impression of being a united, organized whole dedicated to an important purpose.

That made it all the more remarkable and dismaying to think I had been inside this fortress for so long without exploiting my advantage.

I came up to the gate and knew I had already been spotted by Swallo through his system of spy mirrors, for when I was still twenty paces away the great double doors creaked a yard apart in the center and made room for me to pass between. I didn't continue directly across the main yard to my quarters in the family's block, of course, but turned into Swallo's office.

I knew at once something was badly wrong. For Swallo had taken out the misshapen talisman from under his table—the one he claimed had saved him at the Battle of Fourth Orbit—and set it in plain view in front of him. He only did that when there was trouble.

He gazed at me stonily. "You've been a nuisance," he said without rancor. "If you'd been here, things would have been a lot quieter."

"Why? What's happened?"

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"Pwill came back in a boiling temper from the city and sent for you. And today of all days you choose not to be present."

My heart sank. "Where is he now?" I demanded.

"Storming in the Grand Terrace," Swallo answered shortly. "Or was at last report. If you see anyone going around like a kicked cur, that'll be why."

"He wasn't due back till an hour before sunset!" I said.

"Pwill doesn't take much account of clocks," Swallo answered.

I hefted the weight of the can in my bundled-up cloak. It would be safer with Swallo than anyone, I thought. I handed it through the window of his office.

"Guard this till I come back," I requested. "I think it best to go and face Himself at once."

Swallo shrugged and took the cloak, feeling the weight in its folds but not asking questions. I was sure he would look when I had gone, but the can was unlabeled and short of opening it he would learn nothing. I wasn't even sure that opening it would tell him anything, unless he sampled the contents and suddenly found himself irresistible to all the women on the estate, perhaps.

I departed at a run.

All the way across the main yard, along the corridors, up the stairs to the upper floor where the Grand Terrace was set to face the afternoon sun, people with faces as miserable as Swallo had warned me to expect kept recognizing me and throwing their hands up in gestures of relief. Some of them barked at me, demanding where I'd been all this time. I didn't answer, and they didn't try to stop me. Assuming he had come straight back here from his unsuccessful interview with Olafsson, Pwill Himself had had about two hours

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in which to make his entire retinue and probably some of the less fortunate of his tenants feel the lash of his wrath.

Yesterday, it occurred to me, I would have gone quaking to face him in a mood like this; he was seldom really angry, though for show and to impress his inferiors he sometimes feigned rage. But today, having seen him come away from Olafsson's as I had—defeated, on some small matter possibly, but defeated, by an Earthman—I felt a buoyant confidence. I was prepared to outface him, outwit him and, if I had to, shout him.

When I came to the doors of the Grand Terrace the guards on duty there practically fell over each other with eagerness to let me by and take away the source of Himself's anger.

### CHAPTER VII

ALTHOUGH IT WAS also an earsplitting bellow, the tone in which the nomenclator the other side of the terrace door announced my name and office was by way of a sigh of relief. Himself, pacing the white-tiled floor and snapping the heads off pot-plants with a swagger stick, halted and spun on his heel to look at me. In the long moment before he decided what first to blister my ears with, I saw that Over-lady Llaq was seated in one of the ornate chairs along the banquettes of the terrace—her round, heavily lined face severe above her gorgeous robe of brocade—with three maids-in-waiting on cushions at her feet. Their faces were nervous, although they were trying desperately to smile.

I also saw Pwill Heir Apparent.

I didn't come much into contact with him any more. Pwill

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Himself had decided on returning to Qallavarra—his son being by then nearly twenty years old—that the polish an Earthly tutor was supposed to impart was wasted on him. Nowadays the young hopeful was generally away from the house, supervising various of the far-flung enterprises of the family. I'd gathered that he wasn't very diligent in learning the business.

He slouched now in a high-backed chair, his brilliant red satin shirt rumpled, his high black boots defiantly out-thrust across the floor, his face like thunder. Next to him, looking nervous, but trying to stand in a proper military fashion, was a young officer of the space fleet called Forrel, whom I knew to be a close friend of Pwill, Jr. He looked acutely unhappy.

"Where—have—you—been?" Pwill roared at me. Involuntarily the three maids-in-waiting and Forrell flinched.

I took my time over answering, coming another three paces closer. Also I bowed with extreme correctness to Overlady Llaq, because I was of her personal retinue, and this surprised and pleased her.

The Grand Terrace was more of a conservatory than a terrace, actually; it was mainly of white and bright blue tile, and its chief decorations were magnificent orchidlike flowers in hand-carved alabaster tubs. At present, the day being warm, it was open to the air, but at night and in cold weather big glazed screens were manhandled into place to wall and roof it in. I thought it was a pity Pwill had chosen to have his blow-up in such a pleasant part of the house.

I said formally, having finished my bow, "With respect to Himself, it was my information that Himself and the Overlady would be absent until sunset less an hour."

"Seven gods of Casca-Olla!" Pwill said half under his breath. I memorized the oath with interest; if he swore by those gods

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he might conceivably believe in them. Then he was bellowing again.

"I asked where you'd been—not where you thought I was!"

His temper was impressing everyone else, but it left me cold. I phrased my answer very carefully. "On the understanding that my services would not be required by Himself or the Over-lady until then, I put myself at the disposal of the Under-lady Shavarri for a task which could not easily be carried out except by an Earthman."

That fazed him all right. It also made his son take notice. He looked at me suddenly as though he had never seen me before.

"You went to the Acrel!" Pwill challenged.

I looked as bland as I could. "I was certain that Himself would not have failed to question the gatekeeper," I said, trying to suggest that I did actually think he might overlook the obvious. "I was *punctilious* in informing the gatekeeper."

Pwill, obviously at a loss, rubbed his chin with the back of his hand. There wasn't anything he could accuse me of doing without looking silly; he had told Swallo he was going to be out until an hour before sunset, and I was back promptly at that time, and I had gone duly on an errand for one of his wives. He decided to make the best of a bad job.

"Hah!" he said, and strode to his big chair next to Llaq. "Hah!" he repeated.

Then I got the point. The reason he was so furious was not that I hadn't been here when he returned; it was because he too had been in the Acre, and was afraid I might have seen him there! I was grateful that Marijane had thrown my cloak over my face.

"All right!" he barked after a pause. "Shaw, I have a job for you. Since you were just now talking of a task only an

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Earthman could conveniently carry out, you ought to be pleased to do something different from your usual fiddling little odds and ends. It's about time I made use of you as an Earthman instead of just another hanger-on."

This wasn't like Pwill Himself at all! What could have got into him?

His face betraying despondency, the young officer, Forrel, marched forward a pace. He said, "If Himself will permit, I ask leave to go away. This is a very personal matter and perhaps Himself would prefer to speak in private."

"Get back where you were!" Pwill ordered. "Don't try and make out you don't know—probably better than the rest of us—what this mess is about!"

Forrell went the dark brick-color which among the Vorra indicated the counterpart of a blush, and stiffly returned to Pwill, Jr.'s side.

"As for you, Shaw!" Pwill resumed. "If I thought you'd been at all responsible for what's happened, I'd have had you gutted and spitted on pikes long ago. But since my son tells me you didn't, I'll accept that. I think he's still capable of telling the truth occasionally. I *think*!" He threw a venomous scowl at his heir, who returned it with interest.

"What do you know about—?" he continued, and stopped short, as though a word were on the tip of his tongue and he could not complete it. Llaq closed her hands on the arms of her chair and hissed between her teeth.

"Coffee!" Pwill finished, catching the hint his wife threw him.

Cautiously, not sure whether I had heard the word right mangled as it was by his mispronunciation, I said, "Well, it is a common drink among Earthfolk—it's prepared from the seed of a plant, I think, which is roasted and then ground,

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and boiled in water to extract the flavor. It's dark brown in color. Ah—it's taken hot, usually, sometimes with milk and sweetening."

"You have drunk it yourself?" Pwill challenged.

"Why—yes!"

"But you can live without it?"

"Well, of course. I haven't had any since I came to your world."

He gestured at his son's friend. "Forrell Give me that flask!"

His son started out of his apathy with a muffled objection, but thought better of it. Reluctantly Forrell drew an article rather like an Earthly brandy flask out of his pocket and handed it to Pwill.

Hefting it in one hand, Pwill stared at me. "What does this—coffee—do to Earthfolk?"

I had to hesitate; Vorrish lacked words for *stimulant* and other terms I needed. Compromising, I said, "When drunk very strong, it helps to stave off the need of sleep. But usually it's merely taken as a pleasant-tasting drink after a meal, or with a light snack."

Pwill fumbled the cap off the flask and held it out to me. "Is that coffee?" he demanded.

I took the flask and spilled a few drops into the palm of my hand. I sniffed and tasted it. As far as I could tell, it was black coffee, weak, rather bitter, without sugar. I said cautiously, "As far I can judge, that is coffee."

"Drink it!" commanded Pwill.

An agonized cry went up from his son, who bounded to his feet. Forrell tried to restrain him, but he wasn't to be stopped. He seemed at first to be going for his father; then he thought better of it, and caught at his mother's hand.

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"Don't let him!" he pleaded. "That's all there is left! Don't let him!"

I'd caught on. I'd taken long enough about it. Coffee was not just a simple flavored drink; it was a whole complex mixture of alkaloids, including caffein. The metabolism of the Vorra was pretty close to our own, hence we could eat each other's food without worse than minor allergies. Usually! That was the kicker. I thought of Kramer's wife lying fever-ridden. I thought of my own carefully-tended diet-supplementing rows of ordinary Earthly vegetables, without which I would suffer scurvy, pellagra and other deficiency diseases.

Here was one point at which our metabolisms were different enough to cause serious trouble. Whatever coffee did to a Vorra, in the case of young Pwill it had certainly created an addiction.

Llaq gave her son a scornful look. She would have liked to tell him what she thought of him, but people outside the family were listening. The look was definitive, though; her son knew better than to go on appealing to her. Helplessly he stared at me.

I put the tip of my tongue between my teeth—as I would have winked at an Earthman.

It took him one second to catch on and return to his chair, practically smiling. I tipped the flask and drained it. It was awful coffee, but innocent enough so far as I could tell.

When I had finished, Pwill waited a few seconds as if he expected me to drop dead. I handed the flask back calmly, and he resigned himself to facts.

"This—son of mine," he said, "declares that he cannot live a day without coffee now. He has spent his allowance on coffee imported from Earth, bought in the Acre without my

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permission or knowledge. He has spent more than his allowance. It must *stop*."

I waited. Pwill was working up to an admission, the biggest confession of failure in his life.

At the last moment he could not manage it, and turned to his wife, who had no such qualms. She said, "Today Himself has instructed the Earthfolk in the Acre not to supply any more of this poison to my son."

*My son. Not our son.* This was her chief claim to influence: that she was the mother of the heir apparent. If her son was disinherited because of his addiction or some other cause, she would be disgraced and might well have to commit suicide rather than face one of her former juniors elevated to the coveted position of mother of the heir.

"*But*"—oh, she was putting this cleverly—"we cannot be sure this order will be obeyed. Your people are devious and unreliable; they are cunning. And naturally they are anxious for money. You have shown us that this 'coffee' which is poison to my son is harmless to you. Perhaps, then, the people in the Acre will think there is no real reason to withhold it from my son. Unless they do, however—"

Her iron self-control was not equal to finishing the phrase. On a different tack, she continued, "You know the regard the House of Pwill has for Earth; how well Himself governed your people and with what great interest in their way of life."

*In the hope, I glossed silently, of getting at our "secret"!* But I looked attentive and helpful.

"We therefore look to you," Llaq finished in a brittle tone, "to arrange this matter satisfactorily."

Begging with his eyes, her son stared at me.

Well, this was a gift from the gods all right. The very day

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I decided to make myself into an Earthman with mystic powers, here I'd been handed some very genuine power.

It must have cost the Over-lady dear to make that appeal. Only desperation could have driven her so far. I dared not push her further, or I might lose my whole advantage.

Bowing, I said, "I will do my utmost. As you have so elegantly stated, however, it will be hard on the people of the Acre to lose this profitable transaction. Worse, I may have to explain the actual reason behind the command Himself gave today. It would be graver still if that were publicly known. I shall have to buy the silence of prominent key individuals."

"I shall instruct the treasurer to give you a hundred platina tomorrow," Pwill said in a gravelly voice. "It will be cheaper than to continue as at present. If it costs more, I shall want to know why—but you must do it anyway."

My heart hammering, I asked leave to go away, and was given it.

I could hardly refrain from dancing for joy as I went to fetch my cloak and the can of "love potion" from Swallo's office.

## CHAPTER VIII

I FELT LIKE A completely different person. It came to this, I supposed: all my life I'd been so ingrained with the idea that the Vorra were basically superior to us (having proved the fact by beating us into the ground), that even when I was exposed to them at close quarters during my tutorship of Pwill Jr. I went on being impressed by them and honored to serve them. Glad to serve them, in fact.

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As though a bright light had been turned on in my mind, my visit to the Acre had shown me something quite different. It had revealed the Vorra as individuals, capable of being done down by another individual who happened to be Earthly provided he was sufficiently determined. This was what the Acre was all about.

But I was going to cut my own throat if I allowed my elation to show.

Swallo had inspected the thing wrapped in my cloak, as I fully expected him to. I think he noticed the change that had come over me, for instead of putting some joking question, as he normally would have done, he simply handed me cloak and contents.

Thanking him, I crossed the yard back to the family's block and took the narrow side door leading down to my basement apartment. Although the retinue of a great house had no privileges to speak of, at least they had privacy in their own quarters if they were lucky enough—like me—to rate a room to themselves. I proposed to spend a little time on my own, secure from intrusion, reading the slip of paper with directions for use which Kramer had given me along with the can of "potion." And figuring out what to do next.

Outside the door of my room, though, a heavy-set girl whom I recognized as one of Shavarri's maids sat on the floor with her knees drawn up, scowling. At my approach she stood up quickly.

"Steward!" she said. "The Under-lady Shavarri sent me to find you about an hour ago. She grows impatient."

I hesitated. Then I unwrapped the can from my cloak.

"This is what she wanted," I said, trying not to smile. "Tell her that instruction in its use will cost her another platinum."

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Taking the can from me, hefting it uncertainly in her big square hands, the girl blinked. "A platinum?" she echoed. "A platinum is a great deal of money!"

I was salaried at seven platina a month, and fairly well satisfied; a maid like her probably drew down eighty or ninety rhodia. Let her be impressed by the casualness of my request. I shrugged and made to go into my room.

Glancing back before I shut the door completely, I saw her still hesitating. I paused, and she risked another shot.

"I was told to *bring* you to the Under-lady Shavarri," she said.

"You're a fine strapping wench," I said gently. "But I don't think you could drag me there, could you? It isn't your fault if I prefer to come later."

Her eyes widened in dismay, and on that I pulled the door to.

Having changed into house shoes and put my cloak where the tailoress would find and mend the hole scorched through the hem by the flaring magnesium bullet, I made myself a quick snack of Earthly vegetables. Normally I took my meals with other members of the staff—Vorrish cooking, though slapdash, was quite palatable—but once a day I had to supplement my diet if I wasn't to succumb to deficiency diseases. In the middle of sitting down to eat, I had a vision of Kramer's wife—fever-pale, near delirium.

I made a resolution. Tomorrow, presumably, Pwill would send me back to the Acre to try and stop his son's supply of the deadly drug coffee. I'd take along a bagful of my choicest Earthly salads for Kramer's wife.

Maybe there were a few heads running to seed, too. If there were, people in the Acre would welcome them. They

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might not have space for gardens, but there wasn't any reason, was there, why they shouldn't plant in boxes of soil on the roofs of the houses? Or . . . was there? I frowned.

Still, that was for tomorrow. I took from my pocket the piece of paper Kramer had given me with the can, and studied it thoughtfully. It bore instructions in English, not Vorrish, irregularly printed—I imagined, on a hand press in the Acre.

It was the most peculiar mixture of hard sense and gobbledy gook I'd ever set eyes on. Astonished, I read:

Efficacious securing of the lasting affection of the desired personal object depends on the conjunct operation of the one desiring and the appropriate substantial means. Employed in strict accordance with the directions, the preparation supplied will adequately serve the latter purpose. For the former, legislation in advance is not permissible.

Contrive to administer so much of the prepared paste as will cover a thumb's end in food or drink to the desired. Sunset is the best time. Speak consequently to him or her in terms flattering to the speaker. Indulge in all pleasant actions concomitantly. Five to ten administrations will secure a lasting result dependent upon the precise terms used.

What in—?

I turned the paper over, and began to understand. The other side bore what the uneducated among the Vorrans might well take for a magical symbol of some kind—especially if they had been suitably primed beforehand by some of Kramer's mumbo-jumbo. But I had had a pretty good education myself, and I instantly recognized diagrams of molecular structure. Two of them, side by side.

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Rather hesitantly, I tried to work out their significance. The first one, in particular, looked as though I ought to know it—*got it!* Aside from one branching chain springing off the main structure, this was a diagram of a drug called credulin, used to heighten suggestibility. Credulin was, in fact, a chemical equivalent of a course of hypnosis. It could also act as a truth serum under the right circumstances.

Assuming that the altered side branch of the molecule was due to the drug having been tailored to the Vorrish metabolism instead of the human, apparently Kramer wasn't just a phony.

I had much more trouble working out the second diagram, and my assumption that it was a hormone derivative no better than an enlightened guess. Certainly the two drugs combined must have the effect Kramer claimed for them; I could stop thinking "love potion" in quotation marks and think of a love potion that actually worked. For instance: as among the majority of Earthly cultures, a man's virility was a kind of badge of honor to the Vorra. Properly employed, this potion could ensure that Shavarri became the wife to whom Pwill most readily responded. Perhaps it could be used to make certain he did not respond at all to the other wives! In which case Shavarri was going to have a tremendous stranglehold on her lord and master.

There was a rapping at the door. I swallowed the last few mouthfuls of my meal and answered the knock. This time Shavarri had not merely sent one of her maids. Despite my good resolutions, I felt my stomach cartwheel inside me.

I had had as little truck as I could manage with Dwerri, the whipmaster, since my arrival, partly because he hated me on principle—but then, he hated everyone!—and partly because I detested his position on the estate. Pwill was ab-

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solute lord of his tenantry and retinue, and his wives' also, of course. Dwerri was the instrument of his authority: a brick-colored man with carefully dressed whiskers shading between dull gingery-red and brown, pale narrow eyes, arms and legs like sections cut from the bole of a tree. He stood now, eyes glinting, in the narrow passageway outside my room, passing the lash of the whip he carried as symbol of his authority between his stubby fingers. Behind him waited two of his aides, almost as stocky as himself.

"You disobeyed an order from the Under-lady Shavarri," he said in a purring voice. "You did not go with her maid as you were commanded."

Putting the boldest possible face on things, I looked him straight in the eye. "It's taken you quite a long time to bring the maid's message again," I said.

He was unperturbed. "I was engaged in beating a field-hand found sleeping by a hedgerow," he answered, and wet his thumb against his lower lip. He touched it to the lash of his whip. The moisture brought the reddish stain of old dried blood to view on his skin. Waiting until he was sure I had seen and understood, he smiled broadly.

Behind him his aides shifted from foot to foot.

Officially, of course, there was nothing Dwerri could do to me. I was not a member of Shavarri's personal retinue; an order from her was not automatically to be obeyed like one from Llaq or Pwill. But she could give orders to Dwerri, and it was going to help me not at all if after I had been whipped I crawled to Pwill and had the order overruled.

I had a sudden idea.

I was sweating, but my voice was steady. I said, "I take it this is the chance you've been hoping for, to get some

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Earthly blood mingled with the Vorrish blood which stains your whip?"

"Exactly. Back into your room; we will attend to the business here. Unfortunately I am commanded to a mere five lashes. Five hundred would scarcely whip your haughtiness out of you. I have often regretted that my duties here on the estate prevented my accompanying Himself to your dirty mudball planet. In my view, the lenient way you Earthmen are being treated means that one day we'll have to beat you up all over again."

If he had been impatient. I could not have done anything. Luckily for me he had been looking forward to this chance for so long that he was prepared to savor the joy of anticipation for a few minutes longer.

"Very well," I said, shrugging, and turned back into the room. I carefully cleared away the dishes from the near edge of my little table. "Will this be a convenient place for you to work?"

That took him thoroughly aback. While he was hesitating over his answer I flashed a glance at his aides. From their faces I could tell they were none too happy about their new task. Maybe they'd already been indoctrinated with stories about Earthmen.

"Tell me, Dwerri," I went on, "is it true that your whip never leaves you, night or day?"

He hissed his answer. "That's true!"

"Good," I said, beginning to remove my shirt.

"What do you mean—good?"

"It gives me plenty of opportunity."

"Opportunity for *what*?" He was really rising to my bait, and his face was darkening still more than usual. I shrugged.

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"To settle accounts afterwards," I said, being as maddeningly evasive as I could.

He strode forward and caught me by the shoulder; the tip of his whiplash shrieked up and caught me on the cheek, missing my eye—fortunately—by a quarter-inch but stinging abominably. When I put my fingers up to the place, I found a drip of blood already running.

The pain brought tears to my eyes, but I managed not to cry out. I simply looked down at my reddened fingertips, and then flicked them towards the worried aides. Red drops flew off.

"Down in the Acre today," I said conversationally, "I went went to see a magician called Kramer. We had a very interesting talk about blood."

One of the aides had caught on. He found a spot of my blood on his clothing and began to rub at it frantically. I made a negative gesture to him.

"That doesn't help," I said sympathetically. "Nothing helps."

"What's all this about?" Dwerri barked, beginning to be alarmed. I looked him straight in the eye.

"Why, just so long as that whip remains with you, Dwerri, with my blood on its lash, I have my chance to even accounts with you. However, since I don't readily bear grudges against people, suppose we leave it at that, shall we? And I'll go and see the Under-lady Shavarri."

The aide who had tried to rub the blood spot off his clothes whispered urgently into Dwerri's ear. The whipmaster took a hesitant pace back from me, his eyes widening.

"I don't believe it!" he said.

"Try, then!" I offered. "I shall bear the pain gladly, knowing I can inflict far worse on you afterwards."

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Probably Dwerri had never before had a victim who did not struggle to get away, whom his aides did not have to hold down for the infliction of the punishment. That, more than anything, decided him. His mouth working, he turned to the door, beckoned his aides to go with him, and left me alone.

### CHAPTER IX

I HAD A first aid kit with me, of course. Knowing the rudimentary state of Vorrish medicine, and knowing that medicines which worked on Vorra might easily be poisons for Earthmen, I had stocked up thoroughly before leaving home. I dusted some quick-acting coagulant on my cheek to stop blood dripping on my clothes, but I decided against covering the gash with plastiskin. Let Shavarri see the mark and wonder about it.

Then I put the slip of paper with the directions for the potion in my pocket, and went upstairs to the seraglio.

Someone had been talking!

Normally the Vorrish members of the staff ignored me, except for the few like Swallo who could tolerate Earthmen without either hating their guts like Dwerri or being ridiculously impressed with them like Pwill. (That hadn't struck me before. Having been personally involved, as a very young officer, in garrison duties on Earth before the Great Grip relaxed, he had seen us at our most abject. It wasn't logical for him to have gained such a high regard for us later!)

Today the Vorra weren't just ignoring me. They were apparently avoiding me deliberately. Those I did encounter

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on my way upstairs could hardly drag their eyes away from me as they went by.

Astonishing what a change a few minor incidents could make!

Shavarri might not have moved at all since I saw her in the morning; she was still reclining as she had been, in a robe dusted with gold to match the color of her eyes. Her mouth was drawn down a little at the corners in a determined expression. On a low stool-like table within arm's reach of her was the can I had brought from Kramer's. She had levered the lid off. The contents were a kind of thick, dry, granular paste, grayish in color.

The same maid who had been waiting at the door of my room on my return from the city was fanning Shavarri with a big black spray of feathers. She gave me a nervous glance and went on with the fanning more vigorously than before.

Coolly Shavarri looked me over. I met her glance as levelly as I could.

"You took your time," she said at last.

I bowed. "Directly I returned Pwill Himself sent for me," I said. "As your under-ladyship will realize, this delayed me."

"And you have the effrontery to ask a platinum as fee for explaining the workings of this—this porridge to me!"

The maid gulped audibly. Shavarri turned to her and waved irritably.

"Leave us in peace!" she commanded, and the girl was only too glad to go.

"The cost of the can you have was five platina," I said urbanely when the door had closed again.

"I knew that!" she answered impatiently. "Cosra told me—I gave you what was necessary."

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Cosra. The name rang a bell. One of the wives of Shugurra Himself, head of the House of Shugurra across the valley from here, and the most powerful individual on Qallavarra; the rival Pwill would most dearly like to do down. That was really interesting!

I hid my elation. Bowing again, I said, "May it please your under-ladyship, there is a difference between a small everyday service and one like this. On my way to the Acre, a squad of trainee soldiers decided to use me as a moving target, firing magnesium bullets at me. One burned a hole in my cloak."

"I see." She studied me thoughtfully. "And you value your life, which you thus risked, at one platinum. It agrees very closely with my own estimate of an Earthman's life. There you are!"

She picked up a shiny coin from the same table where the open can of potion stood, and tossed it towards me. I caught it one-handed in mid-air and pocketed it.

Her light eyes followed the movement, and I guessed why she was puzzled, but said nothing. After a moment, she sat up on her couch of furs and gestured me to sit down on a chair near her.

"I had not expected you to be able to walk here," she said. "Yet you move freely, for all that Dwerri has marked you with his whip."

"Ah—Dwerri?" I agreed, and put my finger to my cheek. "Oh yes!"

"Did he not lash you, then?" The question was snapped at me.

"Dwerri, for all his pose of authority, is a servant with a servant's spirit—lack of spirit, I mean. He—changed his mind, shall we say? The capabilities of Earthmen impress

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him too greatly. After all, as your under-ladyship is well aware"—and I nodded towards the can of potion—"we are not without ability."

"Did you purchase a drink of artificial courage, steward, at the magician's home in the Acre?" Shavarri said mockingly. "To hear you speak, one would think you another man from your habitual self."

She was certainly perceptive. I wondered how I had come to underrate her all the time since I arrived here. Shrugging, I answered, "An Earthman about Earthman's business is a different person from an Earthman about petty tasks."

"Would you that I repeat what you have said to my superior sister-wife Llaq?"

"I think, Under-lady, that she knows already."

Shavarri smiled unexpectedly. "In other words, panic for her blockheaded son's behavior has made her turn to you for help. Well, I counseled this when the thing first became known—but it was natural, I suppose, for her to wait till she could wait no longer."

"May I inquire why your under-ladyship gave such advice?"

"Bolder and bolder! You may not inquire. Work it out for yourself. You have my leave to go away."

That took me by surprise. I felt in my pocket for the slip of paper with the directions printed on, and ventured, "But—the potion, your under-ladyship? Its mode of use?"

"I know already, steward. Plainly there can be only one way such a drug will work. It must make the subject listen more readily to what is said to him, and it must inflame his mind with passionate desires. Oh yes, steward!" she added quickly. "I was sure you would ask the seller what you were bringing to me, and I don't doubt you have already decided

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for what purpose I wanted it. *That* was why I paid your extra platinum. For your discretion. Not for you to read me the directions. I have been instructed—so much as will cover a thumb's end, five to ten times at sunset in food or drink." She laughed; I had never quite got used to Vorrish laughter, a high neighing sound ending in a savage grunt.

I stood up, a little at a loss. "Your under-ladyship is a person of remarkable talent and imagination," I said sincerely. "Scheming is a skill we Earthmen admire."

"I know! I know!" She tapped the can on the table. "You would not otherwise provide such excellent aids to it."

Her laughter was still in my memory as I returned to my room. That woman was going to be hard to cope with, I thought—probably harder than Llaq and Pwill combined, now she had revealed herself to me as a plotter and contriver.

But I hadn't made much progress with my new line of thinking before I reached my room again and found the door was ajar. It might have been that Dwerri had changed his mind, found himself a passkey and returned to wait for me; I looked cautiously past the edge of the door before I went in.

The boots outflung from my one low chair told me my guess was wrong. My uninvited guest was Pwill Heir Apparent. He looked in a bad way, I saw as I quietly pushed the door to behind me. His face was flushed, set in the same scowl I had seen earlier, but he kept biting his lower lip in a typical Vorrish gesture of nervousness, and he had to thrust his hands deep in his breeches pockets to stop them from shaking.

He must have arrived directly after I went to see Shavarri, for he had had time to ransack the room, turning out par-

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ticularly my food store—after coffee, no doubt. Finding none, he had dropped into the chair to await my return. Beside him on the table he had laid a scattered collection of coins.

I tried not to look at the coins as I bowed to him.

Raising his head, he glowered at me. Back in the days when I had been his tutor on Earth, he had been consistently unfriendly to me for two reasons: first, that I was appointed to supervise him, and he detested anyone who had power to order him about, and second, that I was an Earthman and a member of a defeated race. I'd never managed to learn to hate him, because at age fifteen he was just as much a silly young boy as any Earthly teen-ager—maybe more so, because he was far less bright than either of his parents. I had always been privately convinced that Pwill and Llaq were going to see their hopes unrealized.

Still, it would be better, probably, for Earth if he were to attain his inheritance and then bungle matters, than if he were to be disposed of in the traditional way and be succeeded by one of his brighter half-brothers. There were five of these to reckon with; all five were at the Vorrish equivalent of a military academy where they had been sent when Pwill Himself departed for Earth.

This was no longer a silly young boy, though; aged twenty, Pwill was a nasty young man.

"Don't stand there gloating!" he barked suddenly.

I gave an inquiring look.

"You know what I mean! Why in the name of seven gods have you no coffee?"

"It's expensive, even on Earth. And it would have been impossibly bulky to bring a supply with me."

"They have it in the Acre!"

"Perhaps." I tried to recall what I had known back home

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about shipments for the people of the Acre. "They are allowed—if I remember rightly—one shipload a month of necessities. Possibly coffee is sometimes included in one of the crates." It was the only explanation I could think of, though I wondered why coffee should be sent when the worst need was for diet supplements, vitamins, antihistamines, antibiotics and other medicines.

Abruptly Pwill got to his feet and began to pace the floor, not looking at me. He said, "Having saved your life today, I want you to get me a fresh supply."

"With respect," I said, "saved my life . . .?"

"Of course!" His eyes flashed at me and then he was staring at the floor again. "Don't you think my father would have shortened you to the shoulders if I'd done as you deserved and said it was your fault I'd learned to like coffee?"

He probably would. I shivered. In actual fact, I had never to my knowledge tried to make Pwill like any Earthly food or drink; that was outside my province. In any case he wouldn't have liked it on principle. Things of Earth, to his dogmatic way of thinking, were fit for Earthmen and not for the superior Vorra.

"Why didn't I say that?" he pursued. "Because you're an Earthman; you can go and come in the Acre. And you're going to. Whatever my father offers you to buy the cooperation of your fellow sneak-thieves in the Acre, I'll match it. I know what a stupid thing I'm doing. I know you could take the chance to poison me, or anything! But nothing, not even death, could be worse than—this!"

He took his hands from his pockets and held them out towards me. They shook. Each finger shook differently from its neighbor, as though his muscular co-ordination had gone completely. Above the wrists, the muscles were knotted with

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tension as he struggled to hold his hands still and failed. Sweat crawled out of his hair and down his face; his lips went pale with effort.

"That!" he said at last. "What devil's seed you make the drug from, I don't know. But it's wrecking my body to do without it. I can't sleep, I can't eat, I can't move my bowels, I can't throw a harpoon, and I can't take a woman! There on the table, son of an unpedigreed ox! You'll find ten platina, enough for two handfuls of coffee beans. Get me that much tomorrow, understand, or else—"

He snatched up a knife from the sheath dangling on his belt, and presented the point to me, bright and deadly, a few inches from my face.

One moment, and the point began to waver and swing from side to side. At first he fought to control it; then, with a howl like an animal's, of sheer despair, he dropped his arm to his side and went hurrying from the room.

## CHAPTER X

I KNEW WHAT I was doing this time. Before entering the Acre, I slipped my house shield into the bag I carried; I let the fingers which I had remembered to straighten as I walked through the city curl into a natural *posé*, and settled my head at an Earthly angle on my neck. Nobody troubled me as I made my way to Kramer's.

Instead of the front door I had used yesterday—which was locked from inside, I found—I went to the back entrance, and a small boy of ten or twelve answered my knock suspiciously.

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"Who're you?" he said.

"I'm Gareth Shaw," I said, and explained my business. When I showed him one of the new bright coins I carried, he let me enter.

"Father's got a client at the moment," he said, indicating a chair for me. "A Vorrish noblewoman, I think. She usually stays quite a long time. Mind waiting?"

"Not at all," I said. "How's your mother today?"

A look of deep unhappiness passed over the boy's face. He muttered something I didn't catch, and turned back to a table on which he had been preparing some food—paring mouldy vegetables of their rotten parts. He wasn't very good at his work; he held the knife awkwardly and seemed to peer at each vegetable he picked up, though the light was fairly good. At first I thought he might be backward. Then the weariness of his movements made it clear to me what the real reason was. He was ill himself with undernourishment, although he probably ate as much as he could hold in his narrow belly.

I thought of the vegetables I had in my bag, and I was going to bring them out and offer them to him, when Kramer's voice rose in the adjacent room uttering a formal Vorrish farewell. I decided to wait. I heard the front door open and shut, and a few moments afterwards Kramer came grinning through from his mumbo-jumbo parlor, stripping off his huge black cloak.

"Well, that's another on the hook—" he began. Then he caught sight of me and broke off, his face darkening.

"You again, Shaw," he said flatly. "What's it for this time?"

"You don't seem exactly pleased to see me," I countered, holding my bag on my knee.

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"I'm not," he agreed after a pause. "No, I happened to be speaking to Ken Lee last evening. I think you met him."

"Ken Lee was told by Judge Olafsson not to mention me to anyone," I said.

"Are you sure?" Kramer hesitated.

"Certain sure," I said. "Ask Olafsson himself, if you like. I don't think a loose tongue is a good thing to have around the Acre."

He nodded, but his look of hostility didn't fade. I held out the balance of his fee on my palm, and he took it quickly.

"You squeezed it out of her, then."

"I didn't squeeze it," I said. "She paid it as the price of my discretion, because she knew I would ask you what I was bringing her."

Again he nodded.

"Still, if you're not glad to see me," I went on, "at least you'll welcome these." I produced some heads of salad from my bag.

Kramer's jaw dropped. It was a satisfying sight. He said in a voice near whispered-level, "Where the—?"

"I have some I grow myself. For I don't get any vitamins or diet supplements from back home. I thought your wife might be helped a little by these, since obviously pills aren't doing her any good."

Reverently he took the few undersized knobs of greenery I handed him, shaking his head and moving his lips soundlessly. At length he said, "That's a very kind thought, Shaw. I'm sorry. I think I must have misjudged you. But—" He set the salad on a table, and the boy stopped his paring and began to sniff at and finger what I had brought.

"But what was that you said about stuff from home?" Kramer pursued.

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"Well, didn't I hear, back home, that you in the Acre were allowed one shipload a month of supplies?"

"That's so, yes."

"And isn't that mainly vitamins and so on?"

"You'd never been to the Acre before yesterday, had you?"

"No, I hadn't."

"I see. What's the mark on your cheek?"

I explained. Kramer was carried away with enthusiasm when I finished. Slapping his hands together, he chortled delightedly.

"Clever! Oh yes, clever! I suppose you want something to make sure that your threats to Dwerri come true?"

"I hadn't thought of that," I said. "Can you—?"

"Fix you up? Nothing easier! Ah . . ." He searched among the jars and cans from which he had selected Shavarri's love potion yesterday. "This'll do it," he said finally, taking up a flat glass vial full of reddish oily liquid. "Why, it even looks like blood. You can put this anywhere that Dwerri might touch it; the lash of his whip would be the best place."

"What will it do?"

"It's an acid derivative of peyotl; it'll make the victim see some rather peculiar hallucinations. I think that's most in line with what you said to your whipmaster." He gave me the vial, chuckling afresh.

"I don't know I can get to his whip. He's very strict about never being parted from it."

"Dope him, then." Again Kramer fumbled on the table.

"An anaesthetic gas. I suppose he sleeps alone?"

"Not often."

"Doesn't matter. In a small room, this should be plenty. I wish you luck with it." And into my bag went a fragile tube of grayish fluid to join the red hallucinant.

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"Looks like you're going to be a good customer" he said. I remembered suddenly. "By the way, I found out who put Shavarri on to you," I said. "Cosra is the name."

"Cosra? Of the House of Shugurra?"

"That's what I thought."

"Quite likely. She's been a customer for some while. A very stupid and very young woman."

"Shavarri isn't stupid," I said. I took out the slip of paper with the directions for the potion. "You can have this back. She'd memorized the instructions—from Cosra, I presume—and what's more, she gave me a very fair description of the ingredients the mixture must contain and their mode of operation."

Kramer pursed his lips into a startled O. "That's bad!" he said. "Are you sure?"

I tapped the molecular structure diagrams. "One of these is a credulin analogue, right?"

"That's correct."

"And the other is probably a hormone complex. So she was right on both scores."

"But she didn't actually say it in so many words?"

As accurately as I could, I repeated what she had said. He looked only slightly more cheerful. But eventually he shrugged and returned to the earlier point.

At least, it turned out that was what he was doing. He selected a bottle of yellow pills from his stock, shook half a dozen into a screw of paper, and handed them to me. I was beginning to feel like a walking drug store myself.

"What are these for?" I demanded.

"In case Dwerri or someone else tries to get any facts out of you. I'm surprised you haven't a supply of your own. You can blank out quite a lot of information when you've taken

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one of those, simply by running through it and sub-vocalizing it."

"Such as what?"

"Such as the fact that—oh, but it ought to be obvious, and only good luck has stopped everyone from realizing! I don't know why I'm putting it in so many words for you, except that sooner or later you're going to ask the essential question, and if you aren't provided with definite information you can blank out with an oblivon pill you might let a guess slip out. Hell, Shaw! You recognized credulin-A on that diagram!" He snatched the slip of paper from me. "And the other main ingredient *is* a hormone compound. That stuff we get off trees? Where are the *trees*, hell and damnation?"

His face was getting redder and redder. Now he waved his thick index finger under my nose. "Vitamins from home? We get—with luck—one consignment of medicines and diet supplements in four shipments. The rest is *this!*" He waved at his stacks of jars and cans.

"Drugs! Hormone preparations! Credulin! Poison! Oblivon! Pain-killers! Coffee! And—"

"Coffee!" I broke in. "What does coffee do to the Vorra? I know they can get addicted to it, because Pwill Heir Apparent is hooked. But what effect does it have?"

"Pwill Heir—?" He blinked at me. "Now that's *good* news, if you like. How did you manage it?"

"I didn't have anything to do with it," I confessed. "I just learned about it last night. In fact I'm supposed to buy him a supply today, and I'm also supposed to persuade the Acre to stop letting him have any, on his father's urgent request. Frankly, I'm not sure which to do. Blocking the supply will make him totally useless, but on the other hand—"

"Oh, you'll have to go see Olafsson. This is too big for

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me. In principle, you'll probably be told to keep supplying him; that gives us a hold over him to be used whenever we feel it might be really useful. I think he's the biggest one we've hooked so far."

I took the last sentence in slowly. I said, "There are many of them, then?"

"Why else do you think we ship coffee all the way to Qallavarra? It occurs naturally and does a good job for us. Whatever coffee does to one of us, it does double, treble, twenty times over for the Vorra. We found out about this back home, right after the armistice. Some soldiers got so hopped up on coffee they went berserk. It was banned to them in the end, and it wasn't for years that anyone managed to start hooking Vorra on it again. I didn't think we'd got to many people in the houses, because their forces have often done garrison duty on Earth and recognized the stuff and know what it can do. But we've had a lot of successes among the free population. Top of them all is the city chief of police." He rubbed his hands. "If he clears the Acre, he cuts his supply off. Blackmail is not exactly sweet, but our survival hangs on it."

"Pwill Himself—last night—apparently didn't know what coffee was, or what it could do."

"But he was governor of Earth!"

"Exactly," I said, "Maybe it could be spread among the houses a little now."

Kramer rocked back and forth on his heels, as though nodding with his whole body. "Well as I said," he sighed, "it's too high level for me; I only sell the stuff."

I clinked coins, thinking that was a hint. He made a quick disclaimer.

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"No, no, no! What you've been given is on the house—for spreading alarm and despondency among the Vorra."

"How about coffee for Pwill, then?"

"Same goes. See Olafsson." Kramer's eyes were beginning to stray now to the salad I'd brought, and so I rose.

"I hope those do your wife some good," I said. "I'll try and slip some more to you when I get the chance."

"Thanks!" He shook my hand and showed me out; and I had no doubt that the moment the door shut behind me he was at the salad with his son's paring knife, cleaning and rinsing it.

I expected some trouble or delay in getting to see Olafsson. There wasn't any. In fact, I had the strong impression he made someone else move over in order to spare me time. And this didn't square at all with what he had said to me so sharply yesterday. When I came into his office, Sessions wasn't present; that suited me, because I felt uncomfortable under the man's hard-eyed gaze.

Leaning back in his chair, the judge asked what had made me come.

"Well two or three things," I said hesitantly. "The first was what you said about lack of diet supplements yesterday. I have some heads of Earthly vegetables that have gone to seed, which I thought maybe could be planted out in boxes on roofs?"

Put like that, I was sure someone must have tried it, and they had. Olafsson gave a tired smile.

"Kind thought. Useless," he said. "It's the smoke. The air of the city is thick with it at roof level. You've noticed?"

I had—a yellowish haze oozing from the chimney pots on every house where people were cooking or boiling water for washing.

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"There's a sulfur compound—I'm no chemist, but this is the outline—in Vorrish wood and coal deposits, which is rather readily taken up by the foliage of Earthly plants. They get it from the smoke, you see—it passes through burning unchanged. And it renders them nutritionally as bad as Vorrish plants. Makes them all roughage and no nourishment. If you're growing your own vegetables anywhere that smoke can blow over them, make sure you get yourself another patch of ground."

I said, "I did—"

And there I stopped.

I had known about this when I arrived. I had asked for a patch of ground well away from the nearest building, for just that exact reason. And only this moment had I recollected.

Olafsson was watching me closely, I realized, as I struggled to get over my astonishment.

Other points bounced up in my mind. I'd recognized the molecular structure of credulin, known its name and its function. But that was very specialized knowledge indeed. Yet I hadn't known about the effect of coffee on a Vorrish metabolism.

Had I?

All of a sudden I didn't know where I was. I grappled with the facts and they seemed slippery, like wet soap, eluding a firm hold. I knew, and I didn't know, a very remarkable number of facts. What Kramer had said about the shipments from Earth, for instance—that seemed as if it should have been familiar already. Or was my mind playing tricks? Had I just figured out subconsciously that complex drugs and hormones couldn't be stewed up on Kramer's kitchen stove?

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"Snap out of it Shaw," said Olafsson quietly. "I'm a busy man, you know."

I realized I had been distracted for a moment. Sessions had come in and I had failed to notice; I'd really been wandering in my mind! Full of apologies, I returned to the business which had brought me.

### CHAPTER XI

AS KRAMER HAD expected, Olafsson was adamant that Pwill Heir Apparent should go on getting his supply of coffee. That, in fact, had been the reason Pwill Himself had gone out in so angry a temper the day before. Swallowing his pride—probably only because Llaq had prodded him into it—he had come to Olafsson to ask to have the coffee cut off.

Of course, Olafsson had had to tell him that the Acre was not run like a great house; there were no whipmasters to enforce orders from above. If someone in the Acre decided to supply coffee to Pwill, Jr., there was nothing Olafsson could do, for all that he was judge of the Acre's one law court and a very highly regarded citizen.

There was probably going to be trouble over this, sooner or later. At the moment, since the House of Shugurra was in the ascendant, there was no question of Pwill descending on the Acre and cleaning it out, which he had threatened. But if the balance of power slipped far enough for Pwill to envisage a coup, then there would be hell to pay.

Accordingly, when I returned from the city on this second trip to the Acre, I carried not only a supply of interesting

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goods from Kramer, but the whole weight of a serious problem which had been dumped straight in my lap.

For a while things went excellently well. It was only two nights before I contrived to sneak into Dwerri's room after pouring the contents of the vial Kramer had given me under the crack at the bottom of the door. His whip was hung on two hooks in the wall at the head of his night couch. I had brought a small pan of earthenware with me; I tipped the contents of the bottle of reddish fluid into the pan, and let the lash of the whip soak in it until the effects of the anaesthetic were wearing off and I was afraid Dwerri might wake up and recognize me. Then I slipped quietly away, leaving the whip to dry on the wall as before.

Some peculiar things happened to Dwerri directly after that. And not only to Dwerri, but to more than one of the tenantry whom he had to lash in the next day or two. I hadn't thought of that. Of course, if the hallucinant entered the whipmaster's bloodstream simply because he passed the lash through his fingers occasionally, much more would penetrate the skin of the unfortunates he flogged.

But that couldn't be helped.

Dwerri's whip was not just an affectation, according to Vorrish customs, it was his badge of office and a symbol with almost mystical overtones. He had to hang on to it grimly. He looked very unhappy though, when I ran into him a few days later in the main court of the estate, in full view of some scores of people—hangers-on, traders from the city come to bargain for surplus produce from the estate, members of the family's staff, and even a couple of minor relations of Himself.

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I stopped Dwerri as he made to go past me with eyes averted.

By a lucky chance the same two aides were with him as had been when he made his ill-fated attempt to lash me at Shavarri's instigation. Laying my finger on my cheek where the mark his whip had left still showed, I said in a ringing voice, "How are you lately, Dwerri?"

He avoided my eyes and mumbled something incoherent.

"How's your whip, which you stained with my Earthly blood?" I went on inexorably. When I looked round, I saw that almost everyone in sight had heard me call out, and those who understood the point were explaining in whispers to those who didn't.

Dwerri turned and faced me now, his mouth working and a string of drool leaking from one corner. He wasn't just unhappy. He was very sick.

"Mule without pedigree!" he spat at me. "This whip is still hungry for more of your watery blood!" He caught the lash up in his hands and pressed it to his lips in a sort of kiss of dedication, and his aides fell back from him with a hissing intake of breath.

Now when a whipmaster did that, he meant business. I had gathered sufficient knowledge of Vorrish custom to be certain of that. It cost me all my strength of will not to retreat. But coolly, at the back of my mind, I was considering that if the hallucinant could pass his epidermis anywhere, it would pass much more rapidly on his lips, and I could rely on some startling consequences.

They came!

Dwerri was lunging towards me when something seemed to distract his attention—something invisible which he lashed at with his whip. The crack was like an alarm sounding;

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people from all over the yard and from the buildings surrounding it came dashing towards where we stood. For some of the overeager ones the result was unfortunate; the tip of Dwerri's whip caught them on hand or ankle as they crowded on him, and only moments later they were racked with terror as invisible horrors like Dwerri's began to plague them. I called out, so loud that no one could fail to hear, "I regret that you suffer, though innocent! But that whip cut my cheek and my blood remains on it!"

They began to edge away from me, exchanging startled looks, even though I'd said no more than the exact truth. Meantime Dwerri, starting to foam at the mouth, shrieked horribly about *hundreds* of me!

Plainly his overwrought imagination had seen a connection between his attack on me and the hallucinations he was suffering; now the hallucinations had taken on my appearance to him.

He had whirled for minutes, lashing out and screaming, when Pwill Himself was drawn by the noise and came with armed guards into the yard, shouting for explanations.

Anxious to be helpful, people who had seen what actually occurred recounted it, as exactly as I could have wished. When he had heard them out, Pwill motioned to his guards, and they cut off Dwerri's howling abruptly by locking their arms over his head and around his neck.

"You had that mark on your cheek from *him*?" Pwill demanded.

I bowed and nodded, and said nothing.

"Is his condition your doing?"

I shook my head. "His own," I said shortly. "Since he tried to whip me, he has visions like those of a madman, or a man in fever."

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I heard a rustling whisper go through the crowd. Pwill cut it short with a glower.

"He tried to whip you? On whose orders? When?"

"A few days ago," I said. "But with all respect to Himself I will not answer the other question. As you see, the matter has taken care of itself, and I do not bear grudges long."

Pwill hesitated. But he dared not offend me now that I was party to the jealously kept secret of his son's unworthy addiction. He merely grunted and left it at that—a fertile ground for rumors to grow on.

"Get rid of him," he told his guards curtly, pointing to Dwerri. His glance fell on one of the two aides hanging back among the crowd. "You! Take his whip and assume his office!"

"I—I am flattered by Himself's honoring me," the man whispered rather than said aloud, cringing. "But with all respect, I believe the whip is accursed!"

I gave a grin, as wolfish as I could make it, and then looked innocent again when I was sure some of the crowd had noticed.

Pwill turned to me again, his brows like thunderclouds. "Is this so?" he demanded.

I spread my hands. "I do not know," I said. "Certainly it has my blood on its tip."

"Then burn it! And you!" he added, indicating the new whipmaster. "Make yourself a whip suitable for the task and come to me at sunset for its dedication."

That was the beginning of my reign over the House of Pwill. I could measure the growth of my power in a dozen ways. For instance, bit by bit my colleagues on the staff—though it hurt them cruelly to do so—stopped addressing me by equal-to-equal word forms, and began to use inferior-to-

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superior ones. The junior wives and their relations and children, who had formerly ordered me about as readily as any other retainer belonging to anyone in the family, stopped sending for me. All except Shavarri, and I was becoming something of a confidant of hers.

More than that: my duties grew lighter by the day. Someone else was found in preference to me to do what had formerly been my regular tasks.

And Swallo, who had been the only servant of the house I might call a friend, became very distant indeed. It was Swallo, in fact, who told me when my grip was complete, because he came to me as he might have come to a half-brother of the heir, one evening after sunset when the gate was locked and he was released from duty, with a request I found surprising because I knew he was almost seventy, though well-preserved. Grinning, his mouth twisted up at the side as usual, he bowed and touched his scar and asked if I had any way to undo the harm my people's weapons had inflicted on him, because he was thinking of getting married again and no woman would have him when he was so hideously scarred.

I told him no. But for the sake of the way he had treated me when I *was* simply a serf of the kind the people of the Acre had accused me of being, I got him a potion similar to that I had obtained for Shavarri, and soon afterwards he had three wives as nice-looking as any Vorra could ask for: solid, thick-hipped, industrious and untalkative.

That was two months later. I hadn't just had to wait for this power to come to me, of course. I'd had some tricky jobs to look after. The affair of Pwill, Jr. and the coffee was the worst. On the one hand I had to satisfy Pwill Himself that his son's supply had been cut off. On the other, I

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had to keep the occasional handful of beans in his son's possession. A handful lasted him a long time—five days or more—because the effect of the brew on Vorrish metabolism was so strong he drank usually only a few mouthfuls of a very watery solution.

The answer came to me like a blinding flash, when I was on the point of delivering the first batch. Instead of giving it to Pwill, Jr., I gave it to his close friend Forrel, whom I believed not to be an addict. I was right. Forrel, I felt, was a man I could have been friendly with if he had not been a member of the conqueror race and somewhat haughty; at any rate he responded well to my pretended concern for his friend.

"If I give this to him directly," I argued, holding out the coffee, "he may overdose himself with it and run mad, or die. If you hold it in trust for him, you can ration it out in such a way that his father will come to believe he is gradually getting over the effects and becoming himself again. This will advantage us both."

"You're a smooth-tongued double-dealer, Earthman!" was his answer, reluctantly admiring. He took the coffee nonetheless. "I must confess that for a while when Pwill Himself was so angry about his son's behavior I could see no better future for myself as his companion than to be stripped of my rank and sent to labor in the fields. I do not like this matter at all! Still, Pwill Heir Apparent is so ill and anguished if he lacks coffee, and so elated and skillful when he has it, I cannot choose otherwise."

He must have been able to influence the heir much better than I could, because it went off magnificently. For a few days, while he was on short rations of coffee, Pwill, Jr. was crotchety and irritable. Bit by bit he brightened, as if

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recovering. Only I, Forrel and he himself knew otherwise—that he was actually being given his full need of coffee now. Perhaps his father deceived himself; I am sure his mother Llaq did, because of what was at stake.

Under the stimulus of what was to him a drug he responded to an extent that almost alarmed me. He had never been a man of action. Now he acquired the ability to take decisions, to see things through, to absorb information, and his apparently unsuspecting father was delighted. Here, for the first time, seemed to be an heir worthy of him. I would have been alarmed if I hadn't known that a word from me would reduce him to what he had been before, or worse.

I had qualms at the beginning. Then I thought of the people in the Acre. I thought of Mrs. Kramer, who had died a week or so after I first went there. I thought of Marijane Lee and her brother Ken, and Judge Olafsson, and Kramer himself. I thought of the millions who had died during the war—which we had not asked for—and the further millions who had starved, or been shot as hostages, or simply died of diseases which, but for the war's aftermath, could have been cured. This was a dirty business altogether. It wasn't an adequate reason to say we hadn't asked for it—but it was a good excuse.

So I hardened my heart, and went on scheming to disrupt the House of Pwill.

## CHAPTER XII

IT WENT WELL. But it didn't all go as smoothly as the episode of Dwerri, or the arrangement with Forrel about the

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supply of coffee to Pwill Heir Apparent. And no matter how pleased I felt with my small local successes one frightening problem continued to undermine my confidence.

The same point which had so upset me in Olafsson's office in the Acre kept coming back. Why had I been on Qallavarra, in my position of trust and influence, for seven mortal months without making use of my opportunities? Now indeed I had some results to show for my belated efforts, but all that time I had been living like a typical serf that the people of the Acre so despised: comfortable, well-fed, not overworked. And in the Acre my Earthly fellows were plotting, and struggling, and dying.

When I concentrated on that question, my mind seemed to go out of my control. My memory clouded. I lost track of the difference between facts I really remembered and facts I might have pieced together subconsciously to account for the state of affairs as I found them.

The Acre itself, for example. I'd known about it all along—I must have! Even back on Earth the tales circulated; on my first trip there to carry out Shavarri's errand I'd been eager to find out if the rumors were true. I'd known the streets which bounded it, recalling their numbers instantly. Why hadn't I gone beyond that?

Many times I lay awake, staring into the darkness of my room, for hours on end before my tortured brain would relax into sleep, worrying over the same impossible paradox. It couldn't be that I was purely a selfish, contented vegetable of a man. Pwill was too good a judge of human nature—Earthly or Vorrish—to select such a person as tutor to his heir.

Yet if I were not, why I had been so passive for those seven months, when my every instinct should have been to

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get in touch with the people in the Acre and ask how best I could serve the cause of Earth from my unique position?

Other unaccountable memories piled on that foundation. I remembered how Olafsson had commanded Ken, Gustav and Marijane to get out of his office when they brought me in for questioning, and not to mention the episode to anyone. I remembered the look of disgust on Marijane's face when she found my house shield strapped to my arm. I remembered the passionate way I had tried to convince her that she was wrong about my being a mere serf—and wondered whether I'd been more interested in convincing her, or convincing myself.

Once, while I was fighting to still my raging thoughts because I was exhausted and not only wanted, but needed, to sleep, an idea occurred to me which I was too weak to debate with myself, so that it simply rested in the front of my mind until I dropped off. The phrase is apt; that time, I felt I actually was dropping when I went to sleep, as though into a pit of darkness.

The idea must have stayed in my dreams, for when I awoke the following morning I found that I'd come to accept it.

I'd lost the need to justify my actions to myself. I'd given up the impossible struggle. But I had an even stronger need in its place: I had to justify myself to someone else who usually identified with Marijane.

That puzzled me for a while. Then I reasoned that she was, after all, the first Earthly girl or woman I'd seen since I'd come to work on Qallavarra. Maybe, I told myself, that made her a kind of symbol for me. I didn't find it very difficult to be without women, generally speaking, and I doubted if there was any deeper emotional implication. But I was

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going to have to prove by deeds, as well as explain by words, my good reasons for behaving as I had done, and since, in a sense it had been Marijane who first showed me how I'd been wasting my time, it would have to be Marijane I proved them to.

It was lucky that the first person who suffered from my new-found authority was someone as generally hated as Dwerri. If it had been someone better liked by the rest of the retinue of the House of Pwill, I would not have had such an easy time as I did. Particularly, I realized, I was coming to be hated and suspected by three important groups of people on the estate.

The most influential were the junior members of the family of Pwill—among them, the wives other than Shavarri.

I hadn't been wrong in my guess as to what use Shavarri intended to make of the love potion I brought her. She must have been dissatisfied for a long while with her status as an under-lady. Well, that was not surprising; all the junior wives were dissatisfied. Alone among them she had had the enterprise to do something about it. There was a limited amount of visiting permitted between the seraglios of the various great houses—encouraged, I think, by a hope that useful tidbits of information about the plans of rivals in the never-ending jockeying for power might leak out that way—and it must have been on one such visit that Cosra of the House of Shugurra suggested that she enlist Kramer's help.

Kramer had described Cosra as a stupid and greedy young woman, or words to that effect. I doubted, now that I was coming to know her better, whether Shavarri was either stupid or greedy. From hints picked up in talking to her I gathered that not the least of her reasons for deciding to

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take action was the destruction of her original fantasy notion about what her life as a junior wife might lead to.

Pwill was a level-headed man. Also he had great ambitions for the future of his house. All too often, I'd heard, the fortunes of a house which had seemed unchallengeably in the ascendant had been wrecked by squabbling among rival successors to the headship after the death of a strong father. He wasn't going to let this happen in his case if he could help it. He was no longer young, and he had five other sons who were nearly grown, in addition to Pwill Heir Apparent.

It had not been unknown in the past, too, for the son of a junior wife to wrest power from the legal heir. Shavarri had cherished some such hope for her own child. Unfortunately for this secret ambition, shortly after she was married to him, Pwill decided that he had enough children and took brutal and direct steps to insure that his wives would give him no more. I only hoped, for the sake of the wives, that he'd enlisted the services of an Earthly surgeon instead of leaving the job to one of the Vorrish sawbones.

Probably it was her silent mourning over the frustration of her dream which had led me to think that Shavarri was less intelligent than she turned out to be. Certainly, once she had the love potion, she lost no time in putting it to use. Within a couple of months it was she that Pwill called for, and she alone, on the occasions when he wanted company on his night couch. (The occasions were growing fewer, I heard from rumor. But then Pwill was no longer young.) The jealousy which this caused among the other wives was natural.

I was quite certain that Shavarri would never allow anyone to admit that she had secured an Earthly love potion—that would have wrecked her plans—but I could tell from

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the way some of the jealousy rubbed off on me that behind the curtained doors of the seraglio, tongues were wagging and minds sharpened by years of petty scheming were adding two and two.

In the end the jealousy reached all the way up to Llaq, who had probably thought her influence as senior wife and only partner in her husband's state affairs proof against any attack. What showed her that it was not, I could only guess. But going by what I had learned of Shavarri, I imagined that in some small matter Pwill Himself had refused to agree with her, and had taken Shavarri's advice instead. Shavarri would never have stinted the dose of the love potion, and even in its Vorrish modification credulin was a powerful drug to promote suggestibility.

And I had brought a pound can of the stuff from Kramer.

It took a long time for that to sink in. When I at last got the point, I almost kicked myself. According to the dosage instructions I had read five to ten small doses would produce a lasting result. To give her a pound of the precious stuff implied that Kramer, or whoever gave Kramer his orders, intended Shavarri to exploit to the full her opportunity. Soaked to the gills in credulin-A, Pwill would take the wildest advice from her and be unable to question it.

Another group of people whom I now had to face hostility from was less important. Since my elevation to the confidence of both the head of the house and his heir in the matter of the coffee, nobody was eager to go on ordering me to perform my duties as steward of the household. Consequently I soon let them devolve on juniors, and since I had been industrious in organizing things my way this meant a considerable extra burden of work.

I had not realized how thoroughly I'd altered the arrange-

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ments that had existed before my arrival—if you could call them arrangements. Even such a simple business as the supplying of meat and vegetables from the estate had been run on a slap-happy basis, creaking at all the joints except where it was greased with bribes. I'd contrived—by such small steps I could scarcely remember the details—to improve all that. Fresh from an Earth of scarcity and strict rationing, it had simply offended me to see such slackness.

While I was actually on the job, it had made no odds to my subordinates to run things another way. They grumbled more about my Earthly origin than about my ideas, which were good ones as anybody could see. Now they were left to themselves to cope with the entire complex of the supply problem, they began to see how much they had let themselves depend on me. They hadn't minded letting me do so much work, of course. That was what I was there for!

But I could put up with their petty annoyance. Far worse, perhaps as dangerous as the jealousy of the various wives, was the enmity of a group of people I'd previously ignored altogether.

I'd known, in a vague way, from such hints as the image which Swallo kept in his office by the gate and took out in time of trouble to stand on the table beside his fat ledger, that there were various cults to which the lower-ranking members of the household subscribed. I'd heard the music and chanting at occasional festivals held in the townlets on the estate among different guilds of workers. The metal-workers had one strong cult; among the soldiers, another was popular, and each company maintained by subscription from their wages a sort of shaman. This kind of superstition did not seem to extend much into the higher ranks, particularly not into the family itself.

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Aside from that oath—swearing by the seven gods of Casca-Olla—which I'd heard him let slip, Pwill Himself appeared to subscribe to no deities at all. Nonetheless he was obliged on occasion to conduct quite elaborate ceremonies; I'd been present at several, although I'd never been able to find any hint of an invocation to supernatural forces in what was said or sung. The ritual was structured to induce a kind of generalized awe and reverence. If anyone was worshipped in any sense, it was Pwill Himself as head of the house.

But after setting up in business as a mysterious medicine man myself—especially after the affair of Dwerri's whip had convinced many people I knew what I was doing—I found that I had misjudged the determination with which the various shamans and cult leaders intended to hang on to their influence. Several times I found revolting charms in my room, under my pillow or nailed over the doorway in bags, and as time went by it became clear that the people responsible were willing to find something that worked more efficiently than mere charms.

Once, when I snatched down a bag that looked like just another in the long series nailed over the door, something moved inside it. Barely in time I dropped, and stamped on, a deadly poisonous quasi-reptile, a thing with four legs and a chitinous shell and inch-long hollow fangs. The day following I went the rounds of the various townlets on the estate, and as often as I could manage it unobserved I fixed a little charm of my own to the door of a shaman's home. It consisted of the name Dwerri written in Vorrish characters on a scrap of white leather.

Simple as it was, it worked, and I had complete peace for several days.

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But the peace was not to last.

It was customary, whenever something went wrong with one of the Earth-built solar-powered vehicles on the estate—and there were some hundreds of these, mostly acquired by Pwill during his tour as governor of Earth—to send to the Acre for a mechanic to fix it if the job was too complicated for one of the half-trained peasants who passed for mechanics on the estate. In the past, I'd never even taken the trouble to make the acquaintance of one of these rare visitors. Why, was another unanswerable question.

One morning I came out for a walk in the sun, and found one of the biggest trucks on the estate undergoing repairs in the open air. There were two mechanics busy on it. I saw at once that they were Earthly, and walked up to greet them. To my utter amazement, I found that one of them was Ken Lee, and the other—Marijane.

### CHAPTER XIII

I STOOD THERE gaping like an idiot for a long moment before she raised her head from the works of the truck and saw me. During that moment workmen of the estate came and went, avoiding me; I noted that the two Earthly experts were being left to their own devices completely, except for the watch kept on them by a group of a half a dozen surly-faced soldiers who were obviously annoyed at being detailed to such dull work; and a blinding flash of understanding almost broke in on my mind.

Almost.

Standing there in the sunlight, I could have wept with

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frustration at the tricks my mind was playing on me. The sight of Ken and Marijane working by themselves; the realization that the truck was built on Earth and not here—those two facts had been about to add up into a whole so important that it would have changed my life.

And suddenly, ridiculously, it was gone from me.

Somehow I mastered myself, and realized as if I had heard an echo in my memory that Marijane, no sign of recognition on her face, had spoken to me in Vorrish. One word, made into a question with the appropriate particle suffixed to it.

"Earthman?"

I was hurt for a moment by her expression of veiled hostility and suspicion. Then I realized that it must be feigned, and recalled the way the people of the Acre thought of those they called serfs. I answered, also in Vorrish.

"Yes, and am content at your presence. What seems to be wrong with the truck?"

Now Ken Lee also looked up from the interior of the vehicle, holding a thick cable in one hand as though to keep track of where it led to, wiping his face with the other. He gave me a curt nod and went back to his work.

"An accumulator overload," Marijane answered, still in Vorrish, and then with a switch to English so fast it took me by surprise, "What these dunderheads can't do to machinery! I'd have said this was foolproof, but it isn't Vorra-proof!"

Instantly I caught on. She'd dropped her voice as she changed to English, so that anyone passing would assume she had gone on talking Vorrish and he had merely lost the sense of the words. It was safe enough. No one seemed to want to come very close to the vehicle. Maybe there was a trace of superstitious awe involved.

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And again: I *almost* had that dazzling new knowledge. I had to shake my head to clear it.

I said in Vorrish, "And it will be rectified soon? Pwill Himself is not pleased with the lack of the truck." And copied her example in switching to English in a lower voice, to say: "I'm very glad to see you. Can you stay when that's fixed?"

"Out of the question. Have to talk here. Have a message for you." She glanced at the guards and raised her voice again. "There is not much wrong, but the adjustment is tricky and requires time to complete."

Ken said something from where he was half-buried in the mechanism; she nodded and got to the ground to fetch something from a tool chest laid on a bench close by. As she handed it up to him, she addressed me again without looking at me.

"You're not to come to the Acre again for at least some days." She got up on the truck beside her brother. "Orders. From Judge Olafsson."

Thunderstruck, I did a rapid mental calculation. I hadn't been down to the Acre for more than a week now. I had no difficulty with people inquiring about my movements, but to be on the safe side I always contrived to find myself a reason to produce if asked. In fact, of course, my trips were made to secure the precious double handful of coffee beans which kept Pwill, Jr. going.

His current supply was probably almost exhausted; he and his companion Forrel had been sent on a trip to one of the overseas plantations of the house, to supervise some crucial harvesting operation, I understood. He was due back in another day or so, and he would certainly expect his supply of coffee then.

I said, "But—!" And realized I had spoken too loudly. A

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curious glance came my way from one of the guards. I covered myself with some inane remark in Vorrish, and when the moment of danger had passed, went on under my breath in English.

"That's ridiculous!" I said. "The heir will be back and he'll be out of coffee—there'll be hell to pay!"

She gave me a mirthless grin.

"That's the whole idea," she said softly.

I was still staring, my mouth half open, when Ken Lee made a connection somewhere under the hood of the truck and the engine came to humming life. He got down, dusting his hands, and called for the chief engineer of the estate. They became involved in a technical discussion at once, and the guards, eager to escort Ken and Marijane back to the Acre, moved down towards the truck. Marijane gave me a furious glare when she saw I wasn't moving away, and—helpless with inarticulate rage—I had to wander off as though nothing had happened.

I started to walk, not knowing where I was going, at random across the broad fields in the general direction of a military barracks village. My head was spinning like a gyroscope, except that a gyroscope keeps a constant direction of spin and I didn't know what direction my mind was following.

To cut Pwill, Jr.'s supply of coffee? But that was crazy! The consequences would be dreadful. His father thought that he was free of the addiction; it would be impossible to hide the truth once the young man broke down again. My position would become untenable—it would immediately be clear to Pwill that I had double-crossed him—but even before that, when I had no coffee to offer him, I could expect blind

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rage from the son and probably violence from the terrified Forrel.

And Pwill would not be the man to try a second time what had failed the first. He would never appeal to me. He would send me to the torturers and then disinherit Pwill Heir Apparent in favor of one of the other sons. None of them was his full brother, which meant that Llaq would afford me no further protection; she also might be deposed from the status of senior wife—executed, perhaps!

Add to this the rumors which were now spreading about the rival House of Shugurra. I'd heard these by bits and pieces over the previous several days, which meant—because I was too far removed from the rest of the people here now to get the freshest news—that they were common knowledge. It seemed that Kramer's assessment of Cosra was correct, and that she had made less discreet use of her love potion than Shavarri. For the rumors were to the effect that Shugurra Himself was under her thumb, and that if Pwill played his cards right he could look forward to seizing the domination of Qallavarra in the near future.

Pwill had been delighted beyond measure with the change in his heir. I was certain he had been banking on overcoming Shugurra and then trusting to his son to maintain the leadership. With the young man suddenly reduced to a sniveling bag of withdrawal symptoms, the keystone of his plan would fall, and in his rage and frustration he would probably turn on the people he considered the authors of his fate: the people of the Acre of Earth.

Was Olafsson trying to cut my throat and his? Or was the so-called order which Marijane had given me an error, or a lie?

I swung round, meaning to head back the way I had come,

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and challenge her regardless of consequences. But I saw that she and her brother were already almost out of sight on the road leading to the highway, the guards marching stolidly behind them. I couldn't go after them now.

What in hell was I supposed to do? I couldn't defy the order, if it were genuine, and go to the Acre and ask for Olafsson's own word on it. I didn't want to show myself cowardly and unreliable.

Wait!

For a second I had the impression that the blinding knowledge I had almost seized had come back to me. But I was disappointed once more. Still, I *had* seen something. I was beginning to make a sort of sense of the order from Olafsson.

Suppose the aim was to bring down the growing power of the House of Pwill. What surer way was there, risky though it might be, than induce an attack by Pwill on the Acre? It was known to everyone that the reason he had gone to Earth was in the hope of finding some mystic secret which would assure him of superiority over his rivals.

If he were to attack the Acre, all the other houses would jump to one conclusion: he had succeeded and now he was trying to insure that the other houses were denied the assistance of Earthly skills in combating him. The house to which the present governor of Earth belonged was rather small and insignificant—no match for the might of Shugurra, however weakened by Cosra's interference.

I was still walking as I thought this through. Abruptly I was snatched back to reality by a barking voice from ahead. I looked around. I had come to the outskirts of the barracks village housing half a dozen companies of the finest soldiers the House of Pwill had to offer. Confronting me now were a group of some twenty fit young men, all armed, with two

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sergeants among them. From the huts on either side curious women and children were peeping out, staring at me.

I felt suddenly very frightened. What an idiotic thing to have done to come here alone!

"Where do you think you're going?" one of the sergeants demanded. He used superior-to-inferior forms in Vorrish.

I dared not to make trouble. I answered in equal-to-equal terms, but kept my voice level and as friendly as I could. I said, "I'm walking about at leisure, Sergeant, as can plainly be seen."

"Are you now!" he said sarcastically, and several of the men with him gave the Vorrish laugh, the high neighing sound ending in a grunt which I had never grown used to. "Well, since you're here, we'll use the opportunity. Take hold of him," he added to the men nearest him.

They darted forward and each seized me by a shoulder. I stared at the sergeant steadily. "What's the meaning of this?" I demanded.

"You'll see," the sergeant snapped, and nodded to the men to frog-march me forward.

I went unresisting. There was nothing else I could do. It was going to take a long time, I reflected, to restore my prestige to all the people who were watching me being pushed along in this undignified fashion—and there were a lot of them, for word of what was happening had gone ahead of us.

Under the eyes of a crowd of not less than two or three hundred people, mainly soldiers but with a sprinkling of wives and children—for this barracks village, like all such townlets on the estate, was complete in itself—I was brought in front of a small house standing on its own facing a rough unpaved track. There were symbols painted all over the

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walls: open eyes, male and female organs, weapons, and objects I did not recognize. Clearly this was the home of one of the company shamans—and a powerful one, if the house was his own. Usually a shaman had to share a barrack room with the men of the company who subscribed to his salary.

The sergeant and the two men holding me brought me inside.

As we entered, a very old man indeed looked up from a soft armchair in which he was sitting. I had probably not seen anyone so old since I arrived on Qallavarra. The Vorra had no science of geriatrics.

Again the curious gnawing almost-knowledge troubled me!

The sergeant bowed deeply before the very old man; taking it in turns, the men holding me did the same.

"This is the Earthman," the sergeant said. The old man turned his gaze on me, and the ferocity in his eyes was almost a blow.

He said, in a piping voice made bitter with—what?, "At last! I have long waited for this moment, to show you what your fate should be, and spirits willing, yet may be! I charmed the Vorra to victory in the greatest battles of all, and though everyone else may have forgotten we have not. See you—this!"

He tried to raise his ancient frame from the chair, and gave a despairing wheeze when he failed. Angry, he gestured to the sergeant, waving at a cubicle in the corner of the low-ceilinged, ill-lit room. The sergeant blanched. The old man repeated his gesture impatiently.

"Do it!" he snapped. "I will ward off harm from you!"

The sergeant made a rapid pass with his hands in a curious ritual fashion. Then he approached the curtain, seeming to steel himself, and snatched it back.

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I looked.

I saw.

And, as if by a miracle, I remembered.

### CHAPTER XIV

IT IS A CURIOUS thing to be able to forget. It took far, far longer to explain satisfactorily how the human mind was capable of this than to explain how it could remember. Memory follows naturally from the existence of awareness. But forgetfulness can sometimes defy reason. A thing can be forgotten even when reminders of it are all around.

And the reminders were here in plenty.

Standing there in the dismal room, surrounded by Vorra who hated me and all I stood for, I felt my mind open up like a dusty room which has been shuttered for years, when at last a newcomer lets in the sun. I was thinking to myself, "So we *were* right!"

Of course we were. There wasn't any other explanation.

The thing in the curtained cubicle was a mummy. It was as man-shaped as one of the Vorra, but it wasn't Vorra or Earthly. Its face, the skin shrunk and drawn back from small orange teeth, the eyelids fallen in dry empty sockets, still kept a trace of an expression it had worn in life. Or perhaps it didn't. Perhaps only my mind was supplying the idea. I didn't care. I thought the face seemed in a way—noble.

Over the dried husk of a head there arched a shining dome, a little marred with dust. None of the rest of the skin was exposed. The body was covered by a bright yellow

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fabric, as fresh and gleaming—except, again, for traces of dust where the flat upper side of a crease in the material offered it lodgement—as though it had yesterday come from the maker. But the place where the chest had been was torn, and there was a dark stain around the hole.

The thing seemed to be mounted on hooks behind the shoulders, for its feet hung down so as barely to brush the planked wood floor.

I spoke to the dead thing, aloud, in English. I said, "So we are your avengers. I wonder if we shall ever meet except like this. But even this meeting is better than none."

"What did he say?" cried the old man in Vorrish, and the three soldiers exchanged glances. I had not thought of the risk that some of them might have learned Earthly languages while on garrison duty there. But I was in luck; they all indicated ignorance. Anyway, I was too overjoyed to care, now that I was in possession of all my memories. I could even remember why I had forgotten.

If one thing was obvious about the Vorra, it was that they were incapable of inventing the things they possessed. They did not have the unified industry, the level of education or the advanced knowledge necessary to develop their hyperspace drive, their deadly weapons or their ships, even. It was not that they were too stupid to *use* what they had—we'd seen otherwise in the course of a long and bloody war. It was not even that the principle of hyperdrive, say, was in itself so complicated. Indeed, once you got an insight into it you were astonished to find how blindingly simple it was.

It was merely that you do *not* build a spaceship at the stage where your most advanced timepiece is a hand-crafted pocket watch. Where your commonest means of bulk transport is animal-drawn wagons. Where you split your world

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into zones of influence presided over by houses squabbling feudally among themselves.

The idea that the Vorra stole their techniques from someone else was not just a hypothesis. It was an explanation. The only explanation.

I remembered now that the man who had come to see me on Earth—the man who had been on Qallavarra and talked about soldiers having to be taught to read the time when they enlisted—had not only come to see me once. That single conversation had remained with me out of hundreds like it, with him and with other senior officers of the Resistance.

Could it be imagined that the fabulous organization which had secured for Earthmen their unique Acre within such a short time of defeat would overlook the chance offered by the Vorrish governor's decision to appoint an Earthly tutor for his heir? Of course it couldn't. They had worked on me unceasingly to fit me for the task that lay ahead. It was difficult, in that one could never be sure what the task actually was, but it would indisputably come.

I could call up now, singly or by dozens, the bull sessions I'd had with the Resistance workers in the precious minutes between completion of another stage in my briefing and my next appointment with my headstrong pupil. Often and often we had come back to the central enigma: how the Vorra had come by their powers, and from whom.

It couldn't be that—say—some isolated scout party from another star had landed and been overpowered, leaving the ship for the Vorra to copy. There was high-grade titanium in the ships, and the technological level of the Vorra was lower than would indicate such advanced metallurgy. Therefore they had stolen wholesale.

Perhaps they had never had more than their original haul

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of ships, wherever they came by them, or perhaps they had found empirically rule-of-thumb methods allowing them to duplicate the less advanced parts—the plain steel, the plain glass—and then cautiously salvaged what they could not make themselves, out of wrecks. It had been noted that after the terrific losses we inflicted at the Battle of Fourth Orbit the Vorra had been busy for two years among the wreckage. And knowing the Vorra no one could think it was for the sake of possible survivors.

Whatever had happened, we always decided, we were unlikely to find out before victory was won. For a psychological mechanism in the Vorra themselves had hidden the knowledge from us. I thought of what the old man had said just moments ago, about most people having forgotten. Presumably the Vorra could not bear to think that anyone else was superior to them in accomplishment. Having won the ships and weapons by some near-miraculous means, they then proceeded to convince themselves and try to convince us that they had built them.

No matter. Here was one of the builders, in his yellow spacesuit—so much like the suits the Vorra used—and his spacehelmet, and here I was, at last confronting him.

A kind of squeal from the ancient shaman brought me to the present again. He had demanded to know if I realized what I was seeing.

"Of course," I said, as casually as I could. "That is one of the people from whom you stole your spaceships and your weapons." I deliberately chose the nastiest word in Vorrish for "stole"—it was the kind of term you would use to describe taking coins from a blind beggar's cup.

The sergeant and the soldiers exchanged glances. Their

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expressions showed a curious mixture of anger—probably at my choice of words—and fear. Even the old man was taken aback.

"Son of an unpedigreed ox!" he hissed. "Dare you say that we stole what we have? We, the soldiers of Qallavarra, the toughest and bravest fighting men in the universe, won what we have in bitter battle, and our enemies we treated—thus!"

He thrust out a bony arm at the thing in the alcove. From his loose lips a trickle of drool began to creep. He seemed beside himself with fury. An inspiration came to me, and I watched him closely, hoping against hope that I would time my gesture right.

"We keep the memory green!" he proclaimed, his old voice rising to a shrill falsetto. "Against incredible odds we fought and won! Steal, you say! We bought what we have at a dearer cost than you Earthly weaklings would know how to pay—paid in blood and then wrought vengeance on our enemies. So should you be treated, upstart lickspittle—!"

I thought so.

Whatever had first set him so violently against me—I imagined it was my sudden new role as a kind of rival medicine man, and the rapid increase in my following—his rage had hit a peak which his frail old body was unequal to. He was choking with it now, and that gave me my chance.

To make the fury that fraction more unbearable still, I said, "I am patient, but your babblings are those of a fool, and I will not endure them any longer. Be still, descendant of a line of eaters of dung."

I was careful to use the human-to-animal forms of speech.

Glaring-eyed, the old man seemed for a moment to be trying to hurl himself towards me. From the corner of my eye I saw the sergeant and the two soldiers go pale with

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horror, and I realized I had only a moment to win my desperate gamble.

I threw up a commanding arm, pointing at the old man. "You can only hang up your dead enemies as trophies!" I said. "Now learn how we of Earth treat those who offend us beyond bearing!"

I was still expecting to be overpowered by the three soldiers, but my gesture distracted them. They glanced at the old man . . .

. . . and saw him die.

I knew it was a stroke, brought on by his extreme rage, but I wanted it to look like a miracle. Accordingly, cold-faced, I turned to the sergeant. I said, "See how the old man is, you!"

The sergeant moved to touch the fragile body. He felt for the angle of the jaw, where the Vorra most often took a pulse, and his face gradually assumed a look of pure fear.

"He's dead," he said in a gravelly voice.

"And you?" I said. "Do you wish to die, or having seen your grisly sideshow, am I now free to go?"

The soldiers fell back from me, making the same ritual pass in the air that I had earlier seen the sergeant make. I gave a harsh laugh to show what notice I took of such foolery.

To rub the lesson in still further, I added, "Outrank us at war, perhaps you can—we long ago outgrew such childish banditry. But the use of arcane lore is subtler and more reliable. Did you not hear what I did to Dwerri the former whipmaster?"

"But he has killed the shaman!" one of the soldiers cried. "We cannot let him go!"

I glared at him. I said, "You're stronger than the old fool

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in the chair. I think you could do me harm, indeed. But do it at your peril, knowing that you—and he, and he also”—I pointed at his companions—“will die at the seventh sunset thereafter. In very great pain, and speaking mad words.”

Insanity was a great stigma among the Vorra. Psychotherapy was another science they had never developed.

There was a long silence. In the end, I turned and walked out, and no one tried to stop me.

Nonetheless, it was not until I was almost inside the huge house itself that I dared to relax and think about the immense prestige that I had acquired for myself by “killing” the shaman. Once the word spread I could look forward to queues at my door, people requiring my mystical aid. The other cults would probably wither away.

That, though, was purely a bonus. What mattered was the regaining of my lost knowledge. I could even recall how it was lost. I had been compelled to hide it from myself.

It was on the very eve of my departure with the retinue of the retiring governor, Pwill, that the news was brought to me. A jealous secretary, who felt that no Earthman deserved to be put in such a position of trust, had told Pwill that his wife's new steward was actually a Trojan horse. The news was true, as it turned out. Heart sinking, I had to swallow one of the yellow oblivon pills, then spend a feverish night going over in my mind all the dangerous knowledge I had which could have spelt ruin for the Resistance if Pwill had learned of it. When the interrogators came for me I had a mind as clean as could have been hoped for—and it was as well, for they used credulin on me. No wonder I had recognized its molecular structure in Kramer's formula. I had agonizing first-hand experience of its effect.

Hence the people of the Acre must have resigned them-

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selves to the loss of all the work lavished on me. When I settled in as apparently no more than a serf, made no effort to exploit my position, they must have decided that I was useless to them. Thinking of the tentative plans in which I was to have participated, I sweated. So much wasted care and forethought!

Well, I was back in one piece. I had new prestige. I had exploitable blackmail holds over Pwill Himself and over Shavarri who was now coming to rule Pwill and over the heir as well. So—

And then I recollected the order which had come through Marijane.

The end result of acting as Olafsson had ordered was sure to be my death. Consequently Olafsson must be regarding me as expendable; he must have given up hope of my being more valuable in the future than I had been up till now. From the information available to him, he was probably right. But things had changed now my memory was back. And I dared not flout his order and go to the Acre to explain to him, and there was no one I could send with a message, and—

Appalled, I hunted for a solution, and there was none to be found.

## CHAPTER XV

WITH MUCH CEREMONY and to-do Pwill, Jr. returned from his trip overseas the day following, instead of the day after that as had been expected. I was present at the formal welcome in the main courtyard, scanning the young man's face

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for the telltale signs of coffee-lack. I was almost certain I saw them well advanced, and my heart sank. I had half-guessed that while undertaking a responsible and demanding job like the one from which he had come back Pwill, Jr. would use up his supply faster than normally, and I was also fairly sure that his early return was connected with this fact. I searched the face of his companion, Forrel, and saw that he kept his eyes on Pwill continually, his own expression drawn and worried.

He glanced up once and saw me leaning over the rail of a balcony overlooking the yard. But he did not betray his feelings.

I had no plan of action at all, except that I had decided not to stay around long enough for Pwill to have me executed if I could help it. I dared not leave before the actual crisis, though; I had nowhere to go except to the Acre, and if I contravened Olafsson's order to keep clear of the place for "at least some days" I might unknowingly foul up some other, more elaborate plan whose details I had not heard.

I was very unhappy about the situation.

It was only an hour or so after the return of the party from abroad that a timid servant boy came in search of me with a message from Forrel that I was to see him at once in his quarters. I did not need the boy to lead me there—I'd often gone to Forrel's room to deliver a batch of coffee beans—but I followed him nonetheless, my mind churning.

I found Forrel pacing the floor distractedly. I had half feared that Pwill, Jr. might be with him, but fortunately he was alone. At my entry, he whirled to face me with a look of relief. He dismissed the boy and saw for himself that the door of the room was tightly closed before speaking in a low voice.

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"Earthman, I need more coffee for him immediately. He had the last of his supply before setting out yesterday evening. He's traveled overnight and tiredness and lack of coffee are making him unbearable. I don't know how long I can go on pretending to Himself and the Over-lady that it's only the tiredness which is causing it."

So I had to play by ear. I found myself answering as blandly as though I had no cares in the universe, my face showing the right expression of worry.

"But I have none at the moment," I said. I checked in my mind the date of the next shipment from Earth for the people of the Acre. Good! It fitted with the lie I was going to tell. "You'll remember it was only just before you went away that I gave you two handfuls. A handful lasts him five or seven days, but never less than five. I have no more, and it will be three more days before the next shipment of goods from Earth is delivered in the Acre."

His face paled to the typical Vorrish sallow brick color of dismay. He said, "But you must get some!"

"At the usual time, yes, certainly," I promised. "But not immediately. There isn't any to be had."

He breathed out hard, looking at nowhere. I thought I heard him mutter some kind of prayer, but failed to catch the words. He began to pace the floor again. After taking only half a dozen steps he rounded on me.

"You must get some!" he said. "And today!"

"What would you have me do?" I countered. "Rob the private coffer of the city chief of police, perhaps? I tell you there is none left here or in the Acre, and the next supply comes in three days' time."

"You—fool!" he hissed.

I drew myself up. I said, "If you wanted extra, you might

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simply have asked me. I presumed that you would continue rationing the beans out at the usual rate. In which case there would be no problem, would there?"

"You dare to speak to me like that?" He drew back his hand as though to slap me across the face with his uniform glove.

I did not move. I merely stared at him.

He thought better of hitting me and went back to pacing the floor, groaning. "This is what comes of trusting one of you," he said bitterly. "You smooth-tongued schemers from Earth! I've a mind to have you whipped!"

I said nothing. I could read what was going on in his mind by his changing expression. He was thinking to himself: "Three mortal days! What are my chances of keeping up the pretense so long? Yet if I press this Earthman further who knows what he may not do? He says there will be more in three days. I can't tell whether to believe him or not. Perhaps he has a scheme of his own to ruin me and Pwill, but he would never confess it. I cannot tell if he is deliberately withholding coffee to glory in his power over us, or if he is telling the truth, which is quite possible because after all at the usual rate of consumption the last batch he gave me would have lasted until the new supply arrived."

Finally he drew a deep breath and pointed at the door.

"Out!" he said in a choking tone.

I obeyed.

So Pwill Heir Apparent was already in such a state that Forrel doubted his ability to keep the secret any longer! That made things both better and worse from my point of view. Better, for I now knew the crisis was immediate, not vaguely in the future; worse, for I had not yet made a co-

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herent plan. I was still working on the problem that afternoon when Shavarri sent for me.

By now we were on almost a friendly footing. I was sure she was shrewd enough to realize that Earthmen would never have supplied her with the love potion unless it was in some way to their advantage as well as hers, but the idea did not disturb her, and I had shown myself loyal as the Vorra counted loyalty. The secret she had paid me to keep was still a secret.

She reclined in a red gown on her usual stack of cushions, a low table laden with sweetmeats beside her, listening to a girl playing the Vorrish harp. When I was announced, she sent the musician away and told me to sit down. I did so, some intuition making the back of my neck prickle.

For a while she spoke idly to me about current gossip, and that was a further warning. Usually she was too careful of giving away the secret of her hold over Pwill Himself to call me except on urgent business. I cast around for an explanation of his new behavior.

Then I got it.

She rolled lazily on her side and took one of the sweetmeats from the bowl on the table before her. With a gesture she indicated that I should take one too.

"They are good," she said. "They were brought back from the overseas plantation where the heir has lately been. You will probably not have tasted them before."

I made a formal bow of acknowledgment, but did not move to help myself. Without trying to hide my smile, I said, "Perhaps, Under-lady, I should say that in any case the potion you have does not work on an Earthman as it does on the Vorra."

She froze with the sweetmeat on the tips of her fingers,

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ready to thrust between her lips. For a moment a look of absolute animal rage transformed her face; then it was gone, and she was mistress of herself again.

She gave a rueful laugh and hurled the sweetmeat at the wall, where it burst open and clung stickily, letting a trail of its syrupy juice crawl snail-slow towards the floor.

"You Earthmen!" she said. "To outwit you it would take magic or genius, and I have neither."

"You are flattering, Under-lady," I said. My tone made it quite clear that we were not taken in by flattery either.

"I'll be direct, then," she said. As I'd already decided, she was no fool. "You have my deadliest secret. I cannot put myself further at your mercy. Those sweetmeats were brought to me by Forrel."

Now that *was* interesting. I kept my face masklike, and merely bowed. What was she going to do with the information she had?

"Sol" she went on. "As you're certainly aware, the potion which you supplied to me sometimes greases the passage of secrets. I have known for a long time about the state of the heir, and what you have to do with it. I could at any time have whispered a word in the ear of Pwill Himself—and have not done so. Are you grateful?"

"We are on equal terms then, Under-lady," I said. "We are bound by a pact of mutual—let us not say betrayal, but—confidence?"

She smiled. She had obviously been looking forward to this opportunity.

"As you say," she agreed. "Not long since, Forrel informed me—without really intending to—that you have cut off the supply of coffee from the heir. Tell me why!"

"Forrel has an active imagination," I said. "Moreover, it

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was his responsibility to ration out the coffee, and he has allowed the last batch to be exhausted three days early. If I had coffee to hand, I would give it. I have none."

"Whether I believe you or Forrel makes little difference," she said after a while. "In three days the heir will be in such a condition that nothing can disguise it. What would you seek to gain from that if it were deliberate? Let me see."

For a few minutes she sat lost in thought, while I watched her face intently. At last she stirred and sighed.

"I cannot see how it would advantage you," she said. "It seems certain that Pwill Himself would take revenge on the people of the Acre, and on you. Accordingly, I believe what you say. If I did not, I would whisper the word in the ear of Pwill Himself, and so gain yet more renown and respect. To be first with news is a great thing, is it not?"

"But since you do believe me—?" I suggested. She gave a neighing laugh.

"Ah, for the first time I see you concerned about yourself, Earthman! I had almost come to think of you as an impassive puppet, without feelings or fears. I like you better as you now reveal yourself. What I will do is simple. This potion I have permits me to make Pwill believe whatever I choose to tell him. I shall tell him that it was Forrel who has been the go-between, who has been securing the secret hoards of coffee and deceiving him and my superior sister-wife Llaq. I shall tell him that you had nothing to do with it, and acted in all respect honestly. If I have time to tell him this several times over before the state of the heir is common knowledge, no matter what contrary evidence is brought by Forrel Pwill will refuse to credit it. Moreover, I will advise him against an attack on the Acre. How does that please you, my unasked-for ally?"

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A cunning little piece, this Shavarri! And indeed what she said pleased me very well—all except the last part, about the attack on the Acre. If I had guessed at Olafsson's plan correctly, the whole aim was to make Pwill march against the Acre and thus bring the fury of the other houses down on his head. But I could not say so. Best be content with the insurance of my own safety, and then find some other way of precipitating the civil war. I rose and bowed deeply.

"The Under-lady is as gracious as she is intelligent," I said. She stared at me for a moment, and then laughed.

"You Earthmen are so stranger!" she said. "Never did I expect to hear any man compliment me for intelligence. At most a clever woman might hope for a word of praise for some single notion of hers, but not to be called intelligent. Earthman, I believe I could come to like you. Perhaps one day, when we are no longer bound to each other by mutual fear of betrayal—oh, we may be honest about it!—perhaps then we might learn to like one another."

I suddenly had a pang of ridiculous guilt. I covered it by bowing again and backing towards the door.

That night I had no trouble going to sleep. The respite was welcome. I knew I could trust Shavarri to do as she had promised. As to securing the attack on the Acre—if that was what was wanted by Olafsson—it had already occurred to me that even if Shavarri convinced Pwill not to undertake it, the Over-lady Llaq would be so desperate at the condition her son was in that she might easily be persuaded to act instead, probably with no more work on my part than dropping a few hints where I knew they would reach her.

I must have been asleep for some hours, dreamlessly content, when there came a battering on the door of my room. Whoever it was wanted an answer and quickly. Thinking

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still muddled by sleep, I got off my night couch and went to the door.

The moment I saw who was there, all my plans evaporated, and my mind cleared as though cold water had been thrown in my face. The visitor was Pwill Heir Apparent, his face contorted with sickness and fury, and in his hand he held a naked sword.

### CHAPTER XVI

I REMEMBERED AFTERWARDS saying to myself—because I could not yet think of anything else—how I hoped that I would never again see anyone in such a state. His eyes seemed to have swollen and protruded from their sockets so that the whites showed all round the iris. His whole face was glistening with moisture: sweat on his forehead, tears on his cheeks, saliva on his chin. He apparently could not close his mouth to swallow properly, for he kept gulping air and his tongue came up against his palate after every gulp so I could see its yellowish underside. He was wearing leisure clothes of Earth-made synthetic fabric, and the gaudy shimmering material was dark with wet and clung to his body.

Without a word he drove me back into the room, sword in hand. The tip of the blade wavered continually, but with tremendous effort he always forced it back towards me. When he was across the threshold he fumbled behind him for the catch of the door and drew it shut and locked it.

"Now," he said in a horrible choked voice, "give me coffee."

"I have none," I said curtly. "I told Forrel so."

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"Liar!" he spat. "Forrel said you refused to give him any. Give me coffee!"

"Forrel is the liar, not I," I snapped. "He told you that to save his own cowardly hide. He was at fault for not eking out the supply, but giving you too much at a time. If he had not been weak, there would have been coffee for you next time you asked."

"Give me coffee!" Pwill, Jr. replied with maniac intensity.

My heart sank. It was certainly true that Forrel had lied to cover his own mistake. But this man was too far gone to listen. He was one huge hungry need, and he was no longer rational.

But I could not pity him. I thought of Kramer's wife dead of malnutrition, and his son's poor eyesight for the same reason, and I thought of all the people of Earth who had died, or suffered hunger, or fallen needlessly sick because of what the Vorra had done to them without cause.

The sword shook wildly before my face. I said in the iciest voice I knew, "So you, heir to the House of Pwill, come sniveling like a beggar to an Earthman! What a sight for your father to see!"

Even that did not break through his blind greed. He did seem to realize at last that it was no good asking me again, though. He turned towards my food cupboard and snatched at the lock; when it did not yield he smashed it with his sword, sobbing.

His staring eyes searched the shelves and his nostrils distended as he sniffed like a beast for the scent of coffee. He certainly did not find it; I had never kept a batch of the beans in my food cupboard, preferring to hide them in my mattress for greater safety.

The truth finally penetrated. He let the sword fall to the

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floor with a ring of metal. His head slumped forward. For a moment I was deceived; I thought he was going to collapse, weeping perhaps.

But as I made to step forward to him, he jerked as though galvanised. One hand went up to the shelf nearest him and closed on a heavy pottery jar of salt. With more than animal violence he spun round and hurled it straight at my head.

I ducked, but too slowly. I felt a sharp dizzying knock on the crown of my head which prevented me from recovering my balance, and then he was on me, kicking, biting, clawing, and all the time making noises between a sob and a scream. I knew there was no one to hear him; I was alone in the corridor here, with only storerooms on either side of my own room. It was my life at stake.

That simple fact was what made me react so swiftly. It had been almost the first part of my long, long training back on Earth which taught me how to kill efficiently with my bare hands. No one could count how many careless Vorrish soldiers had lost their lives through thinking that an unarmed Earthman was not dangerous.

I ignored his futile battering at my head and shoulders, his mad attempts to close his hands on my throat. I freed my right arm from where it was trapped between his body and mine, bent my hand back to the right angle which it had taken months of practice to achieve—without that practice, what I had in mind would have dislocated my own wrist—and rammed it upwards against his chin.

His head snapped back in two stages, the first bloody as his teeth were clamped shut on his lolling tongue, the second fatal. There was a sound like a dry stick snapping inside a roll of cloth.

I pushed his weight off me and got awkwardly to my feet,

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staring down at him as it came home to me what I had done. All Shavarri's helpful lies, all her scheming to protect me as I had protected her, would not serve me now. Here on the floor of my own room the heir of the House of Pwill lay with a broken neck.

I left him and went to the top shelf of the food cupboard, fumbling with shaking fingers behind the ranked pots of Earthly preserves until I found the tiny precious flask of brandy I had saved ever since my arrival. I uncapped it and drank it down at a gulp. Its warming fire helped me a little. I threw the empty flask aside and turned back to the corpse.

Dozens of possibilities fled through my mind. If this was not to prove the ultimate disaster for me, I had to contrive some really clever scheme to cover what had happened. I thought of trying to smuggle the body outside into the great yard, and arranging it so that it would seem to have fallen from one of the balconies. I had to dismiss the idea at once. There was no chance at all of going undiscovered by the night watch.

Surely it would be no use to hide the body and pretend nothing had happened . . . ?

I checked myself. I felt a kind of hard smile move across my face. *Was that so useless?* Suppose that I could hide the body completely. Suppose also—this I did not know, but I could hope for it—suppose Shavarri had already had the chance to whisper her hypnotizing instructions to Pwill Himself. She would assure Pwill that I was innocent and had obeyed his orders; she would tell him that Forrel was to blame.

Then, when the heir was found to have vanished, I could drop hints—or at the worst, could tell Pwill boldly to his face—that he had probably gone to the Acre in search of

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coffee, and that perhaps he had been kidnaped. Would not Pwill then call out his soldiers, whatever Shavarri had said about attacking the Acre, and march to hunt for him?

Again, I could not be certain. But there was always Llaq, even if Pwill Himself did not respond as planned.

Then I would do that. Now: where to hide the body? I considered the fact that one of the main sewers serving the house ran beneath a nearby corridor; you could hear it plashing under a heavy wooden manholecover a few moments' walk from this room. It would not be enough simply to tip the body into the stream. By morning it would be miles away, true—but it would be on the estate, and anyone chancing to go to the river into which the sewer flowed would be sure to recognize the dead man. I would have to find an alternative—yet the sewer seemed the obvious place.

What I had to do, I decided, was to get the body into the tunnel and then instead of letting it drift with the stream, anchor it somehow so that the Vorrish counterpart of rats could work on it. They certainly would. Every day dozens of them were found in the storerooms here and killed.

I would have to move quickly. I shoved the body uncereemoniously out of sight under my nightcouch, just in case someone by a million-to-one chance happened to have heard the cries and came to investigate. Then I hurried down the almost pitch-dark corridor.

At the intersection nearest to the manhole I had in mind, a torch was guttering in a sconce. It was one of the jobs of the nightwatch to change the dying torches for fresh ones when they passed. I took one of the spares from the rack beside the sconce, lit it, and heaved up the manhole cover.

The fetid air beneath almost made me giddy for a moment. Then a fresh draught began to blow, tugging at the

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flame of my torch, and I could proceed. There was probably a little ladder under the opening, I reasoned, and I knew there was a slimy walkway alongside the stream. I craned down to look.

Yes, that would do well. For there were several iron hooks in the wall not far away, whose purpose I could not guess but which would suit me perfectly, and at the intrusion of my torch I heard many rats scurrying to escape the light.

I hurried back to my room.

I could not remember ever having made such an agonizingly slow trip in my life as that short hobbling walk with the dead weight across my shoulders. I had found a length of rope in one of the storerooms near my quarters, and had lashed the feet together and the arms to the sides to prevent them swinging, but nonetheless the burden was a dreadful one. Once I almost let it fall into the stream, which would have been fatal to my scheme, but by my fingertips I clung to it and after an age managed to get it down the hole and on to the slimy flagstones beside the water.

There I left him, tied up on four of the iron hooks, for the rats to deal with. I spent no time down there that I could spare, for the stink was choking me, and before dawn I had to clean up myself and my room and hide all the traces of the fight we had had.

I was wearily scrambling back out of the manhole when I heard the footsteps—a slow measured pace, the steps of a man on a routine patrol.

Horried, I glanced at the torch guttering in its sconce nearby. How had I overlooked the obvious? The torch was low now, and that meant that the patrol would soon come by to renew it, and here he was at hand!

I had no time to slam shut the cover of the manhole. In

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any case, the noise would have alerted the oncoming man, the last thing I wanted. My mind raced.

"Hey! Soldier!" I called out. The footsteps halted for one startled moment, then came on at a run.

He rounded the corner of the corridor and stopped short again on seeing me.

"I heard noises!" I said curtly. "I came out and found this cover open. Could it be a thief trying to break into the store-rooms, do you think?"

Clearly this young soldier was not very bright. He said, "Uh—I guess! Is there anyone down there?"

"I've been trying to see," I said. "Maybe your eyes are sharper than mine. Here, take a look!"

I gestured to him to come forward. Unsuspecting, he did so.

This I regretted more than the death of Pwill Heir Apparent, I found. But it had to be done. I chopped down on the back of his neck where his shaven nape showed between the edge of his helmet and his uniform tunic, and he died without a sound. He fell forward with a splash, half in, half out of the stream in the sewer. I heard more scuttering, and saw some dark shapes move out of shadow, eyes gleaming in the dim light of the torch.

I shut the cover. I had to open it again a moment later, and gave the final insult to his corpse by vomiting all over it.

I did not expect to sleep again when, after clearing up all the traces, I wearily crept back on to my night couch. But I had to pretend that everything was as usual.

To my surprise I did fall asleep again for the last hour or so before the dawn.

I dreamed of being eaten by rats.

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## CHAPTER XVII

IT BECAME CLEAR when I got up the next morning at my normal time and started about my day's affairs that there must have been an almighty row in the family's quarters the night before. All the retainers wore the hangdog expression which was the usual sign of Pwill having lost his temper. No one spoke to me if he could avoid it. I'd grown used to that. But today the Vorrish staff took pains to make the fact obvious.

I was scared stiff. I hadn't been so frightened since the distant night I'd spent trying to forget the dangerous knowledge which I risked revealing to the oversuspicious Pwill, just before being brought here from Earth. Perhaps not even then, because this time the danger was far more personal than it had been then. No matter how much is at stake, a man finds it easier to fear for his own safety than for the safety of others.

It was three hours before the expected summons came for me to attend on Pwill Himself in his morning reception chamber. I steeled myself and went with the messenger as calmly as I could. I tried not to think how slender was the thread on which my life now hung.

The morning reception chamber was not very large, and it was usually crowded when Pwill was holding his first after-breakfast conferences with his senior staff. Today it was almost empty except for Pwill, two of his body servants, a young officer I recognized as having been a friend of Forrel's, and—

For a long moment I did not recognize the creature on the floor in front of the high-backed chair where Pwill sat.

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It seemed more animal than human. It crouched on the floor, its legs and arms manacled, and tried to dab at the huge patches of whip-raw flesh on its shoulders. Then the swollen face turned blindly up towards me, and I saw it was Forrel.

I could not speak. Somehow I managed to bow to Pwill and wait for him to let me out of my torment by indicating whether or not Shavarri had convinced him of Forrel's guilt, my innocence.

I was so grateful that Llaq was not here.

At first when I came in, Pwill looked grimmer than a thundercloud, and I expected him to command his servants immediately to treat me as Forrel had been treated. But after a moment a curious puzzled expression came to his face, and I saw him shake his head as though to clear it.

That smacked of Shavarri's work. I began to relax.

"Shaw!" Pwill said at length. "Has your devilish Earthly poison cost me my heir?"

"I—do not understand," I parried.

Look at that miserable wreck," Pwill growled, and waved at Forrel. "For these months past he has deceived me. He has kept coffee for my son, and supplied it to him when he was asked. Under the whip he confessed the truth. He further said that he had it through you!"

I felt my guts tighten. Pwill gave me another puzzled glance and went on, "I know—somehow I know—that this is a lie invented to save his skin. Well, it was unsuccessful. He had no more coffee to give my son, to keep up the poisoning, and now my son has disappeared. This pitiful traitor swears that he set out to find himself coffee. He would have come to you to demand it! Did he come?"

I wagered my all on half the truth. I said, "He would not have come asking me. Forrel came to me yesterday to beg

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coffee. I told him what was true—that I had none and would get none for him. Doubtless he reported this to Pwill Heir Apparent."

Abruptly Pwill got up from his chair and began to pace the floor. Not looking at me, he said, "Where then might he have gone? One place, and one place only."

I stole the chance to glance down at Forrel, fearful that he might deny what I had told Pwill. But he was lost in some delirium of his own. Probably he had not heard me speak.

"Is there coffee in the Acre?" Pwill demanded.

"There has been," I said. "Whether there is now, I cannot say."

"He would have gone to the Acre," Pwill muttered. "He must have gone there. I must go after him. Shaw! Leave us."

Surprised that the interview had been so short, I turned to obey. As I put my hand out to open the door, Pwill called me back.

"Remember this!" he said. "If I find you have been lying—no, but no matter."

I watched him struggle with himself, in the same pitiful way that a man given a posthypnotic command will struggle to find a sensible reason for committing the absurd act he cannot avoid. Once more he told me to go; once more he called me back.

"Shaw! If they say—at the Acre—if they say my son is not there, I will send for you to go into the Acre and find him."

He was a broken man. I bowed, and this time I did go out.

But when Pwill had gone and was safely on the road to the city, four brawny soldiers came in search of me to take me to Llaq, and I knew that she was not going to be so easily

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deluded. I was marched to her luxurious apartments in the east wing of the seraglio, full of quiet maidservants and little shrill-voiced dwarfs who climbed on the curtains and swung there, screaming like monkeys.

The soldiers placed me in front of the high cushioned divan where Llaq held court, and she fixed me with burning eyes. She had been weeping.

"You slimy creeping animal, she said chokingly. "You two-faced subtle cheat, you schemer and poisoner—what have you done to my son?"

"I have done nothing to your Over-ladyship's son," I said as coldly as I could. "I have learned today that his false friend Forrel—"

She cut me short. "I am not to be fooled by such empty stories!" she snapped. "Did Forrel go into the Acre to buy coffee? Did he? Or did you? Coffee is of Earth and you are of Earth and you are here and you have been often to the Acre. Soldier! Hit him!"

I sensed rather than saw which fist of which of my guards was coming up clubbed behind my head. I rode with the blow so that it scarcely hurt.

"Carefull!" I said to the man who had done it. "Remember what became of Dwerril!"

Llaq snarled at me. "What Earthly poison you used on the former whipmaster I do not know and do not care. I'm not impressed by your evil trickery, your drugs and potions and the rest. What have you done to my son?"

"Nothing," I said. "It is my guess that when the traitor Forrel ran out of his secret hoard of coffee your Over-ladyship's son went down to the Acre in search of more. Unless Forrel told him where he obtained his supply, he will have been met with a refusal. Your Over-ladyship cannot have

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forgotten that I spent much time and money in the Acre insuring that no one reputable would provide coffee for your son."

She was beginning to doubt. I piled on top of what I had already said the same half-truth I had already told Pwill—about Forrel coming to me yesterday and being turned away empty-handed.

"We will see," she said at last. "Soldiers, take him and confine him to his quarters until Himself returns from the town. And further! Take my order to the duty officer of the guard and tell him to mobilize four companies with heavy weapons. If we have to, we shall take the houses of the Acre apart, stone by stone, to find my son!"

I was taken back to the morning reception chamber after Pwill returned, and was brought into the presence of something I had never expected to see on Qallavarra—a public argument between Pwill and Llaq. It was something the servants and soldiers present did not like; they shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, wishing they could go out of the room but unwilling to do so without an order.

Listening to the vicious insults being hurled, I pieced together what had happened. Pwill had been to see Olafsson, and the judge had refused to state one way or the other whether his son was in the Acre. Llaq would have commanded her men to hang Olafsson up by his ears until he did answer; Pwill had not done so, but had come home, and that was what Llaq was so angry about.

"Are we to let these defeated worms give us orders?" she screeched. "Are we to let them drug and poison the heir of a great house? That sore has festered long enough in the city—we must turn it out to find my son!"

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Pwill shook his head heavily.

"What has become of us?" Llaq wailed. "You will not move a finger to avenge your heir! It was an Earthly drug bought of Earthly criminals that laid him low. How are men going to speak of the honor of this house if you will not avenge the filthy deed? You have said only 'no' to my importuning—if you had the seed of manhood in you, you'd have called up the four companies I have already alerted and marched straight to the Acre to demand satisfaction! Have you a single reason not to do so?"

I knew he had not. He only had the warning against it which Shavarri had planted in his mind while he was under the influence of credulin.

"Then we must march at dawn against the beasts in the Acre!" Llaq cried. "We must spit this crawling Earthman of ours on steel spikes and show what will become of his fellows if they defy us any longer!"

I knew she meant it. It was time for me to speak up. I said in the boldest voice I could muster, "It was on the invitation of the Over-lady that I came to Qallavarra!"

She froze for an instant. Then she came across the room to stand in front of me, eyes full of hate. She said, "I will make you sorry for that word before you die."

I said nothing. She rounded on her husband again.

"Well?" she demanded. "Shall your men march at dawn against the Acre? Or are the Vorra from now on forever to despise the name of this house?"

Pwill squared his shoulders. He said, "We will go through the Acre till we find my heir—and if we do not find him, we will leave not one of the Earthly grubs alive."

That night I lay in darkness with a guard at my door and

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another at the end of the corridor. I was almost certain to die tomorrow. Somehow I had mastered my fear; it seemed that death was just an event. Why I was now so calm I could not decide. But I was calm enough to sleep.

Once again I was awakened, this time by a thud in the passageway outside. I came to myself all in one piece, ears cocked. After the thud, I heard a dragging sound, and then the noise of the key turning in the padlock which had been fixed on the orders of Llaq to insure against my getting out and overpowering the guards. It seemed that even she now had a great respect for my abilities.

The door opened as I watched, and the narrow beam of an Earthly flashlight showed in the gap. A dim, familiar voice spoke my name. I sat bolt upright on the night couch, striking a light for my bedside torch.

"Marijanel!" I said in a disbelieving whisper.

The rising flame of the torch showed her very pale, and a little unsteady on her feet. She closed her eyes against the sudden light, swaying. I hurried to help her, bringing her to a chair. A thick stench had come into the room with her. Looking down, I saw that her pants were wet to the knees with thin mud.

She opened her eyes and gave a wan cynical smile.

"So that's what you did with him," she said. A shudder went through her thin body.

Instantly I understood. "You—came up through the sewer?" I said.

"Of course. We spied out the land last time we were up here. *Is* it Pwill Jr. there—all eaten away?"

I nodded. "You aren't alone!" I said, to change the subject. "Is Ken with you?"

"Ken and Gustav." She pulled herself to her feet as though

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remembering where she was. "They got rid of the other guard—I wasn't expecting this one. But he wasn't expecting me, either. Is it going all right?"

"Pwill is marching on the Acre at dawn tomorrow with four companies of men and heavy weapons," I answered. I wondered how I knew that that was what she wanted me to say.

"Good. The House of Shugurra will meet him on the road with six companies. Come on, we must get you out of here or your life won't be worth a penny."

She caught my hand. Over the prostrate body of the guard in the corridor I followed her towards my way of escape.

### CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE CORRIDOR, poised watching and listening for signs of interference, I found Marijane's brother Ken and with him Gustav. To my surprise they each shook my hand warmly, grinning in the light of Marijane's flashlamp. But they said nothing—merely beckoned me to the open cover of the manhole down which I had hidden Pwill Jr. and the interfering guard.

It was not until the cover had been lowered behind us and we stood in nightmarish darkness except for the thin beam of the flashlamp, listening to the scuttering of the rats, that Ken Lee said, "You'd have been done for if anyone opened that hatch, Gareth."

I felt pleased at his using my first name. But I didn't get the point of his remark, and said so.

"What happened? My guess is that you had to take a drink

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to brace yourself—and then you threw up from the stink here.”

“More or less,” I confirmed. “But—I still don’t get you.”

“You can still, even now, smell the vomit,” Ken said. “Did the Vorra ever drink brandy? If someone had opened the hatch and found the body, and that too—a soldier who had served on Earth and recognized the smell—but skip that. Time’s wasting. Let’s go.”

We formed a line on the slippery walkway beside the sewer and followed the flashlamp into darkness. What Ken had just pointed out had not occurred to me. I was suddenly shaking with retroactive fear at the narrowness of my escape.

Yet somehow I’d faced the virtual certainty of being spiked to death on steel barbs earlier, and I’d been so undisturbed I’d managed to fall asleep normally.

How come?

And then I understood.

“Is it safe to talk?” I whispered.

“Wait till we’re a little further on,” Marijane answered equally softly. I did so, but it was hard. My mind was churning.

We came to the point at which the walkway ended, and we had to get down into the stream itself. We came out of a tunnel under a dark, clouded sky, moving with absolute silence. We followed a twisting pathway across fields where nothing moved except ourselves. We came to the edge of the highway through an unmended gap in a cattle fence.

Someone was waiting in the shadow of a shrubby bush, and rose like a ghost in front of us.

“Ken?” he said under his breath.

“George,” Ken answered. “We got him away safely. Let’s roll as quickly as we can. Where’s the car?”

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I could barely see George. He was blacker than the night itself. In fact, when there was a muttered introduction and I heard him whisper something about good work on my part, I had difficulty seeing the dark hand he put out to shake mine. No wonder he had been able to hide on the edge of the highway in safety.

"Car?" I said, remembering.

There was a chuckle from all my companions. George answered for them all.

"Courtesy of the police department in the city," he said. "Though they don't know it yet. She's down the road a piece, between a couple of clumps of tubers. Nobody came by to see her."

We climbed into the car, our muddy feet and legs unpleasantly sticky and cold, and sank back into the deep upholstery. From somewhere about him George produced something I hadn't ever expected to see on Qallavarra—a pack of Earthly cigarettes.

"Have one of these to celebrate," he suggested.

The others refused, never having got the habit presumably, but I took one. I knew in a confused way that I deserved the treat. But I still wasn't sure what I'd done.

I said, as George took the car humming on to the highway, "When was I—uh—instructed?"

"In Olafsson's office, of course," Marijane answered, as naturally as though she'd been expecting the question. "We all owe you an apology, by the way. We didn't know about you. Judge Olafsson explained the situation to us—because Ken had got so angry he was talking too much—and to keep the news from spreading further than necessary they ordered us to take care of your escape when it fell due. Judge Olafsson said he thought you must have had to take oblivion just

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before leaving Earth. Do you know if that's what happened?"

"That's right," I confirmed. "I got my memory back just the other day. The same day I last saw you, in fact."

"The judge said it was like a miracle when you were brought to his office the first time," Ken said. "Everyone had given up hope of you being any use ever again—you'd been in the House of Pwill for seven solid months and never tried to get in touch with anyone in the Acre. But when you did arrive he felt he dared not miss the chance to make some use of you. So he had Sessions organize a special emergency briefing for you. Did you notice nothing at all?"

"I remember feeling slightly dizzy for a moment," I said. I also remembered I had taken a dislike to Sessions, the man with the hard eyes. I apologized to him mentally. To have given me all the instructions which had led up to my recent work in the House of Pwill and left no conscious memory with me at all—that was really impressive technique. "That was the second time I called?"

"Yes."

I shook my head wonderingly. Glancing at the roadway ahead, I saw that we were already approaching the outskirts of the city. George reached up to the roof of the car and turned a little switch there. He saw me looking at him and grinned.

"Sign up there says POLICE," he said. "It's insurance. If I have to, I can sound a siren too, that sounds like a banshee in torment."

"Something else that's been puzzling me," I went on after a pause. I turned to Marijane and Ken. "I take it that Cosra was the other half of the scheme, over in the House of Shugurra? Is that right?"

"That's right," Marijane answered. "As I understand it,

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the whole climax of the affair has always been what will now take place tomorrow morning—that's to say, a fierce and bloody new civil war between the great houses. In the old days, as you probably know, the great houses sometimes attempted to seize cities of free people and add them to their domains. This kind of rivalry ceased when the Vorra got their spaceships—"

I made a note to mention the extraordinary episode in the shaman's house, but let her continue.

"But some of the bitterest wars were fought when two or three small houses allied against an arrogant rival who had tried to swallow up a city which was nominally independent. It was clear that the Acre might now be made to seem such a prize that the same situation could occur again."

"Someone—I don't know who, but probably Kramer—got word of what you were doing at Pwill to Cosra at Shugurra. Shugurra Himself is well under Cosra's thumb now." It was Gustav who had picked up the story. "Shugurra is only just across the valley. News of the expedition Pwill plans for tomorrow has already reached him—but not the reason for it. He's been allowed to think—and so have the other houses—that Pwill means to shift the entire population of the Acre to his own estate. He'll stop at nothing to prevent this."

"But," Marijane cut in, her voice shaking with glee, "it doesn't end there! According to what the other houses have been told, there was a conspiracy between Pwill and Shugurra to seize the Acre for themselves, which has only been held up by a petty quarrel, and ten of the other houses have heard that Pwill and Shugurra are mobilizing. As far as they know, this is for a joint coup. We'll have to wait and see what happens. But what's likely is that both sides will find themselves attacked from the rear."

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"Qallavarra will never be the same again," Ken said in a somber voice. "I feel damned sorry for these poor silly fools."

"Sorry for them?" I echoed incredulously. "After what they did to us? And not only to us, but to—"

I was on the point of telling how I had seen that mummy in a yellow spacesuit in the shaman's house, when George's soft voice interrupted me.

"End of the ride coming up," he said. "Get ready to jump out when I tell you. Marijane, got that bomb?"

"Coming up," Marijane said. She fumbled in the dark recess behind the rear seat where hand luggage was normally stowed, and produced something small but heavy in a shiny metal case. She handed this to George.

One hand steering, the other turning a knob on the metal case which clicked as it rotated, George swung the car down a narrow street.

"Acre dead ahead," he called gaily. "Jump on the turn!"

Gustav, nearest the door, opened it and held it. The car swung; he rolled forward and out, turning head over heels on the muddy pavement. I followed unquestioning. I'd learnt how to jump from a moving vehicle without hurting myself many, many years ago. The others came after me. As I got to my feet and looked along the street after the car I saw that George also had flung himself clear, and that the twin blazing beams of the car's lights were full on a tall, official-looking building in its path. I saw that there was a slight slope down towards this building, so that the car was gathering speed.

Out of darkness I heard Marijane say softly, "It's one of the main city tax offices, you see."

The car hit. One of its lights went out, the other slanted sharply upwards at the face of the building. There was the

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beginning of a noise like a man crunching into a crisp slice of toast. It had happened so quickly that the rear of the car still seemed to be moving forward.

Then the car vanished in a blinding white glare, and the entire city seemed to rock with the blast.

"Into the Acre," Ken said beside me, catching at my arm, and like rabbits diving for cover we sought the safety of the forbidden zone. I glanced back once, and saw that huge tongues of yellow and orange flame had leaped up from the wreck of the car, and that the facade of the building had split and collapsed to reveal rooms beyond with their floors and ceilings tilted at drunken angles. A few pieces of furniture, tipped towards the open side of the rooms, had started to burn in the hot updraft from the blaze on the ground.

"What you might call combining business with pleasure," a voice said from deep shadow. It was George; I had not seen him until his white teeth flashed in a grin.

I had never seen the Acre so alive when I visited it by day as it was now in the middle of the night when the rest of the city was asleep. Rare chinks of light showed between fast-closed shutters; if you strained your ears you caught the hum of machinery and talk also, as though a thousand people were whispering behind the nearest walls. In every street we walked along at least someone besides us was walking, the same way or another way, hurrying on an urgent errand. You could have picked the excitement off the air and squeezed it in your hand like solid clay.

Stupidly, I had been expecting to be taken to Olafsson's office at the Central Bank. Instead, my companions led me down a street I had not visited before. Between two dead-seeming buildings we halted. One of us—I could not tell in

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the darkness whether it was Ken or Gustav—moved forward and went on soft feet down a flight of steps to a basement door. There was a knock and a sound of voices. The door opened. I felt myself urged forward.

Beyond the door was a low ceilinged room, with many pillars improvised out of bricks to hold up a sagging ceiling. Here men, women and children—to my startled gaze there seemed to be hundreds of them—milled about between tables and desks. There were computers here. There was electric lighting. There was a group of six radio transceivers ranged against the far wall and messages were coming and going.

And there was a Vorrish subspace transmitter, too—for talking to ships between the stars.

I was so distracted by the sight of this unexpected operations room that I had to be prodded back to awareness by an elbow in my ribs. I found myself facing Olafsson, who was beaming and holding out his hand.

"Congratulations," he said. "You've short-circuited years of work for us. The poor silly Vorra are just about to start cutting their own throats."

Poor, silly? Not in my book! I thought of the way the face of that mummy in the shaman's house had kept, even in death, a noble expression.

But before I could speak there was already another claim on Olafsson's attention. I found my way to a corner where I would not block anybody's movements, and sank down on a chair to think of this extraordinary paradox.

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### CHAPTER XIX

I MUST HAVE dozed off in my chair. Somehow this brightly lit room and all this co-ordinated activity seemed to have little to do with me. It was so far from the scheming and the violence which had involved me at the House of Pwill. I even dreamed for a little. I dreamed that I was back in the shaman's house, confronting the mummy in the space-suit, and there was no one else present. I begged the mummy to speak to me, to tell me about itself, and I thought I saw the dried skin of the face move, cracking and letting fall a fine rain of dust.

But although its face writhed, it was not to speak. It was to sneer at me.

I was awakened by a tug on my arm, and opened my eyes to see a little girl of ten or twelve offering me a big mug of steaming soup and a hunk of heavy brown bread. I took it and thanked her, and she went off without a word.

Looking around, I found that the night's hectic activity had run down to an idling tempo. People—fewer than there had been when I arrived—were standing about, chatting and sipping mugs of soup like mine. Only one of the radio transceivers was in operation, although the operator seated at the subspace transmitter was droning a long message into his microphone, and I saw him finish one page of it and lift another from a very full basket beside him.

There was no sign of Marijane, nor of Ken or Gustav.

I had finished my soup, and was wiping round the inside of the mug with the last crust of the bread, when Olafsson came through a door on the side of the room opposite the

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street entrance, looking very tired. Seeing me awake again, he came up to me.

"Job for you, Shaw, if you're ready for one," he said.

"Anything I can do," I answered, looking for a place to put my empty mug down.

"It's just after dawn. I need someone to take the watch-post on the highest building in the Acre. I warn you, you'll need a smoke mask and goggles, and even so it's a dirty job. But we're stretched absolutely to capacity. You can see the whole of the valley from there, both the great houses, the road where we expect them to meet. You'll have a grandstand view of the beginning of the end, if you like to look at it that way. Say no if you want to."

"Of course I'll do it," I said.

"Excellent." He turned to a girl standing nearby and gave crisp orders. She slipped away and returned in a few moments with the smoke mask and goggles, a miniature portable radio, and a bag containing a vacuum flask and two loaves of bread.

"Best I can find," she said, indicating the bag of provisions. "Have to do."

"It'll do well enough. Thanks." Olafsson looked at me. "You go out of here, go left for two blocks, cross the street. You'll see a sign advertising metalwork. Knock on the door. Someone will let you in. You'll get the rest there. And—good luck."

He shook my hand, and hurried away to answer someone else's claim on him.

I made myself comfortable in my extraordinary aerie. It was a kind of sling-cradle hanging beside a tall chimney-stack; fortunately there was no smoke coming from the

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chimney and none came out all day, though by the middle of the morning every other chimney in the city seemed to be smoking and it was hard to see through the murk.

I suppose I'd had something like this sling-cradle in mind when I was brought up to the roof. What I hadn't expected was the excellent binocular telescope I found clamped against the side of the chimney under a weatherproof jacket. The mount could be extended on a sort of lazy tongs, and it could be swung through a field of three hundred degrees, giving a good command of almost the whole valley and certainly of everywhere where anything important might happen.

What I could not see clearly was the streets of the city around me, except for the very close neighborhood. All the best work of the Vorra was poured into the estates of the great houses; cities like this one grew up on an unimaginative gridiron plan, and the streets were narrow and often overhung by the upper floors of the buildings, like a medieval street on Earth. Consequently I could see only the roofs and occasional open spaces—market places, sites where old houses had collapsed and were being cleared for rebuilding and so on.

In spite of my grandstand seat, then, as Olafsson had called it, and my commanding view of these events so crucial in the history of Earth, most of the day I did not understand what was really going on, and I had to piece the truth together from talking to other people afterwards. In the underground operations room, of course, they were always in touch somehow with the important events.

What did happen, as I found it out eventually, was this.

Dawn. Gray mists clearing from the estate of the house of Pwill. Outside in the great courtyard four companies of men

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in battle uniform, stamping their feet to shift the last of the night's sluggishness, blowing on their hands against the chilly wind. In an hour the day would be warm, but now their breath wrote misty curlicues on the air before their mouths. Their sergeants moved among them, checking equipment, listening to the engines of their transport vehicles for the shake and tremor indicating bad maintenance.

Out of the tall gateway of the house, to take a place in the car heading the four-company column, Pwill Himself in magnificent furs, striped tawny and black, belted with the skin of two forelimbs from the animal killed to make the coat. With him the Over-Lady Llaq, and maids in attendance. The car, of course, was made on Earth.

The smart young officer commanding the task force leaped to attention in front of Pwill, saluted, bowed, and requested the order to proceed. It was given surlily. Pwill got into his car. The men jumped to their places on the weapons carriers and in the transport trucks, and the massive, swift, deadly procession moved off to demand satisfaction of the people in the Acre of Earth.

In the low clouds of early morning, a helicopter—Earth-built—droned overhead. The pilot reported by radio—Earth-built—to the commander of the six-company detachment of the forces of the House of Shugurra waiting to move along the highway. He said approximately, "The rumors are true. There's a strong force moving out towards the city."

The commander of the rival force called his men to their stations, and that deadly procession, too, moved out on the road. They did not have nearly as far to go as the forces of Pwill before they came to the place which had been selected for an ambush. That was one reason they had chosen the spot, of course.

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Rolling down the highway, the car leading the first procession—that in which rode Pwill Himself—rounded a bend and had to brake. A barrier had been thrown across the road. Behind the barrier an enormous voice spoke over an amplifier—Earth-built. In the name of the House of Shugurra it gave him two minutes to reform his column facing the other way and to return to his own estate.

Overhead there was another helicopter now. It was far too high to hear the mighty amplifier shout of the man telling Pwill to go home. Its pilot reported that as far as he could tell the forces of the two greatest houses were about to link up and go down to the city.

For a while Pwill argued. Then he pulled a feint; he had his driver take his car back towards the rear of the column. Passing the command vehicle, he instructed the young officer to clear the road of the obstruction. There was nothing the young officer wanted to do more. He had been fretting and fumbling for a good two minutes already, and his patience was short. He ordered the barrier to be knocked aside with a rocket missile. That would have been built here on Qallavarra; the Vorra did not permit the building of weapons on Earth by Earthmen.

The blast made a hole in the smooth highway, but the trucks could avoid that easily enough. He gave the order to roll forward again.

In the next moment, two things happened. A murderous return fire from the six companies of the House of Shugurra lying in ambush and covering the whole of the locality raked the column of vehicles and killed a quarter of the soldiers in them. And the massed paratroops of the ten lesser houses who had been fooled into accepting the story of a conspiracy

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between Pwill and Shugurra received the order to occupy the estates of those two houses.

They came from the gray sky like the first snow of winter, gracefully. Between them the ten lesser houses could muster only eight thousand men, but they were well armed and made up in efficient training what they lacked in numbers. The troops on the ground were too astonished to fire on them as they came down; each side hoped that perhaps it was being reinforced, and by the time they realized the truth they were already being shot at.

Pwill and Llaq were killed by a rocket as they struggled to get away from their car—an obvious target for the Shugurra troops, and still more obvious for the newly arrived paratroops. Who fired the rocket never became clear; presumably the man responsible was killed.

More rockets reduced the column of vehicles to a string of bonfires in the next few minutes. Deprived of both Pwill and the young hothead of an officer, and with several of their sergeants also dead; with the countryside around them sprouting unexpected death; unable to tell if their enemies were from the House of Shugurra only, or from many houses, the troops of the House of Pwill could only scatter in the hope of saving their lives, firing at anyone who fired at them. In this way they probably accounted for as many of each other as troops of other houses did. Reportedly, the shambles became incredible by an hour from dawn.

By that time the permanent weapons of the great houses were being brought into play. The last civil wars on Qallavarra had been fought in the days of ammonium nitrate explosive and solid shot fired from smooth-barreled guns; consequently the two houses on opposite sides of the bowl-like valley had never before been able to shoot directly at each

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other. In fact, the attempt had never had to be made, for in those days there existed an uneasy alliance between them.

Now it was different.

The first direct attack on the House of Shugurra was not made by the House of Pwill at all, it was discovered later. A detachment commander of one of the allied lesser houses wanted to silence a gun-post enfilading some ground he needed to move his men across. He had only a mortar capable of reaching the gun-post, and the mortar was not wholly accurate. Still, he set it up behind a small hillock and let fly. The bomb dropped fair on the huge glass dome crowning the house, and fell through before exploding and killing over a thousand noncombatants—women, children and sick old men—gathered there from outlying buildings.

Mad with rage, and still thinking, thanks to inadequate intelligence reports, that only the House of Pwill was ranged against him, Shugurra Himself ordered retaliation.

In emplacements on the north and south of the house there were four long-barreled cannon firing shells weighing about a thousand pounds and filled with the preferred, though highly unstable, trinitrobenzine typical of Vorrish artillery. The cannon dated from a period shortly after the last war between houses and were the last new armaments installed for local defense. But they were still perfectly efficient, although much less destructive than the weapons the Vorra had for use in space.

The gunners fired about twenty shots altogether into the House of Pwill; then an underground oil-storage tank was hit and the whole complex of buildings was swamped in a sea of orange flame and black greasy smoke. The gunners turned their attention to the townlets lying beyond.

What happened to the House of Shugurra was rather

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more epic in its nature. Having seen his own house destroyed, one of the troops of the House of Pwill crawled back to the line of wrecked vehicles on which his column had set out that morning. He made his way along until he came to one of the heavy weapons carriers. Most of its armaments were out of commission, but one of the rocket launchers was still workable. He worked it. He put five rockets in a row into the House of Shugurra—the favorite type beloved by the Vorrish military for its sheer spectacle: phosphorus in magnesium casings covered with a fragmenting envelope and a tracery of cordite threads. Then the sixth blew up in the launcher.

But the facade of the House of Shugurra had a gap-toothed look, and in each of the gaps a fire was beginning to rage.

From then on the Vorra were content to fight anyone and everyone they could find. That was the way they were.

## CHAPTER XX

IT WAS EARLY afternoon, and I was wishing that the smoke would clear away from all around me because it was making it impossible to follow the confused progress of the battle, when something went past me with a noise like an angry wasp. And another. And another. And then something *thunked* into the side of the chimneystack, and a splatter of hot metal stung the back of my nearer hand.

Suddenly I was fervently wishing that the smoke would grow dense enough to swallow me completely. I had no idea where those four shots had come from, but they had passed

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too close with too long an interval between them to have been accidental.

It was inevitable that sooner or later some of the confused soldiers—most likely, those of Pwill and Shugurra—would find out that Shugurra had attacked Pwill on a false assumption, and that they would then join forces to go after the blood of the people whose fault the whole thing was. Ours.

In fact, as I heard afterwards, something of the kind had happened earlier—not much later than noon, at all events. About a company and a half of mixed Pwill and Shugurra troops had salvaged what vehicles they could and tried to come into the town to spread as much havoc as possible in the Acre. The free citizens, however, had got the idea that the rumored league between Pwill and Shugurra was aimed at dominating not merely the Acre but the entire city, and although they had had confused accounts of Pwill fighting Shugurra, the arrival of the mixed force confirmed their worst fears. They had some pride of their own; if they'd wanted to swear fealty to a great house they could have done so as individuals, but they didn't want to and they hadn't done so.

Accordingly, the first attempt to reach the Acre was met by a horde of angry townsfolk with improvised weapons down to and including half-bricks. Under a hail of these the troops retreated, found their retreat cut off, and holed up in a block of recently built houses from which they were smoked out late in the afternoon.

The second attempt was more successful. A rather larger force in armored trucks got as far as the street next but one to the eastern boundary of the Acre. In the course of last night a party of explosives experts had mined not merely that street but half a dozen others besides, and by the time two

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or three ramshackle buildings had fallen on them the trucks were unfit to move on and their occupants were in little better shape. The townfolk finished them off with rocks, empty pottery jars, and rotten vegetables.

The third attempt was organized with some care, and included men not only of Pwill and Shugurra but also some from lesser houses and a good many townsfolk who, once they got the point, were only too eager to try and level accounts with the upstart Earthmen in the Acre. It was a few minutes after my narrow escape from being shot dead in my exposed position that the houses all around the Acre seemed to shrug and cough and all fell down at once, burying most of this third attack force and making the nearby streets impassable.

I thought of the sewer that had been used to get me away from the House of Pwill, and drew a conclusion which later I found correct. Cautiously, in darkness, people had crawled along the crude sewer pipes serving this neighborhood and placed powerful mines under key points in the foundations of the houses overhead. Where necessary, extra tunnels had been drilled weeks or months earlier so that the explosive could be taken to precisely the right location.

The collapse of the surrounding houses left the outer fringes of the Acre exposed to fire. On the other hand, it also meant that anyone trying to approach the Acre had to do so across a treacherous sea of smoking rubble and also exposed himself to fire. And in the outskirts of the city the situation was so confused it was unlikely that anyone would succeed in getting heavy weapons near enough to be able to aim accurately at us. The risk remained that there might somewhere be a gunner either skilled enough to range on the Acre by dead reckoning, or crazy enough not to care whether he

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hit us or the rest of the city. That was a risk we had to take. For a considerable time it looked as though it was coming off.

Meanwhile the fighting in the surrounding area was spreading. From the original point of the clash between Pwill and Shugurra it had expanded—with the arrival of the eight thousand paratroops from the lesser houses—well inside the two estates. Pwill had lost four companies, but the total muster was over sixty, plus trainees, recruits and the militia composed of active people from the metalworkers' villages, the farmhands, and all other trades on the huge self-supporting estate. Altogether Pwill could count on a theoretical army of some twenty thousand or more.

At first they had no idea what was going on. It seemed that the world had gone mad when the storm of paratroopers fell on them and began their attack. Then came the destruction of the house itself, by fire from the House of Shugurra, and about half the total forces of the estate—having mustered on the west of the house—set out to fight their way into Shugurra territory and take revenge.

The remaining half, having mustered on the north and east, attempted to tackle the paratroops because they were there and obviously hostile. About then, the guns from Shugurra started to range on the townlets lying to the rear of the burning house, and chaos set in as the astonished troops tried to work out whom they were fighting against. Most of them apparently gave up trying soon; they were satisfied to be fighting again after too long an interval.

Something similar happened on Shugurra territory, but that was complicated by the intrusion of troops from the third house in the bowl-like valley surrounding the city. This

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was normally of little significance in Vorrish affairs; it was regarded as a sort of appendage of Shugurra and usually acted in this role.

But, finding its estate invaded by hordes of maddened Shugurra troops taking a short cut to the estates of Pwill and not much caring what happened to people who got in their way, the people of this third house—its name was Geluid—mobilized its small and ill-equipped, but brave army of some nine hundred men, dusted off its few artillery pieces, and tried to drive the troops of Shugurra back on their own ground. The Shugurra troops didn't seem to notice that they had failed to reach the estate they were making for. At least, not until later.

The situation as it had developed by late afternoon, then, was approximately this:

In the city, street fighting, rioting, and occasional outside attempts to reach the Acre. Several fires raging. The entire district surrounding the Acre laid low by mines.

At the place where fighting had started, fighting still in progress, with the paratroops fighting the great houses, the troops of the great houses fighting each other and the paratroops, and occasional attempts being made to get from there down to the city.

On each of the great estates, troops from the other house fighting their way forward against resistance by both the paratroops and the resident troops, and—by a trick of fate—with the invaders gaining ground on one wing and the defenders gaining ground on the other. Driven back on their own terrain, the attackers accordingly became defenders and fought more violently. This happened on both sides. At places the falling-back turned to rout; the attackers cheered and charged after the defenders, only to discover that they had

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over-extended their communications and were easy prey to fresh defense forces brought up from the two-hundred-mile-deep back country of the estate they had invaded.

On the Geluid estate, a situation so much more confused than the above—what with Geluid artillery firing blindly at both Pwill and Shugurra and the paratroops taking Geluid troops for allies only to find themselves wrong enough to be dead—that it would probably never be correctly analyzed.

I had altogether lost hope of keeping track of the situation, and had reported the fact over my portable radio, when the trapdoor on to the roof opened and I turned in alarm.

Then I relaxed. It was Olafsson, come to see what the battle looked like in reality, I presumed.

"What is going on?" I demanded. "I can see but I can't follow from up here!" And added belatedly, "You'd better be careful—I've been fired at once!"

He nodded and came along the roof to stand beside the chimneystack and stare out over the countryside. He said, not looking at me, "It's going well. This isn't all of it, you know. It's going on overseas—workers revolting on the plantations and in the mines, jealous houses snatching the chance to occupy rich territory belonging to their rivals. And on Earth as well, of course."

"On Earth!" I echoed.

"Naturally. We made quite sure that the news of the destruction of the House of Pwill and the House of Shugurra was reported by subspace transmitter as soon as it happened." He sounded pleased, but he looked very tired.

"And what's happened?" I said, digesting the news slowly.

"What you'd expect. A state of considerable uncertainty! Nobody knows which way to jump or whose boots to lick. If they have any sense, they'll lick ours, of course."

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I felt suddenly slightly faint. I said, "You mean—this is *the* event? The turning of the tables?"

He gave me a curious glance. "Of course it is," he said. "I thought you told Marijane Lee you'd got your memory back. I assumed you knew."

"Then I didn't get all of it back," I said. My heart was beginning to pound so violently I thought it would shake me off the roof. "But is this enough? I grant, it's a civil war which will probably set Qallavarra back for years, but how about the Acre when the fighting dies down? How about reprisals on Earth if they learn the truth? How about—?"

I could see he was going to cut me short, but he didn't get the chance. What did the job for him was an explosion in the middle of the heaped rubble which now boarded the Acre—a shell, probably from one of the guns on the Shugurra estate! So that gunner whose work we'd been afraid of existed after all.

A second shell followed while we were still staring at the dust thrown up by the first, and this time it hit the edge of the Acre itself, bringing down a small house and causing its neighbors to tilt into the gap, their walls crazed.

"I wanted very much to crawl down to the ground. Olafsson, though, merely frowned and seized my radio. He spoke into the microphone.

"Olafsson!" he snapped. "On the bird-perch! How many of the Shugurra guns are still firing? Because one or more of them just opened up on the Acre!"

"Two, up till a few moments ago," came the crackling reply. "A Geluid mortar shell just landed on the emplacement of one of them according to our reports. It was noticed they were tracking round to aim at the city."

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Another crash followed. This time there were screams, and the building we were on shook, loosening some roof tiles.

Olafsson clung to the mike. He barked a question which made no sense to me at all. He said, "And the *ship*?"

"Look overhead—you should see it any moment!"

Olafsson raised his eyes to the low overcast of cloud. I followed the example automatically. "I hope that's right," I heard him say. "If it is, with only one of the guns firing on us, we'll be out of here before much harm is done. And—oh, look at that! Did you ever see such a beautiful sight?"

I never did.

Dipping down through the clouds with the grace of a shining fish in clear water, there came the huge, mile-long belly of an interstellar ship. It seemed that the whole world paused, irresolute, to stare at the sky. Had I not heard Olafsson say what he had just said, I'd have thought that this was a party of avenging Vorra coming to raze the Acre.

But when I looked down, I saw that the Acre's buildings had come to life with people. They swarmed on the roofs like ants, thousands upon thousands of them, stretching their arms up and crying welcome to the ship as it drifted bubble-light down, down, down to the level where it halted on its antigravity stabilizers, all the hatches were opened, and the coiled wire ladders fell for us to climb into the sky like an army of Hebrew prophets entering a chariot of fire.

## CHAPTER XXI

MY MIND SWARMED with questions beyond number. I had some of my memory back—but not all, not even the most im-

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portant part! Or perhaps I had never known the answer to these questions. Now I had to know them. I'd risked my life, I'd done some small work towards the success of this fantastic operation—I was entitled to know the truth now!

But who to ask? I could not trouble the hard-faced yet smiling men who seemed to be supervising the loading of the vast human cargo. I could not trouble Olafsson; the moment he scrambled into the ship he dashed away on important work. And the people coming up after us—the ordinary, weary, weak but marvelously happy people of the Acre—they would not know any more than I did.

Once I was aboard, no one took any further notice of me. I was free to wander as I wished. I did wander, for the sake of knowing I was in a ship owned by and obedient to men of Earth instead of the Vorra. It was one of their ships, of course. It had obviously been stolen. How this miracle had been accomplished was another of the questions I wanted to ask someone. But turnabout is fair play; I thought of the mummy in the yellow spacesuit, and hoped that somehow, some day, we would be able to tell that mummy's surviving friends how we had turned the tables on the Vorra.

If I could only find someone to explain it to me first!

My wandering brought me into another of the big holds, open hatches in its floor, through which the people of the Acre were climbing to freedom. As I came in, pushing past others who had come aboard after me and were now going further inship, I saw that there was trouble on one of the hanging ladders.

One of the men supervising the work turned and caught sight of me as he knelt to reach down into space. "You!" he said. "Got a casualty here—give us a hand!"

I hurried forward and knelt beside him, reaching down.

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I almost fell with the shock as I saw who was struggling to get over the rim of the hatch—Ken Lee, Marijane's brother, his left arm hanging by his side and a smear of blood spreading on his shirt.

He did not wince, although the pain of being dragged over the edge of the hatch by his two arms must have been terrible, and used me as a crutch to get to the side of the hold where first aid workers had set up their equipment. I was peeling off the bloody shirt when I felt a touch on my arm and glanced round. It was Marijane.

"Is he all right?" she demanded. Ken had closed his eyes, the better to resist the pain. He opened them and smiled at her before closing them again. Marijane squatted beside him to help me with the delicate job of cleaning the wound.

"What happened?" she asked him. He replied without looking at her.

"I was near the last of the shells that fell in the Acre. I don't know what's in there, but it'll be messy. Shell casing, bits of rock—who knows what? Easy now!"

He half-rose as pain stabbed him. I snatched a capsule of anaesthetic gas from a passing medical orderly; it was only after I'd broken it under Ken's nose that I realized the orderly was Kramer, grinning like a boy.

The work of dressing the wound went ahead.

"I'm glad you're safely here, Gareth," Marijane said after a while. "I heard someone say he thought you'd been shot on the roof."

"They tried, and they missed," I said.

"It must be awful for you only to know half of what's going on," she said. I nodded. "How much can you remember?"

"Much less than I believed."

"Why the civil war was so important, for example?"

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"To—well, to upset things on Qallavarra, I guess."

"But not only that. To make certain that no one was in a position to give orders for this ship to be intercepted, of course."

In the distance someone yelled, "Hatches tight! Lift!" And there was a booming metallic slam all down the ship. We felt nothing, of course; the ship had its own gravity.

But we knew we were on our way.

"How was it stolen, anyway?" I demanded.

"By the cleverest consignment ever sent out from Earth disguised as essential goods for the people of the Acre."

I blinked at her.

"Yes! The cargo! This time, the cargo which this ship lifted off Earth consisted of a robot programmed to steal away control of the ship from its Vorrish crew! And it did. It blew the locks to space as it settled into orbit around Qallavarra, it got rid of the bodies of the crew, it set a course into atmosphere which brought it out over the Acre, it opened its hatches and let down the ladders which it had previously installed; it cleared away the cargo that was no good to us. It did everything."

"And the Vorra never suspected," I said. I felt chilled with awe at the magnitude of the scheme.

"Of course they didn't, the poor stupid fools." Marijane finished the dressing expertly, and indicated that I should help her lay her brother down full length on the floor where he would be more comfortable.

I obeyed, staring at her. I said, "All this talk of the Vorra as *poor stupid fools!*" I exploded. "After what they've done to us, after—"

I broke off. She was looking at me in astonishment. She said, "Do you mean you—But you can't possibly!"

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"What?" I said. "I can't *what*?"

There was a footfall behind me. I heard Olafsson's voice speak my name. He said, "Shaw! Glad I found you. I imagine you have lots of questions."

"I've been getting answers from Marijane," I said harshly. "But the last one didn't satisfy me."

I explained. I told him about the mummy in the yellow spacesuit, about the shaman, about the Vorrish pretence that they had built these ships themselves. Olafsson heard me out with a faint smile playing round his mouth.

When I finished, he said, "Oh yes, we know about that cult. It's a lot of nonsense of course."

"Nonsense?" I echoed, bewildered. "But I saw—that mummy in a spacesuit—"

"Manufactured," Olafsson said briefly. "Look, you're perfectly right to say that it's unbearable to the Vorr to admit they didn't build their ships and weapons themselves. The plain fact is they didn't, either. But think it over! How, by what conceivable means could they have stolen them from a superior culture? How could a bunch of semifeudal barbarians have conquered a fleet of interstellar spaceships armed with weapons superior even to ours on Earth? They couldn't!"

"Which means," Marijane said in a small clear voice, "that the ships were *given* to them."

"And the cult you discovered, with the mummy in the spacesuit as its symbol, was invented by the soldiers of Qallavarra as part of a heroic mythology concerned with their imaginary victory over a nonexistent enemy," Olafsson finished. "A kind of fictitious battle-honor for the corps to wear on its standard."

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"Given?" I said after a long time. I hardly recognized my own voice. "But—who gave the ships to them?"

"We don't know yet," Olafsson said, stern now and commanding. "As we work it out, somewhere in the galaxy is a race of intelligent beings, very far advanced, very powerful and very, very cruel. A race which can treat the Vorra as subjects for a kind of vast laboratory experiment, and not care how much people like us of Earth suffer in consequence.

"We presume that one day it occurred to these intelligences to find out what would happen if a planetful of barbarians were suddenly provided with a fleet of starships and weapons to match. Their choice of subject fell on the Vorra. And they will probably come back in a century or two to find out the results. Or maybe they've lost interest, or maybe they got the data they were after and couldn't be bothered to clear up the mess they'd left behind.

"And the poor silly Vorra, struggling to make sense of a situation which was none of their doing—too greedy to renounce what they'd been given, too backward to make the most of it, too uncivilized to understand it. Always they are hoping that they will somehow catch up. That's why they've taken such an interest in us, have tried to copy us however much it went against the grain of their natural barbarian instincts. For here we were, people like themselves—obviously, much more like them than the makers of these ships—and we had invented spaceships for ourselves, we almost defeated them in battle, and no matter how they tried to beat us down we kept coming up again.

"But it would have taken too long to wait for them to admit they wanted to be taught by us. Because, you see, the makers of the ships might come back. We doubt if it will be sooner than a century from now. When they do return,

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though, we want to be able to show them what we think of them. We want to speak to them in terms they understand.

"So we're going back to Earth. It'll take a while to clear up the leavings of the Vorra, but by the time we land we can expect to have reduced them to isolated pockets of resistance. There won't be any co-ordinated help for them from home now—not until the civil war dies down, and that will take months, possibly years. And since they occupied us, we've learned every trick they know and invented plenty of our own. Do you know anything about Earthly history?"

The sudden question took me by surprise. I'd been standing with closed eyes, listening—feeling the facts socket home in the places waiting for them, feeling my memory return to wholeness as I relearned the truths which I had hidden with the aid of oblivion from the Vorrish interrogators—and had thereby hidden from myself. It was a wonderful sensation.

I fumbled for an answer. I said, "Of course, but what in particular?"

"Once, the Mongols invaded and conquered China, a horde of barbarians overrunning a great and ancient civilization. As a badge of servitude they imposed the pigtail on their Chinese subjects. And within two hundred years the pigtail was proudly worn by the highest mandarins in the land. It's a slow way to win a war. But it's the only way a war has ever stayed won, and it's the kind of war—this is the best thing about it—it's the kind of war in which the better side is bound to win."

Someone came hunting for Olafsson and called him away to attend to some problem which arisen among the refugees. When he had gone, I stood silent for a long time thinking about the makers of the ships—the people (people?) out

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there in the galaxy whose vast cold intellect regarded us as mere animals.

They were obviously rich beyond imagining if they could casually give away such a fleet as Earth's whole industry could never have built. They were obviously powerful if they could use planets as laboratory benches for their experiments. How could we hope to match them, even in a hundred years? Might they not wipe us out in a fit of disgust for making their experiment go astray?

Of course not. An experiment is made for the sake of results, whatever they may turn out to be. If you don't want to see the results, it's best not to experiment at all. I remembered a very old story indeed, about a psychologist who put a monkey in a closed room and after a while peeped through the keyhole to see what the monkey had got up to.

And on the other side of the keyhole he saw the monkey looking at him.

I found myself chuckling. I said to the air, "Here's looking at you!"

"What?" said Marijane, her head cocked on one side, eying me quizzically. There was a little smile on her lips.

"Nothing," I said. "Just thinking. Say, I have an idea. Let's go and look around this ship. After all, it's Earth's first interstellar vessel on her maiden trip, and it's quite an occasion."

She laughed and turned to walk by my side. I took her hand in mine.



# THE SUPER BARBARIANS

The Acre was the only part of an entire world where Earthmen were allowed to live as they pleased and as they were accustomed. For elsewhere on Qual-lavarra, humanity was forced into servitude by the Vorra, THE SUPER BARBARIANS who had somehow managed to conquer space.

But within the Acre, the underling Terrestrials had cooked up a neat method of keeping their conquerors from stamping them out altogether. They had uncovered a diabolical Earth secret that the Vorra couldn't abide — and yet couldn't do without.

