

# KENNETH BULMER THE DIAMOND CONTESSA

Her raiders plundered a  
hundred earths









“The City of Diamonds,” breathed Alec, “Once a mortal enters there then all hope is gone.”

Inside the city existed marvels to astound even so experienced a traveler as Harry Blakey. Avenues stretched away paralleling the walls within and extending into the heart of the city. And the things that moved along these avenues! Things—creatures, ghastly creations from nightmare, graceful forms of paradise, hunched and cowed figures of mystery, armored men swaggering with a clash of swords, great ladies carried in palanquins bedecked with jewels and gold—things, people, animals and objects completely out of Blakey’s experience passed and repassed in a bewildering flow of activity. The place was exotic and mysterious, beautiful and ominous, a city to love and a city to hate.

As the lash sliced across his shoulders Harry Blakey knew which of those options he favored. . . .



KENNETH BULMER is English, lives in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, and is one of the leading lights of British science fiction as fan, editor, writer and war-games master. Author of many novels, some under pen-names, he has been in print continuously for over twenty years. In America he is best known for a series of novels about parallel worlds which were written for Don Wollheim prior to the launching of DAW Books. For a long time, he has been urged to return to that locale for DAW Books, and in *The Diamond Contessa* he has finally done so, bringing back the magic and marvels of many alternate worlds, of many doors to them, and of that arch-villain, the mysterious countess whose avaricious eye is always on our Earth.

*THE  
DIAMOND  
CONTESSA*

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Kenneth Bulmer

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## CHAPTER ONE

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One thing and one thing only drew him back home.

In the seven years he'd been away even the memory of that one thing had grown into a mystery, a thing not to be believed. He knew his secret room really existed—of course it did! But—how could it?

He humped his kit out of the cab, paid the cabby and watched him make a three-point turn and drive off toward town before, deliberately, he looked up at the house. Cold brick, shuttered windows, an architectural frown. . . . He'd considered the idea, seriously, that he would be unable to enter his old home. He thumped his boots down with determined force on the wooden steps and the seventh one burst through like rotten ice giving way. He did not curse. Isolated houses on the outskirts of town could fall to pieces and no one would give a damn.

When he'd picked up the keys Mr. Garvey had said: "You'll want to find a buyer as soon as possible, Mr. Blakey. We'll put our best efforts into moving the property, even though the market—"

And he'd said, "I don't think I'll put the house on the market just yet."

Garvey's surprise that anyone wouldn't want to unload a near-derelict property as fast as possible was understandable. Blakey was footloose now, out, his own man at last, in a way that owed nothing to the death of his parents. He'd come home for the funeral. Now, as seemed proper, he went up to the old house. How could he tell Garvey that he wouldn't sell because he believed there was a secret room here that ought not to exist?

His boot came up out of the brown-edged wood and he moved up the last few steps to key the door open. The hall smelled damp and brown. He dumped his kit by the warped door to the front room and went on through to the cellar door without stopping.

Remembrance of the atmosphere of the house rushed back. An only child, Blakey had not been happy here, not with his parents who represented only aloof arbitrary authority, not with the school kids among whom he had made not a single permanent



friend. Only in his secret room had he ever felt that he, Harry Blakey, was really Harry Blakey and not an aggravating impediment to someone else's life.

The light of his flash flicked down the cellar stairs. He'd put the flash in his coat pocket because he'd known he'd need it. He went down quickly. Something came up in his throat, and he swallowed.

The cellars extended under the north side of the house and were divided into oddly shaped areas and cubicle-sized store-rooms reached by passageways that wriggled in and out of the foundations. Against the south side of a cellar filled with junk he paused and splayed the flashlight. The door that had been taken from its hinges on the opening leading to a wedge-shaped space under the stairs and for as long as he could remember had leaned against this wall now lay on the floor among the junk.

Blakey shut his eyes. Just before he opened them he switched off the flash. He thought his special thought and stepped through the brick wall into his secret room.

The first time he'd come in here his father had just given him a brutal thrashing, his mother had screamed abuse at him, and he'd been half-thrown down the cellar steps to be locked in—the usual punishment. He had shrieked in his five-year-old mind to get away—and, somehow, he'd walked or flown or swam past the door leaning against the brick wall into the room. He thought—at first—he must have half-opened the door and slipped into a new room in the cellar maze. Exploring the cellar's holes and corners had not been easy, in the half-darkness he needed willpower to go on.

In the beginning he did not think of it as a secret room. It was just one more space under the house to be explored. The idea that the fusty unused parts of the cellar were his kingdom did not occur to him until much later. He did steal a half-candle and a matchbox containing half a dozen matches. Matches were forbidden. He risked an extra thrashing among all the others for those matches. His parents were not great present-givers, and at Christmas time little fuss was made. One year he asked for a flashlight, and, to his great and glorious surprise, received a slender shiny silver tube. After that, coming by batteries was the problem of his life for a surprisingly short time, for very soon after that Christmas he discovered his secret room.

The realization that the room under his house was not at all ordinary did not touch him for some time; he was content to revel in the calmness, the curious things he found there, explore,

dream. And, of course, there was more than one room to his secret room.

From the place where he entered a short corridor of a brick not too dissimilar from the brick of the other cellars led onto a tumbled and confusing mishmash of wrecked things. He could only call them things, for he did not recognize them. They seemed to him to be all a part of the other things in the cellars under his parents' house. The most astonishing difference he found lay in the absence of darkness. Globes of a soft pure light hung from the ceiling and in a way he could not explain, Harry Blakey at once felt at home in that light. From his larger chamber openings led to other rooms. One led to a stone-flagged ramp leading upward. At the top of the ramp a landing, also of stone, was solidly sealed by stone and metal. A complicated-looking handle protruded from one metal slab. No amount of effort by childish hands could open that door, could budge the handle.

Just how old he was when he met Uncle Jim he could never afterward properly remember; at times it seemed he'd always known Uncle Jim. He'd been poking about trying to open a wooden crate with the penknife he'd swopped with idiot Lesley Stevens for homework done correctly. The wood was not much like the wood upstairs, and then Uncle Jim was standing there, smiling at him.

"Hullo," said Uncle Jim. "You gave me a surprise."

"So did you," said young Harry Blakey, speaking up stoutly. In that radiance he could see the blood very red on Uncle Jim's shoulder, where the green clothing was ripped away. "You hurt?"

Then Uncle Jim fell down.

All Blakey could think to do was to wipe away some of the blood with his handkerchief and push a piece of soft cloth under the man's head—for, of course, then he hadn't known Uncle Jim's name. He sat back, the bloodied handkerchief in his hand, and Uncle Jim opened his eyes. They were an odd color, dark and yet with light spots in them. He tried to smile again. Then he told Blakey what to do.

Bringing the hot water wasn't as hard as it would have been if his parents had been sober; as it was they were snoring away in the drawing room. He washed the wound in the man's shoulder, carefully, his mouth tight, and then fixed the bandage Uncle Jim produced from a pouch on his belt. They talked. Most of what was said was unintelligible to Blakey; but he learned Uncle Jim's name, that he'd been set on by those misbegotten Trundlers, that



he hid out here, and didn't young Blakey know better than to go around pulsing all over the place?

"I don't—"

"You mean you're so young you haven't been trained?"

"I go to school—"

"And they don't teach you how to switch off?"

Blakey shook his head, not wanting to appear a fool to this man. Uncle Jim was large, very large, with the features of one of those statues you saw in ancient history books, all nose and chin and eyebrows, and a stare that scorched.

That part of the first meeting remained clear to him; but thereafter his meetings with the man he called Uncle Jim, and then Jim, blurred into one all-encompassing and happy relationship. He was warned not to go outside until he was older, for the Trundlers and other mechanical horrors like them would squirt him, rip him up, or jelly him. He found out all about what that meant as Jim talked on—as their meetings went on over the years. Jim used this place, which he called Internin, as a short cut.

"That first time, Harry, I'd been foolish. A Trundler caught me and I managed to blow it up, but it scratched my shoulder—"

"Scratched! I remember—" He must have been eleven or so at this time.

"Yes, well, I dodged into these ruins and found you. And you were pulsing all over the place." Jim bent those fierce eyebrows down. "You've been practicing?"

"Yes. Mark me."

He did what Jim had explained to him with his mind and Jim nodded, pleased.

"Off like a light. Good. Makes it easier for you."

Jim always pulsed that he was coming, so that Blakey would be ready. His parents had no idea. Why should they? Their brat was better off out from under their feet. Blakey soaked up all that Jim told him. The full picture emerged slowly. Jim used this world of Internin as a shortcut between a world called Furgelay and a busy world known as Addledor.

"Internin once was a wonderful place; but then the fools took to quarreling. They had their wars."

"And they blew themselves up with atom bombs?"

"No—although they might as well have done. They built lots of mechanical fighting units, robots, designed to destroy the enemy. They gave them powerful weapons. They stored energy from sunshine, and so could carry on for years. Well, Harry, they did carry on. They wiped out the humans. Now this world

is filled with all kinds of mechanical robot fighting creatures who go around shooting one another and anything else that comes along. It's a nightmare world. Most folk along the parallels shun the place." He rubbed his shoulder feelingly. "With good reason."

"But you don't!"

Jim smiled his hawkish lopsided smile. "No, I don't. But then, I'm what you'd call stupid myself." He'd tried to explain what he did for a living; but Blakey could not understand.

Always Jim would check him out on his ability to control his mind. Over in a corner of the cellar by an opening Blakey had become aware of what seemed to him to be an archway surrounded by fairy lights. Lights like those of the fairground strung around in combinations of colors. The first time he'd noticed that he felt surprise, of course, but that surprise paled when he turned around to see strung around the way he came in and went out of the cellar a similar archway of lights.

Jim explained on his next visit.

"You're gaining your powers nicely, young Harry. That's why you must control them. Those lights look bright to you?"

"Sometimes—"

"That's all right. They show up casements—" Here Jim wrinkled up the skin over his nose, and laughed, and said: "They're really there, only they aren't. Thresholds, some folk call them. You must always be very very careful how you use them."

The idea came to him without thought. "You mean, I can go through that casement over there and—"

"Yes. It leads to a world called Mathertone, a long way around along the parallels."

At once Blakey was fired up. "What's it like? Can I go there? Can we go now?"

"Most of it is water. You'd need a submarine."

"Oh!"

Jim shook his head, reflectively chewing on a strip of what looked like old shoe leather. He liked it, though.

"Your world—Earth—is right there at the end of a parallel axis no one uses much, if at all. And yet you are a trajecter. You are a trajecter of considerable authority. When I get the time I'll have to take a trip into your Earth. Maybe there are others, although you're stuck so far away in the parallels I doubt if anyone would ever come here. Maybe pass through."

Blakey said, the same as he said every time: "Can we go out now, Jim?"

And Jim would answer: "Not until you are older, Harry."



Once he said: "If you do go out into the parallels, you'll need this." Between his fingers a little silver glint caught the light. He took from one of the many pouches on his belt a thing like a hypodermic needle. Blakey hardly felt it at all. The needle deftly inserted the tiny silver bead under his scalp beside his left ear.

Jim smiled. "No, Harry. Not under your scalp. Right inside."

"What's it do?"

"So you can talk to folk along the way."

"Won't it—?"

"Not likely. It's organic, so a scan is not likely to pick it up. Also," and here he brought out his pack and flipped the covering open. He took out what looked like the father and mother of all the water pistols down the department store toy section. "You can't keep this. But if we're going out—"

Blakey jumped up. He jiggled. "We're going out!"

"You don't want to now—?"

"You bet I do!"

"Well, watch me, jump if I say jump, don't point this at me, and be ready to run back into the ruins."

So, feeling bloated with feelings he did not want to worry about, Harry Blakey went with Jim out onto the surface of the world called Internin.

The place looked desolate in a way that all the deserts in the world do not look desolate. The sky and the clouds appeared like those on Earth, there were mountains on the horizon, and a river in the distance. The trees looked funny. And the mechanical monsters burst from a screen of trees two hundred yards away, bellowing like steam engines, charged for them. Jim leveled his gun, let rip with a blast of yellow fire. The mechanicals shot back purple blasts of flame. Blakey aimed the overblown water pistol, triggered a line of yellow fire, and then Jim was bellowing and they were jumping back into the charred ruins from which they had stepped.

Back in his secret room, Blakey got his breath back.

Jim looked down at him.

"All right, young man. That settles it. They were waiting for me—"

Blakey was not foolish enough to miss what this meant.

He was still young at the time. He said: "But you won't come to see me again!"

Jim's expression did not change. He just waited. At once Blakey burst out: "Jim! I meant—if they're waiting, then you're in danger!"

"Don't let that worry you. I can slip past. And as for visiting

you, well, that isn't going to be so easy, all right. But I will. You can rely on that."

"Not if you get yourself killed!"

Jim took out his chunk of old shoe leather and started to chew the end. Presently he took it out of his mouth and said, "I do not anticipate getting myself killed, Harry."

By this time the secret room contained chairs and a table, and Jim had brought in some miraculous kind of cooking stove. Books lay scattered about. It was a den. Blakey started to brew up, and Jim sat down, began to clean his weapon.

"When I go I'm going to put a lock on the door. I don't want the mechanicals coming down here." He wiped a cloth over the metal parts of the gun. "I've taught you a lot about the parallels. You're quick and smart. Keep your gift to yourself in your world, for I think—" Here he paused, and went on more slowly. "In some parallels I know they don't understand the planes, and if a lad like yourself displays trajecter gifts, they regard him as insane, or a wizard, or evil. Anyway, mind what I say, Harry."

Blakey swallowed and said nothing.

Jim usually wore a simple one-piece outfit of some indeterminate color, green, grey, slate, with a broad belt festooned with pouches, and with a pack on his back. His boots were solid and the left sprouted a gun butt and the right the handle of a knife. Blakey would wear boots like that one day, he'd always promised himself.

"Mind you, young Harry, you call me Jim. That's not my real name, you know, as you do know." When Jim had pronounced his name all Blakey had been able to repeat were the two syllables: "Car-ank." All the rest, and there was a quantity of it, had escaped him. Now, with that organic pip near his brain, he understood that Jim's name summed up the qualities of the man, and he did not repeat them for he knew such a recital of glorification would embarrass Jim between friends. Jim finished: "I just hope you'll think of me from time to time, as I shall think of you."

Blakey, young as he was, had the sense to make no reply.

The secret room appeared a warm and friendly place. The junk had been swept into one cubicle, there was a carpet on the floor, the table and chairs were polished. Some of the artifacts found remained, for Jim said that this basement of the ruined building above represented a kind of museum to a vanished people. When Jim prepared to go he said: "I'm going to put an interdict on you, Harry."

Blakey opened his mouth.



"Wait, Harry! Your life is your own. I do not wish to interfere any more than I have. I wonder if Lewanos will forgive me for what I've already done." Lewanos was another name for God, Blakey knew. "But you were so—so naked and helpless, pulsing away. When you're a grown man, the interdict will weaken and vanish. Then, Harry, remember. I've taught you and you've learned well. You will have great power. If you don't use it wisely, then I'll come back and—and—"

When Jim walked up the ramp to the metal door, and checked the all clear, and said a cheerful good-bye and stepped out and the door clanged shut, Harry Blakey knew he would not see him for a long time, perhaps never again.

So now here he was, a man coming home to bury his parents. Could all that jumble in his head really have happened? Parts of it seemed real. Others appeared to him mere ghostly flashes of furtive recollection. Trajecters and parallels and all the rest of it. Could a secret room—a room in a ruined building's basement on another world—really exist under his parents' house?

He thought his special thought and stepped through the brick wall and—he stood in his secret room.

He took a breath. The air smelled sweet. The globes of pure soft radiance dispelled the shadows. There was very little dust. So this part was real. There was a secret room, just as he had known all along there was. So maybe the rest of his jumbled memories were true as well?

Unsteadily, he walked along the corridor and into the main room. The table, the chairs, the magical cooking device, the books, the carpet—yes, yes! All were as he remembered them in the confused and doubting recesses of his memory.

Jim—if there had really been anyone called Jim—had tried to protect him. From just what, at the moment, Blakey was none too sure; but if his memories were real, then Jim knew what he was doing. The whole stew of memory could be simply the mish-mash of wish-fulfillment of a deprived childhood.

He looked about him. There was no denying this! He'd stepped through a solid brick wall. The cellars extended out much farther than could be explained logically. He walked through, remembering, and climbed the ramp. The metal door was bulged as though some force had tried to break through from outside.

He put his hand on the handle. It would not turn. A lock, Jim had said. And this interdict. Blakey could recall flashes in detail; yes, a lock and an interdict. And he'd not seen Jim from that day to this.

He looked back and saw the archway over the brick wall

through which he had entered. That archway glimmered. As he looked lights like fairground strings of lamps glowed into life. Brighter and brighter they shone until he shaded his eyes. And from somewhere the thought shone in his head: "A wide and simple casement."

The way that special thought worked in his head grooved, dovetailed, with the concept of the casement. The lights grew and extended until they formed a perfect oval, glowing against the brick wall. And through that opening he could sense quite clearly the dank and unpleasant basement of his parents' house beyond.

He swung about quickly. Yes! Against a corner of the cellar by an opening . . . The oval of lights indicated the threshold onto Mathertone, the world of water.

He could not doubt now. If he doubted what he thought had happened as a child, then he must now be insane.

Jim had been real! He had existed! Those marvelous memories were not the sick phantasms of a deprived mind. As Harry Blakey stood there, luxuriating in the thoughts pouring into his brain, quicker and quicker, as the interdict wore off, in parallel with them grew a foreboding terror of the future.

Jim had warned him. Often he'd said that in a world that knew nothing of the parallels, a person who had been given the divine gift of being a trajecter would be hounded, persecuted, deemed mentally ill, confined. Jim had seen it. No wonder Blakey had been placed under an interdict. Jim had protected him until he was old enough to handle this marvelous and dangerous gift.

Blakey hunched his shoulders, then drew his head back and up. He was old enough! By God, he was old enough!

When he'd calmed down a little he began to explore his kingdom in the cellars.

Almost immediately he found the scuba outfit neatly flapped under canvas, not too far from the casement leading onto the water world of Mathertone.

He'd done enough underwater stuff in his time to identify the kit as being nothing he did recognize. There were two spare cylinders beside the four—yes four—in the harness. However the scuba had got here, it was no longer on Earth and therefore someone had brought it through the parallels. His first joyous thought was that Jim had placed it there ready for him. A kind of homecoming present.

He thought about that.

He checked the gauges and valves and saw they were set to figures that meant nothing to him; the marks were gibberish. If



the depth of water out there in Mathertone was at all formidable, anyone popping through here into one atmosphere was going to get the bends. If he put this kit on and went through, he'd be entering the kind of danger Jim had warned him about.

He shook his head. He could hear Jim's voice, warning him, and understood a little more of what his friend had meant.

Still and all; the scuba was *here*.

Was this a test? Had Jim left the underwater-breathing apparatus to force him to recognize folly? Or to challenge him? If he went through into the water world he might prove his courage; he might also prove the folly that would kill him.

Blakey had taken risks during his time of service and thought as much about them as the next man. Now he had gone some way to opening up the secrets always faint and fuzzy in his memory. He'd proved his secret room did exist. He was sure that Jim was real and had guided him. There was so much to think about, so much to find out, that to throw all that magic away for a foolish bravado would be criminal.

Quietly, Harry Blakey turned away from the scuba and walked back to the archway of lights revealing the casement back to Earth. He'd get a night's sleep, and then, tomorrow, he'd decide.

He went through the ring of light into the basement on Earth and turned. The lights this side were not as bright. As he watched they dimmed and faded. Presently, all he could see was a blank brick wall.

## CHAPTER TWO

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In the morning, after a wash and shave and a breakfast rustled up from the bacon and eggs he'd had the forethought to bring, Blakey went back down to the cellar.

The scuba gear was no longer there.

Blakey put his hands on his hips and stared about.

Whoever had put the kit there had taken it away, or else some other villain had stolen it. Whatever the reason; no underwater gear meant that he no longer had to face the problem of going through into Mathertone.

If Jim had set a test for him, he didn't know if he had passed or failed.

Blakey had come through a few scrapes in his time and his record was not an unblemished one; he'd stick his neck out if he had to, not otherwise. In this, pass or fail, something of the new Harry Blakey who'd grown up in the past few years emerged. He still was not one hundred percent convinced that Jim had ever existed outside his own imagination. When he'd been a kid he'd been easily impressed by Jim, and every visit had been glorious and awaited with palpitations and dwelled on in retrospect with the gloating glee of a miser over gold. But—was it all real?

In those days he'd have been in agony that he might have failed in a test set him by Jim.

Now, with a shooting war behind him and a bit of the world seen and docketed in his experiences, he'd be far more cagey about risking his neck for nothing.

He poked about in the cellar, picking up and looking at objects he had come scarcely to believe in, admitting the truth that this secret room did exist, and feeling bloody miserable about it all. After a bit he went back through the brick wall and saw the lights were there again, not as bright; but there. He climbed the cellar stairs and shut the cellar door and went off to town.

Pleasance had not changed as much as many towns over the last decade. He walked along sniffing the early spring air, seeing the new buildings, ignoring traffic, wondering just what the upcoming interview with the bank manager would bring. Mr. Garvey would have to be told that the house was not up for sale. The lawyers wanted to see him again about his parents' will—all perfectly legal and no complications, of course, but. . . .

Harry Blakey wondered, too, what these good folk of Pleasance thought of him. He didn't give a damn what they thought; just that the idea amused him. He'd gone off to join up as a gangly kid, quiet, reserved, withdrawn to the point of beaten invisibility. He'd returned as a man whose chest and shoulders strained the red check shirt he wore, whose legs in the jeans covered ground. He could yomp fifty or sixty miles carrying ninety or more pounds, could drop in by chopper. His red beret lay packed neatly away in his kit. Cropped of dark hair, pugilistic of face, harsh of eye and damned demanding with the two tapes on his arm, Harry Blakey knew how to make men jump, and knew better how to make himself jump when the need arose.

When he awakened to the archway of lights off to the side of the road, between a frame house and a waste lot, he frowned. His first and stupid thought was that the fair had come to Pleasance. Then he realized what he was looking at, and his breath sucked in.



He'd never seen a casement there before. But, then, until last night the interdict Jim had placed on him would have prevented his seeing a threshold through to another parallel.

The things must be all over!

Jim had said they tended to clump together, and parallels led off side by side. There was just the one oval of lights he could see, with an angle of the house showing through. The lights were orange and green and a mixture of both and they looked friendly, glowing cheerily away.

Well?

Why not?

He could in some way sense dimly what lay beyond. Instead of the corner of the house he knew there existed a stretch of grass. He couldn't actually see the world that existed in the other parallel through the casement. Come to that, he felt that he didn't really *see* the archways of light. But they were there, bright and real. He didn't know how he knew there was an open space of grass through the threshold; but he was confident enough to stake his life on it.

For, and he made no mistake, that was exactly what he would be doing. If he was wrong he could end up in a water world like Mathertone, or a world of poisonous gases, or a place drenched in hard radiation. Many other dire alternatives occurred to him, to be quenched. He was not taking a stupid risk now. He *knew* there was grass over there. Therefore, he'd take a little stroll into another world to see what it was like.

That special thought he was coming to regard as not particularly special at all but something he merely did when he wanted to go through a casement triggered him through. He stood on the alien grass. The grass stretched for as far as he could see, unbroken. His blue and white training shoes rustled dryly as he turned about. The air was dry. The archway of lights at his back reassured him. He rotated three sixty degrees and saw nothing but sky, grass, and two archways of lights half a mile or so off.

This place, he told himself with some acerbity, is a bore. So, Harry Blakey started off marching for the distant ovals of lights.

This parallel was dry. His throat parched up quickly. There was not a cloud in the sky, and he wasn't going to look anywhere near the sun. The grass clicked and rustled underfoot. He saw no sign of life; but the grass grew so it must rain from time to time and therefore there would be life of some sort about.

That is, he corrected himself with an amazed understanding of some of the adjustments he would have to make in the future, if life here was anything like life on Earth.

Beyond the nearest casement Blakey began to sense water. Cool shade, and trees, and running water. He lengthened his stride. Just before he trajected through he turned to stare back. The dazzle across the baked grassland blinded him; but he could see the casement through which he had come. That was the way back home to Earth.

In this parallel there were trees, and shade, and cold running water. He flopped down and drank, quickly and economically, and then stood up, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. He stood in a dappled woodland. Delightful. He looked around. A startled deer-like creature broke cover and in a flutter of fawn and white was gone. Blakey felt pleased. A real sylvan glade.

Delightful though the place might be, he was not going to risk wandering off into the woods. There was the second casement back there to be explored first. So he trajected back into the heat and the harsh dry grass and walked across.

The images of what lay beyond did not at first come through clearly. He caught a mental glimpse of what appeared to be a tall clifflike building on his right hand, and another similar structure on his left, separately fifty feet or so of concrete. At least, it could be concrete. He paused and looked back, checked the casement to Earth, and trajected through.

He was standing on what appeared remarkably like a concrete pavement. The join marks showed stained gray against the prevailing white. He looked up and saw a slot of grey sky.

A man wearing grey coveralls walked quickly around the corner of the right-hand building. He wore a bulbous type headgear, almost like a cross between a welder's headgear and a spaceman's helmet. He called out as soon as he saw Blakey.

"Hey! Did you see a rumbletot go by?"

Blakey shouted back: "No."

So, as this was not Earth, the tiny silver organic pip Jim had inserted in his head allowed him to understand. But just at the moment it was not telling him what a rumbletot was.

If he took the words at their face value they could mean a juvenile delinquent. He did not think the meaning would be that simple.

The man walked quickly on. He looked worried. His helmet was pushed back; but it did not catch the light. When the man had gone around the next corner, Blakey moved carefully after him, giving a rapid glance back. Yes, the casement to the dry world of grass shone between the buildings.

He reached the corner and stopped. The buildings towered featurelessly, unbroken by window or door. If he got himself lost



here—and then an opening appeared soundlessly in the wall at his elbow and a group of people ran out.

All were dressed in coveralls of various dark shades, carried helmets, and were all looking worried.

“No!” shouted Blakey. “I haven’t seen a rumbletrot.”

He just hoped he hadn’t overdone it. He was getting fed up with this world, and began to look about seriously for a fresh casement to something more interesting.

A man at the front of the group stopped running. He walked over to Blakey. He looked agitated and, at the same time, displeased.

“Now you know better than that,” he said in a breathy, disheveled way.

A woman ran across from the group, shouting. She was of that large, choleric, dark-red species of woman, and she pushed the man aside without ceremony. “You’re too soft with them,” she said in a voice all jagged splinters. A thing in her hand, like a toy gun in the hand of a gorilla, sparked.

Blakey felt as though she had taken out his intestines and spread them ready to do her knitting. Nausea and pain struck him to his knees, retching. He was aware of nothing save the inferno sprouting from his own insides.

Just how long it was before he tasted the foulness of his own mouth he couldn’t say. His wristwatch still said the same as when he’d stepped into this new world. He rolled over and then did nothing for a time until he gathered his insides together again. Whatever that female harridan had hit him with made CS gas and any other crowd-control weapon look like a water-pistol technique. He groaned.

“Lie still, the nausea will go away soon.”

The voice carried no tones of friendliness, only a tired appreciation of reality. Blakey squinted up. He was in a metal-lined room and three other men, none wearing coveralls or carrying helmets, squatted along the wall. There was no furniture. The light shone down from the whole of the ceiling.

Instead of saying—as he felt every right so to say—“What happened?” Blakey began to get himself together. He reckoned he knew what he’d stumbled into, therefore he would take himself out of it as soon as possible. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that he did not like this parallel.

After a lapse of time women wearing livid green coveralls and with their hair braided up under small helmets herded the men out. Blakey was goaded along with the others. They stumbled along metal-lined corridors until they reached a yard under the

pale grey sky. Here vans waited for them, purring ominously, their back doors open waiting to receive them. The interior of the van Blakey climbed into was a mere metal shell. Other men dragged themselves up and they all huddled together as the doors shut and the van started off.

The journey took around three hours. Blakey estimated the time to keep from screaming. None of his fellow prisoners vouchsafed any information; all were sunk into an apathy that would, if Blakey had been other than he was, have scared him witless.

The van stopped. The doors opened. The women guards shouted intemperate orders and the men shuffled off to stand in a bedraggled line in a yard no different from the one they had left. The metal walls went up to that grey sky all about them.

By this time Blakey could feel his inward parts as being alive again and growling. He was, as Jarvis—who being tall and on the gangly side was called Chunkey—would have said, decidedly peckish. No offer of refreshments was forthcoming as the miserable gaggle of prisoners waited in the grey metal yard.

More guards both male and female herded them through doorways into a vast empty space of metal. Somewhere out of sight around an edge of metal a dull crimson light source shed streamers of ruby light across the floor. The sound of heavy blows as of metal striking metal, boomed at rhythmic intervals. A sparky electric smell sizzled in the stale air. The men shuffled along, despondent and apathetic.

Two by two the men stepped up into small boxlike cars suspended from a single rail. The contraption looked like a row of square beads hanging from a string. The rail went in a straight line out of sight into the darkness. Ruby light splashed across the treads as Blakey climbed into a car, and sat down on a slat seat next to a man who simply put his hands to his face and rocked back and forth, back and forth, in a paroxysm of terror.

The cars shot off at speed. The monorail hissed. Blakey was pressed back by the acceleration. He just sat. He had always considered himself to be a fellow slow to anger. He'd taken a great deal of hazing before he'd struck back. Now he felt as though he'd explode at any instant. What the hell was happening? Why? And, more to the point, where was the next casement to get him out of this diabolical parallel?

No windows broke the line of the cars and the lights were merely dim blue bulbs. How fast they were going it was quite impossible to ascertain. The monorail stopped three times, and



more prisoners boarded. Now Blakey could feel his insides clamoring for sustenance. Nothing was forthcoming.

He began to try to estimate distances. Suppose this contraption was running at fifty miles an hour. That might be a good guess. His watch refused to restart. But he could check off one hour, and then two, and then three. He felt cramped and cold. After five hours—say two hundred and fifty miles?—the monorail slowed, jerked, and then stopped. Doors slid open.

As he shuffled out with the others he supposed that the thing could have been running at a hundred miles an hour. He couldn't tell. That would be five hundred miles. He was one hell of a way from Pleasance, that was for sure.

And—which way? He could, relative to the Earth Parallel, be in the Atlantic Ocean right now. Not a happy thought.

Guards in their livid green and their helmets and their little glitter pistols that drew out a guy's insides for knitting herded them into another—another!—blasted metal hall. Blakey looked around.

He saw. About ten yards off, to the side, the dimly glowing frieze of lights was not a part of this world. Those mentally sensed lights indicated a casement.

He drew in a breath.

He did not intend to hang about. He had thirty feet to cover in a single mad dash before they could get their inside-drawing pistols into action. He'd have to be quick.

"Hurry along there!" and "Move it! Move it!"

The prisoners shuffled off, herded along away from the casement.

Blakey lined himself up on the threshold, put his head down—and ran.

He ran.

His mind was already forming the thought that would traject him through the parallels. His feet skimmed over the metal floor. He was almost there. . . . The lights glowed a welcome. He felt himself lifting to sail through, the lights enfolding him, and the glitter-pistols sparked and his insides coiled and nausea gripped him and he went through the casement in a tumbled useless heap, yelling in agony.

In a vague and disjointed way he was aware of bright sunlight falling about him, of a tremendous rushing roaring, and of falling.

Below him a river spumed along, bellowing, casting up glinting foam-tinged sparkles. The noise engulfed him. Just before he struck the water he saw downstream the surface of the river

covered with sharp-edged black rocks, riddled with streamers of white water. The rapids down there looked ready to take any boat ever made and chew it up and spit out splinters tinged with blood.

He hit the water and went under. He came up, spluttering and a log thwacked him alongside the head. His insides were a single nauseous mass of corruption; his head rang with the blow; he was retching and yelling and slopping water. He got an arm over the log and clung on.

The river whirled him on.

In seconds he'd hit the rapids.

He just had time to think that this was a damned fine parallel he'd jumped into before the first of the rocks went by like crazed whales pursued by sharks. Madness bellowed about him. A tiny helpless chip in that maelstrom of water, Harry Blakey went whirling down the rapids.

## CHAPTER THREE

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He sprawled along the log, gripped onto a stub-end of a broken branch, closed his eyes, and hoped. The runnels of spuming foam like veins of fat in meat sluiced the log between the rocks. The noise reverberated inside his head, painfully. He was tossed up and down and thumped about from side to side. A rock slashed all along his jeans, ripping the blue cloth. Water smothered him. He gasped in the effort to breathe.

The bark of the log chafed at him, and he gripped on and wetness entered into every fiber, and he hung on, and the log whirled downstream among the boulders, and he clung tightly, and held on, and would not let go—and presently the noise fell away and the log twisted gently in a pool, and he could once more feel the nausea rising inside. The glitter pistols could only have caught him with a tithe of their power. He felt terrible. But he was alive. Very wet, half-drowned, sick to his guts—but alive.

Presently he got himself together a little, and started to take an interest in his surroundings. He refused to dwell on what had happened. This was like learning to drive. You made an awful foul-up and then you must not dwell on that; but look to the next



hazard on the road. If you hung about with your attention puzzling away on what had happened and what you'd done wrong, why then you'd make an even more monumental foul-up next second.

The banks of the river were choked with vegetation that looked so alive as to be menacing. The pool gradually emptied him out at the lower end and the log sailed down-stream. Other bits of wood congregated and he hauled them in to fashion a somewhat more stable platform. He couldn't yet dignify this crazy construction as a raft.

Splashes from ahead snatched his attention from the bank where he was almost—almost—sure he'd seen movement. Something large and scaly broke the surface. Jaws opened. Blakey gulped. That was the father and mother of all alligators!

The thing vanished under the water and Blakey wriggled most of himself up onto his lash-up of wood. He peered ahead. The stream carried him on under the blue sky and the brilliant sun. Whatever that thing was, it did not have him on its menu for now. Later on . . . ?

Dwelling for just a moment on the past, he came to the serious conclusion that perhaps if you ventured off into the parallels it would be a good idea to go prepared.

Now that his insides had settled down after their nauseating contortions from the effects of the glitter pistols, they were letting him know that they felt neglected. Blakey appreciated good food. While he would not call himself a trencherman, he yet liked to put away enough to keep body and soul together. He now felt as though his body was about to part company from sustenance altogether. In short—Harry Blakey was hungry.

He looked about with little hope. He was not particularly fond of fish. He supposed that if it came to it he might catch a fish or two; then he'd have to fabricate some way of cooking the damn things. Here the river widened and soon, drifting along about a hundred yards from the right hand bank, he saw the left bank receding until it was all of half a mile away. A few islands went past as the log and its attendant raffle of branches drifted downstream. The river curved into a wide right hand bend. Currents meshed here and the craft Blakey sailed swirled. The smell of the river, warm and brown and mysterious, came up off the water and from the banks like the scents from the fabulous palace of Achmed D'arreddin in the legends of Araby.

Right on the point of the bend, wooden staked walls showed against the bank; thatched rooftops, tall columns of blue-grey smoke wispy against the green of the forest, and the distant

yelping as of a thousand kicked curs spoke eloquently of the first sign of civilization Blakey had encountered in this world. At once he struggled to paddle in using a broken branch.

He wasn't concerned at the moment if they were cannibals over there; if they were he'd be diving in to grab the choicest bits from the pot with the best of them.

A boat pulled out from the town. Low, flat-bottomed, blunt of bow and stern, she waddled along under the impetus of a score of paddlers along each side, churning up a fuss of white water beneath her chunky prow. Deck houses rose amidships, pierced with openings. Flags flew.

"Hey!" yelled Blakey. He tried to stand up and almost went nose first into the river. He waved his branch. "Hey!"

Now in the flat breeze over the river he could smell the divine aromas of cooking floating from the punt-like boat.

"Hey!"

He was not thirsty. In the trip down the rapids he'd drunk enough water to waterlog an elephant, and if the stuff was poisonous to his system it was too late to worry. "Hey!"

At last they saw and heard him. They picked him up by the simple expedient of flinging a rope and letting him trail astern. When he was clear of the thumping row of paddles, they hauled him in. He came aboard gasping and wet, like a bundle of washing towed overside as quick laundry.

He choked out: "Thanks!" and then sprayed water all over the deck.

"You're lucky to be picked up, my friend," said a fellow with one eye, a lopsided face, and a red scarf tied around his head. He wore a blue breechclout, carried a knife strapped to his thigh, and nothing else.

"Yeah—thanks again, pal."

The boat was simply what she appeared—an overgrown punt with a spacious cabin amidships, forty paddlers, and a bridge construction up front and rear like pulpits. In those pulpits stood contraptions like bows and arrows on their sides and enlarged five times. They were not quite like ballistae, but Blakey spotted the black and heavily barbed darts. If that artillery was designed to protect the boat from alligator-like monsters, then Blakey felt very friendly toward the idea.

Other men and women, all dressed in the same way, moved about the deck doing things like coiling ropes and scrubbing and swabbing. The smell of cooking floated divinely nearer. Blakey stood up. He opened the conversation in a general way, got on to the particular very quickly, and finished by saying: "And so after



my boat sunk and being rescued by you good folk, I am hungry. In fact, I'm starving."

They expressed a lively sympathy. For a single horrified instant Blakey wondered if they would not regard him as a shipwrecked mariner entitled to comforts, and demand payment. He needn't have worried. One-eye, whose name he said was Hondle, led Blakey into the cabin. This section was furnished with tables and chairs, and the smell increased. Blakey licked his lips. Pretty soon he was sitting down with other folk and tucking into a fine meal. What it was he neither knew nor cared. It tasted delicious.

"We are sailing for Lookenti," said Hondle. "We can put you off there. We are all sorry about your boat."

A nice friendly folk, Blakey decided. He smiled.

"That's good of you." He saw out through the wide square window—they were never scuttles—an oval of light go drifting past. It was some ten feet or so above the level of the river. He watched as the boat pulled past the casement. Well, there'd be another threshold to another parallel along real soon.

He said very little, and they were polite, quite realizing his state of exhaustion after his ordeal. The boat, referred to as *Joy of Comfort*, swung well into the center of the river, and the paddlers stowed their paddles, leaving just the two aftermost to keep the boat on course. The engine power of the boat then tucked into gargantuan meals. Blakey felt he might like it here. He certainly liked looking at the fit bodies of the paddlers, seeing their smiles, their bright eyes, their white teeth, men and women alike, and he liked the jokes and quips that flew about. The passengers occupied the upper deck. They would lean over the tail and stare down at the crew, and jocular remarks flew. This world seemed—after the alarums and excursions—to be a happy and wonderful place.

Blakey knew all about paddling a canoe.

He offered to take his turn when necessary, and by this means his passage was arranged. *Joy of Comfort* sailed on.

No one passed any comment on his red checked shirt or his ripped jeans. Some of the passengers on the upper deck wore gaudy clothes, and Blakey had a hunch he'd soon be wearing just a blue loincloth and a red kerchief around his head.

He was quartered up in the forepeak that was, in truth, square rather than triangular. Just before he went to sleep he told himself, very seriously, that all this was happening to him. He was not dreaming. He was taking a holiday through the parallels. He was a trajecter. His secret room led to the marvels and the

terrors through which he had been. In all probability, even Jim was real. . . . He went to sleep.

The morning brought an enormous breakfast and then some fancy paddling as *Joy of Comfort* angled across the flood to make the jetty of the next town. Here more passengers came aboard. And, Blakey licked his lips, more provisions were brought up and stowed carefully alongside the galley. Beautiful cooking smells hung about the boat nearly all the time. They pushed off and Blakey took his share of paddling until they were once more on course. Four times that morning they passed casements, glimmering away with mysterious promise low over the water.

Standing right up in the squared-off prow under the platform supporting the armament, Blakey spotted the lights of a casement dead ahead. He reached out in that subtle mental way and caught the impression of concrete. Should he?

And then Hondle appeared, shouting cheerfully: "Hey, Harry! Dinner! Steak and eggs and fresh fruit and cheese—"

By the time Blakey made up his mind, the casement was long passed away astern. He smiled. Concrete, in place of this?

During the early afternoon they negotiated a place of swirling waters where rocks broke the surface, spouting with far less venom than the rapids upstream but still presenting the captain with a nice test of his river skills. Captain Onduras knew his river—the River of a Million Teeth—and *Joy of Comfort* negotiated the bad patch with great panache. Blakey dug in his paddle as the orders were shouted. Hondle, who served in the office of Boatswain, kept the paddlers up to the mark. After that, bottles and jugs were cracked.

Blakey tried to rouse himself. If this was Lotus-eating, he'd stand for a deal of it yet. He had his eye on one of the girls, who paddled away just ahead of him. She was delightful, and judging by the sliding glances she favored him with, and the way a rounded shoulder lifted, he was in with a chance. It rained until nightfall and then the stars came out. Up in the forepeak by the section of bulkhead given over to his use, with a leaf-stuffed mattress that was aromatic with sweet-smelling herbs, he found his paddling companion waiting. She smiled dazzlingly in the vague light from a horn lantern.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Oh, yes, I think so, Duveen."

Privacy was assured by a rattan screen. In the morning Blakey felt that he'd go all the way with *Joy of Comfort*, and then he'd have to be talked out of signing on. During that day the boat pulled into another town where some passengers disembarked



and others came aboard. Blakey helped load fresh provisions. Hondle wanted to know if it was all right for Blakey to come with them instead of being off about his own affairs.

"Well, Hondle, it's like this. My old boat was in pretty bad shape; that's why she fell to pieces. As you say you have enough vacancies to take me on—if you will, I will."

"You've heard the stories of the river?"

Cagey old Harry Blakey said: "Some. Which one do you have in mind?"

Hondle put a hand to the knife strapped to his thigh.

"The one about the disappearances. Boats sail down river to Lookenti and are never seen again."

"Oh, that. D'you believe in it?"

"My friend, who was bosun aboard Laughter in Heaven, is not in any of the towns along the river these days. I do not know. I wondered if you had heard—"

Blakey shook his head. "I don't give credence to all the stories, Hondle, my friend."

But, Blakey reasoned, this was perhaps one reason why there were vacancies among the crew. *Joy of Comfort* could handle twenty-five paddlers aside.

Because they used the current to take them along and the other boats plying downstream did the same, they seldom passed or were passed by other vessels. Every now and again a long, lean canoe-shaped vessel would go paddling past upstream, the spume flying, the paddlers bending and thrusting and urging their craft on. These arrowlike canoes appeared like apparitions, smothered in spray, battling their way upstream. No unwieldy, comfortable craft like the punts attempted to make passage upstream except for the most short and necessary of journeys. All this made sense, of course. When the punt-like craft reached Lookenti, the end of the line, she'd be broken up and the crew and paddlers would take canoes to return. Passage upstream was an altogether different business and art from traveling downstream.

Blakey and Duveen got along splendidly. She said that her parents were dead, that she'd taken up the life of a river paddler because that was better than many other careers open to her. Her face, open, bright, sunny, with hazel eyes and a shock of light brown hair forever blowing about her, enchanted Blakey. Artlessly she gave him a deal of information about the river, and this parallel, which she called Vundersharm. She had heard stories of lands and people away from the river; but she only half-believed them. The River of a Million Teeth was her world.

"We'll be crossing the Lakes tomorrow, Harry."

The way she said this alerted Blakey.

He made some casual remark in the way he'd quickly affected, and she went on, speaking seriously—for a change—and quite evidently a trifle alarmed despite her own air of self-possession. "It'll be hard work if you're not used to it, Harry. And if we meet a monster on the way—

Blakey half-laughed. "That's what the artillery is for."

"Yes. Can you shoot?"

He started to say in his offhand way: "Sure—" and then stopped. He could handle a rifle and a machine gun and anything else an airborne infantryman who'd started in the armored ever needed to shoot. But oversize bows and arrows? Cautiously, he said: "I don't think I've ever handled one of the pattern you have."

She smiled. "Oh, that's all right. Captain Onduras is very fond of his throwers. He brings them back upriver with him in the canoes. He says they are the best along the whole river."

"Well," said cunning Harry Blakey, "then maybe he'll show me—I should certainly like to put a shot into the eye of any monster that tried to eat *you*!"

She squealed and clung to him and it was very satisfactory thereafter. But, all the same, when *Joy of Comfort* sailed out into the first of the Lakes, Blakey quite saw what she meant.

Only the faintest strip of grey on the left side indicated the presence of land. When it rained the water looked as grey as that strip of land. If a real storm got up here, as it might very well do, the puntlike craft might prove a poor sailer.

But Captain Onduras knew his business. He did not venture out into any one of the string of enormous lakes until he was sure the weather was set fine. They paddled their way across the lakes, and Blakey, for one, looked forward to reentering the river, even if it did bear the ominous name of the River of a Million Teeth.

By this time he had grown accustomed to the appearance of casements here and there. Most were oval, some were circular, a number oblong. They varied in size. Three or four could have swallowed the boat and three of her sisters whole. Some were so small as to admit of only a single person. The thing that began to take hold of Blakey was the realization—which he had taken for granted ever since he was a child—that here he was in this world, and in exactly the same place were hundreds, thousands, millions, of other worlds. They were all there. No one could pass from one to another unless they had the gift of trajecting, and had studied and trained to perfect that divine gift. It was



odd, damned odd, to think that where the boat sailed these lakes there existed concrete jungles, and barren wastes, deserts, and other people separated by walls stronger than Chobham armor. During those days in *Joy of Comfort* Harry Blakey gained a tiny inkling into the very marvel of what he had always taken so matter-of-factly. And this, because he was spending time in a world that was not his own? Or because of Duveen? Or, just because he was on a holiday and could take time out to think?

He had no idea where he was in relation to Earth.

That did not bother him unduly. He felt sublimely confident that when the time came and he wanted to go home he could find his way from parallel to parallel. He did not think he would make much effort to retrace his steps; but if that proved the only way, then that would be the way he would go.

His hands, already tough, toughened still further. He hated to think of the state they'd have been in if he'd been unaccustomed to hard physical exercise. He'd never felt fitter. Except for his legs, and he tried to make up for that by taking a daily constitutional. Duveen laughed at him, and then jogged along at his side until she grew winded, and collapsed gasping and laughing.

"You don't need to worry," said Blakey. He spoke without any offense intended or taken. "You have the most splendid legs of any girl that ever lived."

And Duveen laughed, and tossed her head back so that her hair swirled, and Blakey felt the deep jolt of pure pleasure.

One early afternoon, just as the rain began, Blakey had pointed out to him the distant loom of land.

"That's where we rejoin the river," said Hondle.

"Good-oh! Let the current do the work."

As he spoke he became aware of a casement ahead, glimmering distinctly through the rain veils. And, in a direct line about a hundred yards or so farther off, a second casement. The lower arcs of the large circular casements vanished in the water; although he was aware of their presence. *Joy of Comfort* would sail straight through both thresholds.

Without any deliberate effort, without thought, Blakey made no attempt to sense out what lay beyond. He imposed his own form of Interdict upon his trajecter powers. Instead, he watched Duveen, laughing and holding up her hands and arms in the rain, the water swirling and glinting from her body. *That* was his world now, and for a good long time to come. . . .

The squared-off prow of the boat entered the space where an opening existed between this parallel and the next. Blakey blinked. At first he thought he was seeing double. Then he realized that

he was, rather, seeing in the singular a double event. For the boat's prow entered the casement and vanished from this world, vanished to everyone there except him—for he could still see the boat as she sailed on into another parallel.

Duveen let out a surprised yelp. Hondle put a hand to the hilt of his knife. Shocked exclamations burst up all around the aft end of the boat. Screams blasted into the rain-choked air.

The stern of the boat entered the casement and vanished from the world of Vundersharm.

Now they sailed a small lake, surrounded by forests, a lake of a brilliant blue under a blue sky. No rain fell. The uproar battered from Joy of Comfort. Directly ahead, Blakey could see a casement. He sensed out with flashing speed and caught the impression of rain and a lake and the feeling that beyond that casement lay the world of Vundersharm from which they had just passed.

He looked up. In the air above the boat a thing that looked like a flying platform flat and metallic, hovered. As he looked, the platform swooped down. It halted in that rush to hover just above the boat. For a moment silence gripped everyone. And then shrieks of terror burst out in a frenzy of fear and loathing.

From the flying platform horror dropped upon that happy little kingdom of Joy of Comfort.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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To the passengers and crew of the boat the experience through which they were now going would, no doubt, at first be attributed to madness. When they all realized the same events were happening to them the real horror would hit. To them it must seem that their boat had sailed from the grey rain-soaked lake in the River of a Million Teeth straight into some weird brilliant-blue lake where the sun shone with a harsh and metallic luster.

They had not seen these events as Harry Blakey had witnessed them. They were not trajecters.

The screaming went on and on.

From the flying platform dropped forms of grotesque and horrific shape. The things hit the deck and at once ran like



greyhounds. Filmy nets spun up, opening into circles, descended upon the people, hopelessly entrapping them.

Dazed, Blakey looked on in horror.

The things were repellent in a way that reached right down past the primeval in a human being. Their bodies, as big as horses, sprouted bunches of tendrils. Two thick bunches rippled underneath, giving them their rapidity of motion. From the tops of the bodies other tendrils waved, some sporting eyes, others black-fanged mouths, others ears. Each separate tendril coiled with animate life, alive and seeking to do its part in the coherent whole that was its monster owner. Pink flushed under parts exuded a slime that ran from wide pores, lubricated the things' movements.

Captain Onduras recovered quickly on his bridge. He appeared with a crossbow, triggered it, and sent a bolt into the top section of a monster about to hurl a filmy net. The thing staggered, and a thick ichor pulsed. The stench made everyone near gag. Hondle ripped out his knife, slashed at a net. The knife bounced. Only a frantic duck saved the Bosun. Blakey grabbed Duveen around the waist. He glared upon that scene of terror as the monsters tendrilled about the boat, casting their nets, binding their prisoners.

The boat sailed on over that brilliantly blue lake.

Blakey swallowed. He could see the answer. But could he do it? Would it be beyond his powers?

Only one way to find out.

He pushed Duveen at Hondle, shoving them toward the stern. He braced himself. The boat sailed on toward that second casement. Quite evidently these monstrous obscenities had in some way trajected the boat through the first casement. If they missed with that the second lay to hand. Boats sailing down the river would line themselves up as they reached the far end of the lake, line up to reenter the river—just as *Joy of Comfort* had done. Then they'd be trajected *here*—and the monsters would enslave them at their leisure. No wonder the River of a Million Teeth was rife with stories of disappearances. *Heart of Laughter* had gone missing, so had *Laughter in Heaven* and *Delight in Happiness*. Now it was *Joy of Comfort*'s turn.

Harry Blakey intended to change the pattern.

Monsters were working methodically. If they were slavers they knew their business. Captain Onduras shot again and then went down under a rush of slimy tendrilled bodies and a flurry of the nets. Monsters rippled aft.

"Harry!" screamed Duveen.

"Hold on. We'll be back in the river soon—then you can take these creatures to pieces—"

The prow of *Joy of Comfort* nosed into the second casement. Blakey put out his special thought, twisted, urgent, desperate, calling upon every single ounce of his strength. He felt as though someone had taken his head between two boards and hit them with a sledgehammer. He saw through dazed eyes the front sections of the boat going through the threshold. He was doing it! Somehow, in a way he devoutly knew belonged to the teaching Jim had hammered into him, somehow he was trajecting the whole boat through a casement!

Sweat stank on him. He shuddered. He felt as though all his teeth were being drawn at the same time. He held on. Now over half the boat was through. The monsters were milling. Some up forward started to run back aft. Paddlers boiled up out of the aft deck house with crossbows, began to shoot. They'd taken time to recover from shock, and fetch their crossbows—no wonder! And Tall Farley up on the stern thrower swung the weapon three hundred and sixty degrees around and let the long iron-barbed dart loose. The wicked shaft pierced through a running monster and skewered on to stitch a second onto the bolt, like kebabs. Hondle let out a roar of triumph, and snatched a crossbow from a paddler, let fly. Duveen bent to the discarded bow and instantly began respanning it. Blakey, a single mass of shaking perspiration and quivering agony, held on, held on, shoved the boat and her people through the casement from one parallel to another.

In the bedlam all about him he could smell the stink of green ichor as the monsters bled, the aroma of the lake, so strangely different from the soothing scent of the lake in the River of a Million Teeth, he could see Duveen's lovely flushed face as she bent over the crossbow, see Hondle shooting with deadly aim, see the other paddlers triggering their crossbows. The flying platform swirled closer.

Over the rail of the platform a head clad in a golden helmet appeared. Metal winked up there. A coruscating line of fire spat from the metal weapon in the hand of the man with a golden helmet, struck the deck. Flames flicked up instantly.

Not much more . . . Only a few feet of the boat left. . . . Blakey pushed hard, forcing *Joy of Comfort* through the casement. He was aware of heat and of a searing fire scorching his eyes. A blow smashed into his ribs. He was falling. With all his last despairing strength he pushed the boat through.

Then he hit the water and went under and blueness surrounded him.



He was fished out in a silver net and dumped onto the wooden deck of a raft. He pumped water, gasping and groaning, vomiting. He felt as though all his limbs were broken and stuck back together the wrong way around. Two paddlers lay with him—Hobe and Young Teke—spluttering and coughing water.

Blakey was under no illusions.

He knew what had happened.

That bastard with the golden helmet had shot his fancy gun and blasted Blakey and Hobe and Young Teke overboard. Probably it was a newfangled laser. They'd been blown off Joy of Comfort, and so here they were, stuck in another parallel and prisoners of these ghastly tendrilled slimy monsters.

It was enough to make a fellow sick.

All the worlds you came across in the parallels were not paradises. Very far from it.

Tendrils lashed. Blakey and his comrades were hauled to their feet, forced across the raft into small boats. The boats were quite ordinary; fiberglass, outboard motors. The men controlling them were not. They possessed tiny heads and gangly shoulders and limbs, and were dressed in lizard skins. The boats roared away from the raft over that blue blue lake under the brilliant harsh sunlight. They creamed in to berth alongside a jetty where sheds wilted under the sun.

There was no need for the monsters to lash them with whips. The tendrils equipped with barbs were worse than whips.

Along a small stretch of wooden jetty they stumbled. The man with the golden helmet stood there, clad in black leathers, very arrogant, very contemptuous and in a towering temper. Now Blakey could see that he had a wristlet circling his left wrist, to which a long chain ran to a small girl—a woman but of small size—crouched at the end, the chain riveted to the iron collar about her neck. She was clad in a short white frock, much torn, her feet were bare, and her hair dragged in a filthy and untidy mess.

The man with the golden helmet was striking her with a cane. The whippy length lashed down again and again upon her shoulders. She simply huddled, and cried, and did not scream.

"You imbecile! You apology! You let them get away!"

A tendril caught Young Teke across the back and he let out a shrill scream. Blakey and Hobe were pushed on.

"Fool!" shrieked the man, slashing with his cane. "I'll teach you to fail me!"

As he stumbled on toward the sheds, Blakey felt great sympathy for the chained woman. Quite clearly she was a trajecter, as

he was. She had drawn *Joy of Comfort* through the casement, so that the monsters could snatch their captives. And when the boat had simply sailed on and out of this world through the other casement, she had done nothing. Blakey wondered if she could have done anything. He pondered. If this was how some parallels treated trajecters, no wonder Jim had so solemnly warned him. Suppose he was caught and chained up and beaten into trajecting his masters and mistresses between the parallels!

That would be a life of horror. Harry Blakey saw more clearly the wisdom of his tutor. Let *no one* know he was a trajecter!

From all he could see here this was an organized enterprise. The blue blue lake was merely an artificial stretch of water within the forest. Constructed so as to match the surface of the lake in Vundersharm, it accepted the river boats as they sailed downstream. The monsters enslaved the passengers and crews. Just how many were taken Blakey could not know. Probably not too many, otherwise the river traffic would halt altogether while steps were taken to discover the causes of these mysterious disappearances. This, of course, revealed a little of the power and resources of the slavers. If they could set up this organization for a few boatloads of people, then their ramifications of slavery within the parallels must be immense.

Inside the shed all their clothes were stripped from them and they were thrust forward to topple into the mass of people already huddled there. Hobe and Young Teke recognized fellow paddlers. Women were crying and crooning in terror, men were swearing away, although blasphemy was notably absent along the River of a Million Teeth. Also, there were men and women there not from Vundersharm. They were from other worlds within the parallels.

A fair-haired girl was cussing in a very forthright way, mightily incensed, and at the same time trying to comfort the man with her, who clung to her, the tears streaming down his face and his body shaking with sobs.

Catching at the wisp of a thought, Blakey mentally switched off that silver pip near his brain. At once he was assailed by a chorus of noise, words that meant nothing. He was hearing what these people were saying, and completely unable to understand. This was how it would be in any world where you didn't savvy the lingo.

Just as he was about to switch on again, he heard a man's voice say: "Well, confound it! I say we bash 'em and make a run for it!"

Instantly, Blakey looked in the direction from which the voice



came. In that mass of naked flesh he at last made out the man who spoke. His hair was greying at the temples, his face was of a square and ruddy shape of good living, and his body, although disfigured by a paunch, looked still fit enough in the refined way of golf or squash. His skin was of the whiteness that desiccates skin left too long covered in office blocks. His companion was younger, with dark hair, and a nose rather of the pinched kind. He was sweating. He did not look strong.

"If we run, Mr. Chandler, where do we run to? I do not think we can be in New York still."

"Of course not, Charles!"

"The office will be sure to be making inquiries—"

"What good will that do? They'll run as through the computer, and come up with a fat zero. I wish I'd had a better lunch. I'm starving."

"Yes, Mr. Chandler."

"I say we should clobber them and run. We can't be worse off than we are here. You'll run, too, Charles."

"Ye—of course, Mr. Chandler."

Blakey eased over.

He squatted down. Chandler eyed him with great disfavor. Charles sniffed.

Blakey said: "You guys from Earth!"

Both men reacted in shocked surprise. When their gabbling silenced, and Blakey made a few noncommittal noises, they told him they were from ASC Dyanmics, based in California, currently at the New York office. And just where the hell were they now? They'd walked out of the office and turned a corner and—poof—they were in a net and stark naked, and then they were here. Wherever here was. And were they mad?

Blakey assured them they were not mad, told them that much the same had happened to him, and then sat back to ponder.

New York!

So he *had* traveled a ways, then. . . .

"See here, Blakey. Are you with me? We can knock over one of these bastards and get into the trees. You look useful."

"Where do we go then?"

Blakey was not, was most certainly not, going to tell them that he was a trajecter and if he could find a casement could traject them out of this madhouse. He'd do that, of course; but they'd never discover from him how it was done.

"Go? We'll find a way. I didn't get where I am today by sitting on my butt when things needed to be done!"

Being kind, Blakey refrained from reminding him just where he was today . . .

"We'll wait until it's dark—if it gets dark in this nuthouse. Then we'll escape. Now conserve your strength. If they don't feed us we'll go hungry."

Charles stuttered: "That's no way to speak to Mr. Chandler—"

But Blakey ignored him, turned on his side, closed his eyes. Come nighttime they'd bash monsters, if they were lucky, and make a run for it.

From what these two clowns had said it seemed to Blakey that maybe they'd come through more than one parallel to this place. If he ran across any other casement he'd have to be careful. Going back to the casement leading onto Vundersharm, assuming they could steal a boat, would be best. He liked the idea of roaring along the River of a Million Teeth in a fiberglass job with a big outboard, chasing *Joy of Comfort* and Duveen . . .

Before night fell—if, as he had sourly surmised, night ever did fall in this damned place—they were all roused out. Thwacks and blows drove everyone out of the sheds to line up, shivering with terror, on the packed dirt road fringing the edge of the artificial lake. The man with the golden helmet, and the woman-girl in the white frock at the end of her chain, waited for them.

Tendriled monsters bustled about, traveling at a surprising speed, their pores flushing pink and oozing the thick oil-like liquid that assisted their locomotion. The brassy sun still shone. The heat oppressed. And the way ahead looked likely to be long and arduous.

They started off, staggering into one another, being beaten, a groaning moaning line of captive humanity.

"We'll make a run for it at the next turn in the trail," said Mr. Chandler. Charles checked a groan.

"Hold it," said Blakey. "How far d'you think you'll get with them?"

Then a tendril laid itself across Chandler's back and he yelled. He yelled blue bloody murder. Charles, unaware that Blakey was looking at him, sniggered, and then immediately tried to be conciliating to Chandler. Blakey sighed. Well, he was stuck with them as fellow Terrans. They were going to be a handful, though, that was for sure.

Around about then as they trudged on Blakey realized that the fact these two were fellow Earthmen really didn't mean a great deal. If he had any responsibility to any of these people, captive with them, then his responsibility was to them all. To Hobe and Young Teke, for instance. He couldn't abandon them.



Presently under the avenue of trees Blakey became aware that a casement existed ahead. He sensed the threshold before he saw the familiar oval of lights. Everyone slowed down. They shuffled along, two by two. When he reached nearer to the arch of lights he received a profound shock. He stared, and his mind sorted and categorized, and came up with what was the only answer. He felt completely numbed with surprise.

At the side of the casement a rig that looked like a small computer terminal was coupled up to a dynamo and diesel engine, thumping away, chuff, chuff, chuff, under the trees. Thick cables snaked off from the terminal. But these things were of only fleeting interest, fascinating though they were to find here.

The cables led to a rectangular slab of utter blackness.

Blakey had never seen blackness like it. Jet would look grey by comparison. It stood some ten feet tall, and five wide. It just *was*.

The people were lashed forward, tendrils striking down on their naked backs, herded into the blackness. They vanished completely. Blakey saw that they were stepping into the oblong of blackness and going through the casement. And here he understood what he was seeing.

The diesel and the dynamo generated power. The computer terminal—hell, that was no computer terminal!—created the oblong of blackness which was an artificial trajectory.

Jim hadn't mentioned this—or had he? If Blakey could really believe that Jim was real, maybe he'd remember more of what the friend of his childhood had told him. The Interdict Jim had put on him still clutched him; he was not free of it yet, even if back in his secret room in Pleasance he had thought he was. There were more marvels to be discovered in his head. He was willing to bet, having supreme trust in Jim even if Jim was not real, that this black opening between parallels was one such secret stuck in his head.

He shuffled on with the others and went through and felt sensations differing only marginally from those he experienced when he trajected personally. They stood on a wide grassy plain and the sky was yellow and umber, and a keen wind blew, and it was decidedly not warm.

He had to disregard the screams of the people. In time they'd get used to going through the parallels.

Hurried on, everyone broke into a clumsy run. Tendrils lashed them. The golden-helmeted man and his shrinking trajectory ran ahead. Up there a second casement showed with that rectangle of

blackness. Once more the captives were flogged through. This parallel, then, decided Blakey, was of the nature of a shortcut. Just as the world outside his secret room had been for Jim.

On the farther side of that casement a world opened out of rolling downland and clumps of trees. The captives trudged on. Twice more they went through thresholds where the artificial trajecters put them through the parallels. On the next occasion a convoy of motor trucks passed them going the other way. The captives shrank aside. Blakey watched. They were GM trucks, each driven by a little hobgoblin of a fellow wearing a black leather helmet. Ahead of the convoy rolled a jeep with a man in a golden helmet lolling in the back. The trucks vanished through the blackness.

Ahead of the prisoners, who by now were exhausted, rose a stockade. The walls were tall and thickly spiked. Watchtowers graced each corner. Over the gateway towers lifted. Up there, plain to see, the snouts of machine guns frowned down. Blakey knew a prison stockade when he saw one.

In this world the sun was almost gone.

Thick woods grew down close to a stream on the right side of the enclosure, a chilly evening wind blew, and clouds were thick enough to blot out the stars when night fell.

Just across the stream and among the nearest outgrowths of the trees a small casement glimmered. The ring of fairy-lights showed up clearly to Blakey's senses, although he realized they were dim by normal standards. He realized how tired he was—he meant the lights, not his senses. Although, wasn't it God's truth that his senses were dim after all his experiences?

The interior of the stockade was as he had expected; quarters under the walkways, a stabling area, and a packed earth compound. Here the captives squatted down to try to rest. Some of the naked prisoners were led off into an archway in the far wall. Others followed. Blakey hunched across to his fellow paddlers. The men from Earth followed him. He'd kept the language problem at a distance so far; he was in no mood to play games with the men from Vundersharm; he valued them greatly.

Chandler said: "Look! In those stables—trucks—a jeep!"

In the next instant he was up and running. Charles followed. All hell broke loose. Cursing like a defrocked priest, Blakey heaved himself up and charged after the pair of damnfool idiots.



## CHAPTER FIVE

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Machine gun bullets thwacked into the earth. People screamed. Chandler reached the stables with Charles a pale ghost at his heels. They leaped into the jeep. The engine turned over at once. Blakey flung himself forward. Hobe and Young Teke were panting at his back.

A concussive roar broke the world asunder behind him. He whirled. The main gate was just disappearing in a cloud of smoke. The detonation rippled across the compound. The machine gun stopped firing, it swung around to face outward, and opened up again. An armored car trundled through the wreck of the gateway, spouting thirty-millimeter shells, and a second and then a third followed.

They looked like Panhard jobs, although in the darkness and the smoke and confusion Blakey couldn't be sure. Anyway, it didn't matter what they were. This was a rival gang come to hijack the golden-helmeted gang's loot. Blakey guessed that was the answer, and he just hoped they'd all kill one another and save him the job.

A firefight rapidly developed. Grenades crish-crashed against the watchtowers. The dark fleet forms of men poured through the gateway. Smoke roiled confusingly.

Chandler had the jeep hurtling out of the stables. It careered crazily across the compound, struck the armored flank of a car, rebounded, rolled over. Blakey ran across. Young Teke and Hobe were yelling. He switched in his silver pip and heard them screaming: "Look out, Harry!"

He dropped flat.

The swath of bullets passed over him. He rolled under the jeep. Chandler and Charles were gone. The armored car trundled on, its machine cannon making an incredible din. Tendriled monsters shrilled and rippled over the ground. They traveled so fast they presented difficult targets. Some were caught by thirty-millimeter shells and blown into gobbets of pink-slimed gunk. Others vanished into the smoke. The armored cars ran about the compound, shooting. One, and only one erupted into a ball of flame. Blakey saw the streak of fire lancing from the flying

platform. A glint of gold up there. . . . Yes, he knew who was up there with his little girl-woman at the end of her chain. The platform flew off.

A voice bellowed from somewhere.

"Who bought it?"

And the answer: "Tommy—he'll never bet on the trots again."

The answer was lost. Noise continued to smash at Blakey. A lone machine gun continued to fire. Lights broke garishly from the smoke and he saw that the far quarters under the wall were burning. An inferno blazed up, drenching the compound in flickering radiance. An armored car hauled up by Blakey huntered by the jeep. It racked out a burst of machine cannon fire. Taking a breath, Blakey crawled out and started to stand up.

He was lying on the ground under the jeep. A huge hollow numbness held all the right side of his head. He supposed vaguely a glancing bullet had bashed him. He could see the legs of men in a group beside the jeep, the wheels of an armored car. The men spoke quickly together, jargon, shorthand professional talk.

"Phil! Tommy bought it—and his crew."

"I saw. . . . Think about it later. Punchy—what about the PPL?"

"Blown to bits, Phil."

"Damn. Charles—are we all runners?"

The voice that answered was not the Charles who wiped the nose of Mr. Chandler. "All runners, Phil. We've shot away a lot of stores, though. Punchy'll have to scrounge just a leetle harder."

"That I'll live to see. Tony?"

"On the top line, Phil. Jock's set is on the blink though."

"He'll survive. We'll have around half an hour to get clear. We must get all these poor devils back to their right homes after that. We really need more manpower. Alan will have to handle that—send three and fourpence routine."

"Advertise, Phil? Wanted, fearless young men for outdoor life and thrilling adventure?"

A general laugh followed.

"The lads of the old div will join; but we can advertise, yes. Good idea. We need more troops. Anyone seen Stan? He ought to have blown that flier out of the air."

"His flak got bogged down crossing the stream—"

"Armored cars are fine—sometimes. We'll have to bring in some tanks next time. Right, lads, get to it. The quicker we're back in Senchuria the better. I feel bushed. We all need a refresher."



The order group broke up—for that was what it was, Blakey realized, and he recognized the clipped accents with a wonder that this, too, was an unreal part of all the rest of the unreality. The armored cars rolled away. The smoke choked down. And Harry Blakey passed out.

He came to his senses and touched the side of his head and felt the clotted blood. His skull felt as though it had been emptied out and three witches were using it to stir up their foul brew. He spat and nothing happened, he was that dry. He crawled out from under the jeep and lurched to his feet.

The compound was a shambles. Smoke drifted flat and evil-smelling from the burned quarters. Dead bodies lay about, abandoned humans mingled with the tendriled monsters. There was no sign of anyone wearing a golden helmet.

The night struck cool. His mouth was an inferno and he thought of the stream running outside. He began to stumble toward the wreck of the main gate. Bodies lay thick here.

He stopped. Yes—be prepared.

He found a pair of grey trousers that were clean and he pulled them on and tightened the leather belt. A grey shirt from another corpse—usually only one garment was usable, and not always then. Also, he swooped with a grunt of effort, feeling the pain in his head. He picked up the revolver. It was only a .38 but it was fully loaded, and the body beside which it lay carried an ammo pouch on a blood-soaked belt.

He did not think these corpses were those of men who had attacked. He'd had the silver pip working in his head, so he was not completely sure of the language he'd overheard; but the accents and method of speech were familiar to him. No, he did not think those men from the armored cars would leave their dead and wounded behind.

Outside the clouds covered the sky, and he fumbled his way to the stream. He drank deeply and laved his head. He'd have to have that seen to pronto. The casement across the water glimmered an invitation.

Nothing here detained him. A half an hour, the man called Phil had said. He'd about used up all that. If retribution was to follow in thirty minutes, he'd be best off out of it. No one else remained alive in this wrecked stockade.

Sloshing across the stream he reached the woods. He looked back. Through the darkness the glint of distant headlights told of the retribution rolling on. He sensed the casement, caught the impression of grass and trees, and trajected through.

It was very dark. The air smelled of an odor he could not

identify. He trod on a twig and the report was like a cannon going off.

A voice, very breathy and with a kind of shushing splutter about it, said: "Who's that?"

"It's all right," said Blakey. "A friend. I tripped."

"Keep quiet. They'll hear you."

Wondering what the hell he'd stumbled into now, Blakey did as he was bid and kept quiet. He could see nothing. The fierce throbbing in his head was bad enough; but it was better than the pains preceding it. He could not traject back, for he was confident that retribution would seek out hiding places with ruthless efficiency. He was in a new parallel and must stick in here, using all the skill he still retained to keep himself alive and in one piece.

A gentle rustling heralded the approach of a bulky figure, more sensed than seen in the velvet darkness. A hoarse shushy voice said: "All set? The moment I shout the word—attack! Remember, they burned the village and killed all the old folk and the kids. What we shall do to them is less than a fair exchange."

A low-murmured chorus of avowals followed. Blakey felt it incumbent on him to join that low savage chorus.

Anyway, if people went around burning villages and killing the old folk, wouldn't the lads of the village fight back?

He was still lightheaded from the glancing blow on his head. He could now admit to the terror he had pushed aside that maybe the blow would have damaged his powers as a trajecter. Then—why, then, he would have been marooned in the parallels.

"Here they come!"

Lights showed some way off, suddenly appearing as though rounding a corner. They bobbed along. Each light was a lambent globe supported on a tall pole. The light grew in intensity as the column neared. Blakey saw what manner of creatures marched under those bobbing globes of radiance. He felt nausea, the same kind of nausea as he had felt when the tendriled monsters dropped onto *Joy of Comfort*. These creatures dragged along slaves of a humanity different from *Homo sapiens*, yet quite clearly misshapen human beings. The misery in that coffle of chained slaves rose up in a palpable wave. Blakey saw with perfect clarity the difference in kind between the slavers and the enslaved.

These creatures rode shambling parodies of horses, with awkward necks and grinning teeth and hooves that glinted. The creatures themselves—Blakey quelled the nausea. They looked as though they were freshly risen from burst-open graves. They



each had three eyes, the center orb projecting on a thick stalk from the center of their foreheads. The greenish grey skin, marbled and trending to scales here and there, clung to their faces and limbs as though pasted to the bones without need of flesh between. Shambling marbled green skeletons, three-eyed, each eye of a lambent smoky crimson, they reeked of an other-worldliness that in the parallels so far Blakey had only seen approached by the tendriled monsters. From the upper jaw, curved teeth, yellow and glistening, sank deeply embedded into indentations in the lower jaw, one each side, like saber-toothed tiger teeth.

Instinctively, Blakey thought of these horrendous beings as Saber-Toothed Skeleton Men.

Slender lances slanted up from slings over their shoulders; weapons were scabbarded to the flanks of their mounts. They used whips with great freedom on their slaves.

And—these slaves, these poor devils being thrashed along! Blakey looked at them without revulsion, with feelings of compassion and of fellowship in remembered adversity.

Judging by the shape of their bodies most of them were female. They were not of the race of *Homo sapiens*. Their faces were wide, with widely spaced eyes, with skin of a pinkish-pallid hue, a lick of blue extending down their chops. They wore no clothes. Their legs were short and more bandy than straight, and the females stood around five foot or so in height, the males some six inches or so taller. The musculature of the males' bodies was nothing short of superb, their muscles rippling with power; the females were a little less powerful but of a slenderer and more graceful form. Staring down on that macabre scene in the light of the bobbing globes of radiance, Blakey supposed that in other circumstances he would have found these people to be repugnant. But not now. Now he saw them as fellow sufferers. With the folk crouched in ambush he'd do his damndest to free every last one.

He could feel the tenseness communicating itself along the line of waiting men. He supposed they were men. And then the obvious solution hit him, and he gasped, and half-turned. In the shadows beyond the radiance of the globes he could not see these new comrades. But he could guess. If their village had been burned and the old folk and the children brutally slain, and the women and some of the remaining men driven off to captivity, then . . . Of course!

A voice breathed through the darkness.

"Hoshoo!"

Instantly the line of ambushers was in motion.

Blakey's naked feet, toughened by his experiences and the work aboard *Joy of Comfort*, would just about last him out. He'd got over the worst of the pain, his soles had hardened and no doubt calluses were developing that would send a chiropodist into a tizzy; but he rose with the other men and flung himself forward.

"Hoshoo!"

He saw the silhouetted shapes of his comrades rushing down. They were not naked. They wore spiky armor, and tall helmets with crests and spikes and fleering scraps of what looked like bundles of cloth. They brandished weapons, swords and spears, and they rushed down onto the trail in a headlong shrieking mass.

The tinker-hammer of weapons racketed up. Blakey gripped the .38 and took up the aiming position and pulled the trigger six times. He did not miss once. Then he flipped the revolver open and started stuffing fresh shells into the cylinder. The crashing concussions stopped everything. Looking up, a shell in his fingers, Blakey saw that everyone had stopped fighting. They were all staring up at him.

"Get on with it!" screamed Blakey. "They've got your girls!" He slapped the revolver shut and shot a big fellow on one of the horselike animals. The man went over backwards off the crupper and Blakey swiveled and shot another of the bastards who had a sword half-lifted.

He knew what was happening. He was taking out on these slavers all the horror and despair and desperation he'd felt when he'd been lashed and beaten along in a slave coffle. The skull-faced, green-skinned, crimson-eyed monsters astride their animals shrieked. They tried to fight. And they died.

"Hoshoo! Hoshoo!" The strange folk with whom Blakey was now allied tore into the fight, their leaf-shaped swords flashing and thrusting. It was over quickly after that, and Blakey had only to reload once more before the end came.

Many of the globes of light fell. Some of the lights were rescued and they shed their mellow radiance upon what followed. Blakey took one look and then went away. Primitive societies had their own mores when it came to dealing with defeated enemies. If you did not—say—decapitate your dead foeman his spirit would return to haunt you. If—say—you omitted to dismember a person you had killed, his limbs would propel him, from the grave to tear out your eyes. Red Indians scalped their foes. These folk pubicked their dead enemies.

A man walked up to Blakey in the light of one of the globes



swinging three scraps of skin and hair. His own hair of a reddish tint was stuffed up under the tall spiked helmet. Blakey now understood what those scraps of skin and hair were fleering on their cords from the spike.

"You are not Honshi, yet you fought for us."

"I'm Blakey. I don't like slavers."

The fellow looked up at Blakey. He wore armor of a reddish color, and carried two of the leaf-shaped swords. Both had been wiped clean. His face, wide, almost frog-like, with a tinge of grey and yellow flushing along under the pink, did not repel Blakey. All about them the sounds of laughter, of joy, rose, as the men freed the captives.

"It is strange you should be here, Blakey."

"I was lost—"

"So you're from another world? Oh, well, we know all about that."

Blakey opened his mouth, shut it, swallowed, blinked. This calm acceptance, this off-hand reference, to the parallels astounded him. There was much to learn here.

The situation here in Honsh was quite a common one. The Honshi had been living their own lives when these green-skinned, three-crimson-eyed monsters had come through from another world and enslaved them. The Honshi fought back; but they were losing the fight. Many of them were off world serving as mercenaries. They saw little future. But, still they fought and refused to be beaten.

"When we serve as mercenaries, we serve our masters well. We understand very little of the other worlds; only that they exist and that is enough for us. We know all about that."

This fellow, called Bright Sword, bossed the others about in a calm competent way that, whilst it brooked no questioning, raised no resentment. Blakey took the name of Bright Sword seriously, quite deliberately equating it with the way Red Indians were named in many areas. Somehow, it fitted. He saw, too, as everyone gathered themselves together and sorted themselves out, and started off at a fast bandy-legged trot into the night, that these Honshi had a sense of humor. Well, he'd figured that from their variation of scalping. Gruesome, of course, but essentially a primitive reaction to the unknown.

"If these damned Saber-Toothed Skeleton Men have burned your village, Bright Sword—where do you go from here?"

"The Gardesh we call them. As for us—we will go to the great city of Manelpar, may his name be praised, and hire out as

mercenaries. Many people from other worlds come there. But, friend Harry Blakey, what of you?"

"All I need to do is get home. If there are outworlders in Manelpar—" And then Blakey thought to add: "May his name be praised."

Bright Sword gave that wheezing spluttering eruption that, a Honshi laugh, echoed now above the march. "You would make a good Honshi, Harry Blakey. We dedicate our lives here and our lives hereafter to the great Manelpar, and that is why we say his name be praised. But the outworlders call the great city Coordinate Junction. Or, sometimes, Honshi City. The true name is not known to them."

Blakey felt the tiredness hitting him now. He wasn't over worried about what the Honshi called their city. "That's all right, Bright Sword. I won't tell anyone."

The line of marching people was much easier to see now and he realized that dawn was not far off. Bright Sword said: "Here comes He Who Croaks."

When the Honshi stomped up and bashed his armor in a salute and spoke, Blakey burst out in a guffaw. He Who Croaks lived up to his name.

"The caves are within three marches, Bright Sword."

Bright Sword did not hesitate. In his shushy gravelly voice he said: "Then we march without a break, and make the three marches into one. Pass the word, He Who Croaks."

Just how Harry Blakey yomped those last miles remained a mystery to him. He kept his head up, and tried to put his shoulders back, and attempted to ignore his feet. Most of the time they marched on soft grass, thank all the angels in heaven and all the devils in hell. He rolled about. Bright Sword watched him, made no comment, did not offer to help; and they marched on.

The sun splashed color all about; most of the light congregated in his eyes and blinded him. He just put one foot in front of the next, over and over again, and kept in a straight line. Then the ground struck cruelly into his feet, which he had thought numbed beyond sensation. He gasped. Blueness fell over his head and shoulders. Bright Sword's words reached him as though fighting to be heard over a cataract in the river.

"These are the caves, Harry Blakey. Now we rest."

Harry Blakey fell down.

Harry Blakey was asleep before he hit the ground.



## CHAPTER SIX

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"The plan is, Bright Sword, for me to tag along with you folk to the great city. I'll get directions there for Earth." Blakey marched along with the column, a forlorn little group of people sundered from the life they knew and marching on into a life filled with uncertainty and fraught with peril. He finished: "That is, if you agree."

Bright Sword, striding on his bandy legs ahead of the column, hauled up. He regarded Blakey fiercely, his wide-spaced eyes all aglitter in the light of the sun.

"Do you wish to insult me, Harry Blakey? Do you wish to inspect the point of my sword?"

Blakey nodded. Bright Sword was a good egg. The remnants of the village plodding along had adopted him not so much as a mascot but as a friend, a comrade and one of them. It might all have been stickily sentimental; but the scraps of pubicked hair and skin floating from the helmet spikes, the way the folk kept up their spirits by singing, the way they kept on the move, and forever glanced back over their shoulders, all these things created a heightened tension and an awareness that death stalked them.

Blakey began to take an interest in the countryside. Most of it was ruined and abandoned farmland. The little party kept to the higher, rougher ground, and they skirted two towns where he was informed the Saber-Toothed Skeleton Men, the Gardesh, maintained garrisons. They were not interested in farming, reaping their harvest from other industrial pursuits. Bright Sword was of the opinion that before much longer the Gardesh would take ruthless steps to prevent the outflow of Honshi mercenaries to other worlds.

The Honshi knew he was from Earth. Blakey himself itched to get back to the River of a Million Teeth and assure himself that Duveen was safe. He held onto the conviction that but for Hobe and Young Teke the entire crew and passengers of *Joy of Comfort* were safe. The chances were strong that they were. The tendriled monsters trapped in the boat would have been dealt

with. Captain Onduras wouldn't hesitate to snuff every last one out. He had a good crew.

The Honshi sang as they marched.

Among the songs one caught Blakey's interested attention. They called it the Honshi Hymn. Its verses were many and labyrinthine, and it charted the events of Honshi history.

“For we are the Honshi bold  
And we know what we have to do.  
We don't give a damn for your gold—  
Hold still while we pubick you!

My helmet spike needs a trophy proud,  
Hoshoo! hissed the Honshi, Hoshoo!  
You're just one of the crowd—  
Hold still while I pubick you!”

And so on, in a rollicking lilting tune that lifted the feet and sent them tramping on. All the horse-like animals they'd captured from the Gardesh in the ambush were ridden by the women. Blakey, well aware that women were a damn sight tougher than men in many areas of life, made no comment and slogged along on foot.

Most of the march they were on short rations. They raided a farm where crops were grown to feed the Gardesh. Blakey expressed himself as surprised that the Saber-Toothed Skeleton Men had the guts to digest food, and the Honshi hissed their amused appreciation. They marched on.

Bright Sword took a particular interest in the thirty-eight. Blakey explained that once the supply of cartridges was gone there was little likelihood of replenishing them this side of the city. Notwithstanding this, he let Bright Sword shoot off six. The Honshi jumped with each shot, and then his wide froglike face split into an enormous smile.

“Excellent! I hope to acquire one of these myself.”

“Me, too. We could use some more firepower if we run into a lot of those damn Saber-Toothed Skeleton Men.”

In return the Honshi let him swish a leaf-bladed sword about, and they bashed at him with spears. He was not in his own opinion a swordsman, although with a rifle and bayonet he'd be able to tickle the ribs of most opponents. As the journey progressed and Blakey came to a fuller understanding of the idiosyncratic ways of the Honshi, he did develop his swording skills. With the broad, leaf-shaped bronze weapons he was no



d'Artagnan, but he did learn to swish a swash and to make his opponent jump around a trifle. Using a spear in lieu of a rifle and bayonet, he could best most of them.

The cataclysmic eruption of those armored cars into the compound, the way that group of men had spoken, the meanings behind these events, began to obsess Blakey. If those men were really from his own Earth an enormous vista of possibilities opened up. For a start, it meant other Terrans knew of the parallels, and could traject, and travel between the worlds in command of their own destinations and not as cowed and beaten slaves.

Swinging along with the Honshi, flicking a leaf-shaped sword about, Blakey rather cared for that idea, that to be in command of your own destiny you had to be in command of your own destination. Not that destiny had ever meant very much to him; it either did operate in people's lives, or it did not. Once he'd broken away from the parental home, he'd tried to carve his own way, with some successes and some failures. If he was guided by a destiny, he didn't know.

What he did know and reveled in was the growing understanding of the power magically conferred upon him. No doubt some quirk of the genes—and from his parents!—was responsible. At home Christmas had always been a lackluster affair. That silver torch had been a mightily memorable Christmas for him. But he understood about Christmas. He could see that for him to go from one parallel to another was like a child greedily opening one Christmas present after another, tearing open the bright wrappings to reveal the wonder inside.

All that lay before him.

He would travel the parallels, luxuriating in the wonders and the marvels. This time he'd go prepared. He pondered on the idea the men from the armored cars had mooted, that they'd advertise for help. That would be a lead to follow up. Either way, Harry Blakey was going to run wild among the parallels, exploring from world to world!

Despite that, he was content for the moment to march along with the Honshi. They passed casements from time to time and he'd sense them out. Far too many were concrete or metal. A damned sight too many. He was beginning to sort but a rough and ready code of colors, and whereas one day a red and violet casement might mean a world hostile and barren, the next day the same colors might indicate green fields and open pastures. The knack lay in interpreting the lights in the archways through a near-sensitive feel for place and occasion and parallel. Learning

the full art of the trajecter was going to be a lengthy and laborious process.

It was one he would dedicate his life to with joy.

But, still, at the moment he was fascinated by the lore of the Honshi. He'd march along with them lustily singing the Honshi Hymn, or any other of the hundreds of songs, and then he'd fall quiet as an older man carefully recited the Honshi Myths. Their beliefs were stark and, although not brutal, downright matter-of-fact. They endured hardship as a matter of course. Rooted in practicalities of nature, their beliefs were yet enmeshed by an intricate system of supernatural phenomena.

They placed great emphasis on the weather. There was only one Manelpar—may his name be praised—but he could appear in many guises, as the voice of thunder, as the stroke of lightning, as the beneficent or the punishing rain. When the crops flourished, when the cattle grew fat, then Manelpar smiled on his Honshi.

"But, Harry Blakey, you must remember that all Honshi are not as we."

"It's a big world. Wouldn't go round if we were all the same."

Bright Sword flicked a leaf from a branch as they passed through a forest clothing the flank of a hill.

"See. I wantonly deprive that tree of one of its leaves. Oh, the tree has many more. But I ravaged the tree with my sword." He shook the offending instrument and snicked it back into its scabbard, a splendid affair of skin and bronze and semi-precious stones. "I did not ruin the tree, for we know another leaf will grow. Some Honshi there are who would lop a branch, and still a new branch would grow."

"So," said learning Harry Blakey. "There are some of you folk who'd chop the tree down?"

"Aye."

"But we have to have wood—"

"The difference is in the motive. If a man must be killed then a man must kill; not otherwise."

"And a woman?"

Bright Sword spluttered his eruption of a laugh.

"Be wary of women, friend Harry Blakey. They will stitch a stitch through your nose and lead you like a blind donkey!"

"Too right, if you let 'em."

"So, remember. Make sure what Honshi you are dealing with."

Despite the brave words of Bright Sword, Blakey did not fail to notice how solicitous of their women folk were the male



Honshi, and how the females responded with a grace he did not find one whit incongruous in their froglike faces. Also, he didn't like to mention that he might have difficulty in telling one lot of Honshi from another. They put a little scar shaped like a triangle, point down, just above his left hipbone. It healed quickly; but remained faintly visible. That, they told him, was the mark of the Hoshen Honshi.

Singing, eating well when they could and starving when they couldn't, the column tramped on.

Honshi City was their goal, where many peoples met and where they could hire out.

They ran into serious trouble only three times, and the first two they resisted with strength and determination. The first was a small party of Gardesh upon whom they stumbled raiding an outpost. The fight was short, sharp, cost them one man and a wounded girl, and lessened Blakey's stock of ammo by a dozen rounds. The second was, in all their views, far more serious and upsetting. A rival bunch of Honshi jumped them. The .38 cracked again and again, swords flew in the moonlight, spears thunked. The Hoshen Honshi won; but they lost two good men, and Bright Sword had a chunk out of his arm. He did not swear; but only gazed mildly on the wound as it was doctored and bound up.

The third occasion was entirely different.

The trouble here related directly to Blakey, and to Blakey alone.

The column made their bivouac for the night. Toward dawn, with a little breeze stirring the grasses, Blakey sat up. He had felt a distinct sense, as of the pulsing that Jim had warned him so vehemently against. A trajecter was near, and was using her power.

A small casement he had seen when they'd camped had held no interest for him, leading as it did to a world of grey skies and dripping forests. Now, as he watched, a man stepped through the threshold. Blakey kept very quiet.

The man carried a rifle. He was followed by three more in quick succession. They all wore neat blue shirts and trousers and white shoes. Red kerchiefs were bound around their hair, and from their ears depended small clusters of golden bells. Blakey blinked. Those ears were pointed, very pointed. The men moved quickly; but Startled Dog was just as quick. His yell brought the camp awake.

"Peace!" shouted the first man who'd stepped through the casement. "We mean you no harm. We bring gifts. We wish to

talk to you. Here is His Excellency Cardini who is an important man."

Something about this bristled Blakey up. The fellow in the blue shirt and pants and with the pointy ears spoke to the Honshi as though they were ignorant savages. Then he knew, and knew without a single doubt, that he was right.

His Excellency Cardini stepped through the casement. He wore fawn shirt and slacks, an automatic was belted to his waist, he was fat and porcine and very well groomed. His face glistened. He wore a bracelet around his left wrist, with a thin glittery chain attached to the necklet of his personal trajecter. She looked well-fed, though, clean, with a nice face and combed hair. She wore a yellow shirt and pants, and shoes. Blakey saw as she went past that across the back of the yellow shirt an embroidered representation of an eye stretched from shoulder to shoulder.

Bright Sword stumped up on his bandy legs.

At once Cardini started. In only a few words Blakey caught his drift. He was offering to hire on all of Bright Sword's people. He was very sure of himself, very proud, conscious of not only his own worth but of that of the employment he offered. Also—and in this Blakey, being a hard-bargainer when he had to be, could scarcely find fault—it was clear that Cardini was cutting rival employers out. He'd hire on this crowd of Honshi before they got to the great city. If he was offering lower rates, no one could be sure just yet.

Bright Sword was too proud in his own mind to dicker, yet he held his people's trust, and so he forced himself to bargain. Blakey stayed put. He kept looking at the girl trajecter. She looked well-cared for. If he was going to trust himself to someone else to traject him through the parallels, he'd make sure he damnwell treated her well!

But, all the same . . . Harry Blakey, with a collar and a chain, harnessed to someone else's bidding? Hardly!

He started to crawl through the shadows of the early dawn, looking for He Who Croaks. He found the Honshi thoughtfully polishing up his spear. Speaking in a soft whisper, Blakey said: "He who Croaks, as you value me as a friend, tell Bright Sword I cannot come with him. Say that I shall always remember him and all of you with pride and gratitude." In these sentiments he was not laying it on too thick. For one thing, they were true, for another, the Honshi were not so far sophisticated as to have forgotten what pride and gratitude were. "I must make my own way now. Say to Bright Sword that you will all live in my



thoughts, and that to the safe keeping of Manelpar, whose name be praised, I commend you all."

"But, Harry Blakey."

"One more thing!" Blakey spoke fiercely. "Do not mention my name, tell Bright Sword, not to anyone! Swear!"

A trifle dumbfounded at Blakey's obvious passion, He Who Croaks swore by the Rainbow of Manelpar. Blakey just hoped he was doing the right thing; but he couldn't stand the sight of that chain fastened to the neck of the trajecter. He took out the .38 and the remaining shells.

"Here is a gift for Bright Sword. Farewell."

And Harry Blakey slid back out of sight, and managing to keep low, scurried away into the dawn shadows.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Harry Blakey stood in a world of whirling ochre dust storms. He took a step forward and stood under dripping trees looking down with great pleasure upon the River of a Million Teeth. At his back the casement glowed a serene pinkish yellow.

He'd found his way back to Vundersharm, and without going all the drab way those repellent tendriled monsters had brought him. He had overcome his scruples about leaving Bright Sword and his Honshi friends. He could only hope they would understand. At the very least, it was clear that his destiny did not lie with them, magnificent comrades though they were.

Using casements when to travel through the forest fringing the river proved too troublesome or dangerous he found his way to a town called Happy Deliverance. Here he made inquiries about the riverboat *Joy of Comfort* and of a girl named Duveen.

His knowledge of river customs was enough to avoid any awkwardnesses. He had no way of paying for meals now, so he did the obvious thing. Everyone knew *Joy of Comfort*, and the general impression was that Captain Onduras would have made passage upriver now in his canoes. No doubt the latest *Joy of Comfort* was busily building upstream. So Blakey signed on to help paddle a canoe upriver.

Keeping body and soul together was a full-time job. He'd caught and cooked and eaten various unlikely little animals on

his way here; now he tucked into the food offered by this parallel of Vundersharm and enjoyed every mouthful. Soon he'd be seeing Duveen again, and the rest of the crew, and sailing with them downriver. Another splendid holiday was in the offing.

He found Captain Onduras and the almost-completed *Joy of Comfort*. He found the crew. He found Duveen.

She eyed him. She did not smile.

But, the folk of the boats along the River of a Million Teeth were free-and easy, happy, not given to bearing grudges.

"We were a little disappointed in you, Harry," said Duveen. She stood with her arm around the shoulder of a big fellow with a lot of hairy chest and a double row of white teeth, and his arm was most familiarly around Duveen's delicious waist. "But whatever you were up to, you ran away when we were in trouble."

"But!" yelled outraged Harry Blakey.

"We all heard the story," said the big fellow with the teeth, swelling his chest. He was holding Duveen in the most confoundedly affectionate way. She snuggled closer to him.

"Everyone has, Lonki. But we must hurry. Captain Onduras—"

"Of course, Duveen—"

And the pair of them, his delightful Duveen and this great oaf Lonki, turned away and walked off. Blakey looked after them. He did not say anything. If you saw this thing from their point of view—*Joy of Comfort* had been to some odd and impossible place, horrible things had fallen on them and whipped and nettled them, and they'd fought back and won. In that fight Harry Blakey had been notably absent. They didn't mention Hobe and Young Teke, and he just hoped they were safe. As to whether they'd got back to Vundersharm, as the men from the armored cars had promised, that remained for the future.

That let-down decided Blakey.

Wandering around in the parallels without a weapon was highly dangerous and yet at the same time a weapon could prove awkward. If you trajected yourself into a highly civilized city and appeared brandishing a sword or snouting a rifle, you'd be run in and locked up muy pronto. So you had to box clever.

Be prepared. That was the ticket.

The people of some worlds seemed to know of the existence of the parallels and some didn't. They didn't know on Earth, for Blakey remained unsure of those men from the armored cars. He'd seen Earthly artifacts in the parallels; but a trade mission could pop through a casement for those.

When he trajected into a world that knew about the parallels he had to fight the perfectly rational fear. If they found out—



then he'd wind up chained up and used. Yet he had to venture into such a place. Had to.

He walked along a street toward a small town. The sky was of a pale pearl, without clouds, and airships flew up there. His grey clothes were barely presentable, and even if he'd known what they used for money here, he had none. He was reluctant to steal. His parents had barely bothered to tell him that stealing was wrong, only that you'd get put in prison. He thought of the victims of his putative thefts, and determined to leave that solution until the very last desperate resource.

If he could find a world where communal property was the norm. . . .

What he found here was that in Demaid, communal people were the norm.

Because he did not wear a tall red hat, and have a coat cut in a curious way with many lapels of sewn gems, he was taken to a stockade by people dressed in red hats and with many jewels. Here he was thrust in with others like himself without those essential items of citizenship, and very quickly farmed out to back-breaking work in a factory. He was given slop to eat. He knocked nails into wooden beams, sawed off ends of wood, and men and women wearing tall red hats and with lapels of great jeweled luster stood guard with guns. Blakey, once again, was thoroughly fed up with a world among the parallels.

He had no idea what he was helping to make. Later on it dawned on him that he was making the wooden frames of airships.

"Over here, Communal Six thousand and fifty! Help lift this!" His name was Communal Six thousand and fifty.

Obediently he helped carry the completed frame through the slid-open doors of an erecting shed. A casement glowed up near the roof where angular girders met in a spider's web of wooden beams. He licked his lips.

The circular frame was erected by ropes and pulleys in line with the others, fat in the center, tapering at the ends. People buzzed everywhere. The gas cells were prepared. In that beehive of industry, Blakey was able to pick up a piece of board, put it on his shoulder, and march along as though busy about his work as any good Communal should be.

When he reached the far end of the erecting shed he found a small door. Importantly, he pushed this open and went through. The whole sections of doors were capable of being slid aside. The next shed revealed an almost completed airship. There were no casements. About to turn back, Blakey halted.

Down at the far end, where the nosecone of the ship dwindled away in perspective, he saw what—quite genuinely—he at first took to be a string of lights outlining the far door. He sensed out. By God! That was a threshold. And it was enormous, encompassing all of the shed's height and width.

Then he realized.

These people of Demaid built airships and trajected them through the parallels, sold them to customers on other worlds. Well, now!

He marched on, strutting, carrying his plank.

A glassed-in office stood at the side of the casement. He could see a tall red hat. He went inside.

"What do you want? Can't you read?"

"I beg your illustrious pardon," said Communal Six thousand and fifty. I was looking for His Illustriousness Carpenter Chief."

"He is not here. Go away."

Red hat turned away to bend over his desk. He was thin and bent. He was adding up figures. Blakey went up to him, propped the plank beside the desk, and said: "What's through those doors, then?"

Red hat spluttered. He spilt ink all over his figures. His face turned purple like thunder.

"I'll call the Restrainers—"

"Oh, do, do." He sensed out through the casement and received the impression of a tarmac field, a tractor, the hint of a windsock. No one seemed to be about. He could get clear away over there in that other parallel. He trajected.

What Red Hat was now thinking was amusing, no doubt; but Harry Blakey ran over the tarmac heading for the flank of a hangar. An airship was about to land, and men—if they were men—trotted out onto the field to form twin lines ready for the landing ropes. He pressed his back against the wall in the shadows. He looked about. . . . He knew what he wanted.

The most promising prospect was a single-story brick building about a hundred yards off. He walked across again as though on an important mission—this time without the plank. A man and a woman came out of the building and hurried toward the landing crew. They looked ordinary enough. Blakey went up to the building and walked in through the open door. He held his breath in check. He had seen no casements on the field; he could sense one about half a mile off in the opposite direction, and a smaller one nearer to hand, somewhere in this building. He did not think how much time he'd have. He went through the first office, down a corridor and so into a small room in the rear.



The casement was there, glowing serenely, and he at once caught the sense of trees. He could hide in the damn trees, if it came to it. . . .

The girl seated before a switchboard whose purpose was completely unknown to Blakey swung around on a swivel chair.

"What the hell do you want?"

"Uh," said Blakey. Then he spoke the truth. "I'm lost."

She wore an apple-green blouse, very frilly, and her face bore crease lines around the mouth, lines of laughter, Blakey hoped. Her hair was very dark and caught up to one side by a jeweled clasp. She did not look fierce.

"Oh," she said. She spoke with some impatience. "I suppose you're from Demaid. They keep apportioning people through with the ships. They're so damned careless."

Blakey kept his mouth shut.

Apportioning. So that's what trajecting was called here.

Then he said, nodding to the casement: "Is anything through there?"

"That's Roanga. There's a Stop Order on that. I'll come and apportion you back to Demaid. And I'm behind enough as it is." She flicked switches in a disgusted competent fashion. "I'm stuck here to wet-nurse idiots like you, and to keep an eye on Roanga—they tried to break through over in Central City only last week—and how I'm to keep track of everything. . . ."

She finished up with her board in a way that told Blakey she was not at all sorry to leave her post and go and do some real apportioning. He'd taken a chance. He pushed his luck.

"I'm new around here. What's wrong with Roanga?"

"What's right with it! If they had me there my life would be a misery. Then're insane. We won't trade with them, although there's plenty that do, may their noses turn black and fall off. Come on, idiot. Let's go."

Harry Blakey had no desire to return to Demaid and the control of the Illustrious Red Hats. He sensed out to the casement again, and felt a strange resistance, as though he pushed against a membrane. On the switchboard an orange light glowed into life. The girl swung back at once, her face knotting. She picked up what was quite clearly a telephone and without dialing, said, "They're trying to get through here. You'd better get an orange alarm out."

Blakey realized that the Stop Order on the casement had reacted to his probe; the orange alarm had gone off. He wanted to stay around to see what would happen.

All the time in the parallels he was learning. In some way if

you had the technology you could rig an alarm to trigger if a trajecter attempted to use the casement you'd bugged. That was information.

"Does the Stop Order stop anyone from coming through?"

"Do what?" She was flicking switches again. "If they're very good they can bypass a Stop Order. I can't do it. Now shut up and let me—ah!" A yellow light pulsed on the board.

In the distance and closing at high speed the sound of bells reached into the room. Blakey sensibly stood to one side. Almost at once the room filled with bulky men in what Blakey could only describe as armor—metallic casings for the body and limbs, globular helmets, power packs. The men carried weapons of convoluted metal, heavy, fluted, with dangerous-looking muzzles. They ringed the casement. The girl took Blakey's arm. She smiled nervously.

"I think we'll be better off away from here."

"Yes."

"If the Roangans do attempt to come through there will be a fight."

"All," said Blakey with great feeling, "I want to do is go home."

They went along the corridor and out onto the field. The airship was almost down. The girl glanced up at him.

"You're not from Demaid?"

Blakey swallowed. "No."

"I thought not. What happened?"

"I was—it was frightening—I was kidnapped."

She made a grimace of sympathy. She looked to be a nice girl, with her apple-green blouse and her dark hair and skinny legs. She was a smart operator; she'd reacted at once and correctly the moment the alarm went off. And yet, her appearance and her smartness, important though they were, had no impact on him. He realized that he was absorbed in actually being with and talking to another trajecter. He could feel her pulse, low and what Jim would have called semi-controlled, the pulsing movement of her magical power impinging on his senses.

He said, "You told me you couldn't bypass the Stop Order. Yet if these Roangans are coming through—"

"They're very good, some of them. Some you're not sure if they can apport or not, they can hide it so well. So you were kidnapped. I do feel sorry for you. I'd like to help."

"Find me somebody who can show me the way home—"

"Where was that?"

He didn't see any reason to lie.



"Earth."

"No! Really! That crummy old place! Why, they make nice things, but their airplanes are dreadful. Terribly dangerous. Our ships never crash."

You see, he told himself severely, if you go gallivanting off among the parallels you must discard all your preconceptions. Powered battle armor and laser weapons and wooden airships? But there was logic to it all.

He said, "D'you know the way back to Earth? And I don't know your name. I'm Harry Blakey."

"I'm Lashiel Vrin-Dux. Oh, I suppose we could find Earth on a map somewhere."

"Map?"

"Well, how else do you find your way about?"

"How else," he said, his voice as weak as prison porridge.

"Of course, I'm forgetting. You're supposed to go back to Demaid."

"Oh, look, Lashiel. I'm just a number there. That's not home. I told you, I was kidnapped."

A bulky figure in powered battle armor leaped out from the brick-building and in enormous leaps joined them. A magnified voice boomed. "Apporter! No sign of hostiles."

"Well, the orange went off. You could see that. I'll see about it. Meanwhile, you'd better have your squad stay on guard. You can't trust those Roangans."

"May their noses turn black and fall off."

"Amen," said Harry Blakey.

The soldier leaped away like a kangaroo in armor, and the girl smiled at Blakey and said: "I'll file my report and then I'll be off duty. We could go and eat and—"

"Find a map?"

"As well as."

She shared an apartment in a pleasant building containing three other apartments bowered in trees, with a lake and lush fields used for sporting events and brick-walled gardens rioting with flowers surrounding the complex. Everything quite clearly was what in a world of richness and poverty extremes would be very high class. This world of Calverly gave everybody a good deal.

"I share with my brother Todd. He's third officer in *Monsooon*, and soon he's hoping to be promoted to second in a much larger airship. I don't see a lot of him, unfortunately."

He realized that this Lashiel Vrin-Dux was a lonely person.

They ate well. She used a terminal to have a map printed up for him, and he gathered that in this, at least, she exercised a

privilege reserved for apporters. Also she bestowed on him a phonetic dictionary. Taking the gift from her, he saw over her shoulder in the cupboard an armored man pointing a gun at him.

He yelped and, grabbing Lashiel around the waist, dived back out of the way. They hit the floor and rolled under the table.

"What are you doing? What is it?" She struggled, yelling, and her face exposed fears she habitually kept strictly clamped down. Then she saw.

She laughed. His arms were about her in protection—although nothing was going to protect flesh and blood from that diabolical weapon in the armored glove.

"You idiot! That's Todd's armor!"

"What . . ."

"He's in the militia. He has to keep his armor somewhere, doesn't he?"

Blakey sat up, and his left arm still rested about her waist. She felt nice. She made no move to crawl out from under the table. She leaned a little towards him. Blakey kissed her. She gave a soft shuddery sigh before clasping him hard and kissing back.

Blakey enjoyed kissing her. After a bit they crawled out from under the table and stood up. She was shaking. Her hands trembled. She could not meet his eye.

"I'm not—I don't—Todd—"

"Tell me about his airship," said tactful old Harry Blakey, reversing the engineering ploy. He'd had it used on him enough times; now he saw how he could ease the situation. She walked across to a stuffed piece of furniture you might call a sofa if you could call a throne a chair, and sat down. The apple-green blouse was half-twisted up out of the waistband of her skimpy skirt.

"*Monsooon*—do you really want to know?"

"Wooden airships, and powered battle armor?"

"Laminated polymerized wood, light and strong, monocoque construction—Harry! Do you really—?"

He was staring at the armor that had given him the shock. It looked impressive and formidable, standing quietly there in its cupboard. There were weapon orifices in the chest and the helmet, and other weapons of the kind the guards at the field had carried leaning against the wall.

"Look, Lashiel—"

She started to cry. A soft, gentle, almost self-mocking sobbing that upset Blakey.

"I know my legs—it's the fashion, and I hate it. You'd better leave."



He went across at once and put his arm about her.

"Lashiel! In my world the girls wore minis and ra-ras and didn't give a damn about their legs! Lots of women think it demeans them to look pretty. They resent the pleasure a man takes from looking at a girl. That's only some. Men and women are a funny old lot. There must be good and rotten women as there are good and rotten men. I suppose that's a law of Nature. You just have to stick in there and be what you are. Sure, you don't have the best legs in all the parallels—" He thought of Duveen's splendid legs, and went on in that soft voice. "So what? You probably know girls who have lovely legs and acne, or cross-eyes. That doesn't matter. Everybody has something special about them that just chucks away the odd bit that maybe isn't one hundred percent perfect."

She looked up, the tears in her eyes, and he wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of this, and be tender, and be tough and tell her not to cry over wanting the moon.

He said: "What you have is more than enough for any man in the beauty department—if he's foolish enough to categorize you only on that. I reckon as a person you rate two hundred percent." And he bent and put his arms around her and kissed her again, and this time he kissed her with meaning.

They became better acquainted and what made Blakey laugh out loud was her matter-of-fact remark: "Oh, no, Harry—don't throw it on the floor like that. Here, let me fold it up neatly." And the apple-green blouse was meticulously folded and placed on the table.

When she turned back to the sofa Blakey said: "You don't have to worry about legs, Lashiel, not with the rest—"

And she flung herself on him.

He stayed around for a week, and he went for a quick joy ride in Todd's armor, which she told him severely was not a suit of armor, but just armor, PBA. The citizenry were not overly enamored of joining the militia; it was a duty laid on them because of those insane Roangans. Blakey got the feel of the PBA.

Then Todd's airship flew in and it was time for Blakey to go.

He took off through the parallels for Earth. Lashiel cried when he left.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Checking into a nice middle-ranking hotel in New York, Harry Blakey said: "No credit card. Cash."

"That will do nicely, sir."

While the routine reception desk formalities were concluded he kept on telling himself he had nothing to worry about. But he felt jumpy, and knew he felt jumpy, and curse though he might could do nothing about this weakness.

He went up in the elevator and threw his brand new grip on the bed. Then he threw the grip onto the floor, took off his jacket and threw himself on the bed instead. He was tired. Lashiel had found Earth for him among the co-ordinates, and she'd also found that she'd discovered herself a man. She'd fair worn him out. But he could feel only affection for her, and wouldn't patronize her or her lonely, dedicated, misguided way of life by feeling pity for her.

She had her demanding job, the sports field to play in and the lake to swim in. She had her hobbies, the latest was a video record of the wild life in the garden through the seasons, and she was a devotee of the latest in Calverly's music cycles.

He felt guilty about running out on her; but Calverly could not yet hold him. He'd been evasive, which had not pleased him. No doubt she imagined him wandering forlornly through the parallels latching on to whatever apporter he could find, clutching his copy of her map and dictionary.

What Jim had drummed into him was right. Control your pulses! She'd not had the slightest idea he was a trajecter; yet all the time he was with her, whenever he switched on his senses, he could feel her pulsing away.

All he'd done was find a casement back to Demaid, nipped through, borrowed a coat, and then tripped through the parallels back to Earth. The jewels on the lapels were real. He'd been cheated rotten selling them; but that didn't worry him. By careful manipulation and not being greedy he'd got rid of half of them, and he had five thousand left after buying an outfit. As to papers and identity-proving possessions, they would have to wait until he was rested up.



If they'd treated him properly in Illustrious Red-Hatted Demaid, he'd never have relieved them of a single coat. But there was far too much of the slaving mentality there, and he'd seen at least three trajecters in miserable conditions during his time there.

He slept all night. In the morning, after a great breakfast, he went out and bought all the papers.

This was a wild chance. But he knew he had to try.

Being back on Earth, even in New York, was marvelous.

As he went through the papers he was mindful of the fact that any one of a number of unfortunate happenings could occur this day. Some of the people to whom he'd sold the stones looked as though they would relish trouble. Cash instead of a credit card. There were all kinds of accents on the streets, and he blended; but, well. . . . If the boys in blue broke the door down and leaped in, guns held in the grip, spraddle-legged, ready to blast him if he swallowed too loudly, he couldn't say that he hadn't been prepared.

Thinking these somber thoughts, he ran down the advertisements, flipped the pages, came up with nothing. Well, he hadn't expected to hit the jackpot first time out. He was worried about the length of time that had elapsed; if the advert had already gone in he'd missed his chance.

Feeling jumpy, he packed his grip, paid his account and checked out. He found another hotel, less expensive, and signed himself in Charles Chandler, his hand poised.

Just choosing that name—and not at random!

Of course!

Cretin!

Instantly he went across to the phone alcove and ripped out the directory for all the A's. ASC Dynamics—yes, there it was! He checked the address. Then he remembered he'd better finish up here, went to his room, chucked his grip on the bed, threw water all over his face, dried off, hunched his brand new coat on, and went out of the room like a hundred meter sprinter. He didn't bother with a cab; the afternoon was sultry; but he kept up a lickety-split gait. The office was on the umpteenth floor of an imposing building made out of identical glass slabs piled one on top of another like a cardhouse. He went in the elevator in a fever. The foyer and the receptionist were icy cool. He made himself smile.

"Mr. Chandler?" She had a smoothly honeyed head of hair, and green-rimmed glasses, and moved as though whatever she touched defiled her. "You can't see him without an app—"

"Can you get a message to him, please?"

"We-ell—"

"Just tell him my name's Blakey." He forced the smile wider as though making what he said a joke. "Ask him if he's through with the tendriled monsters."

"Pardon me?"

"Just say that, please. He'll understand."

"Did you say tenderized—monsters?"

"Tendriled."

Her mouth pursed up. "I see."

She spoke into her telephone and presently beckoned him over across that icy foyer. She sounded genuinely surprised. "Mr. Chandler says for you to go up. Mr. Dupre will meet you at the elevator."

"Charles Dupre?"

"Of course."

He rode up and had to stop from jiggling about. Charles was waiting for him in a reception area even more icy cool than the foyer. "Blakey?"

"Glad to see you escaped safely, Charles. You and Mr. Chandler."

The thin man shuddered. "It ruined my nerves. I don't think I'll—and you! Well, come along, come along. Mr. Chandler is waiting. He cancelled an appointment for you."

Chandler, looking formidable in his own kingdom, said the same thing. "I cancelled an appointment on your account, Blakey."

Then the three of them went at it hammer and tongs, finally reaching the sage conclusion that they had not dreamed their experiences, they were not mad, and that Chandler's snatching the jeep was a sound move. "I didn't get where I am today by not snatching a jeep when one needed snatching."

"I," said Blakey, "got hit by a bullet at that damned jeep."

"You," Charles told him, and sniggered, "should have ducked."

"You've no idea how I tried to explain my absence. Head Office value me, otherwise it'd have been a no-no."

"It was my wife," said Charles. "she thinks I was off with some stripper or topless go-go dancer." He smiled. "She's been real sweet ever since."

"My wife is in Europe"—he said Yoorp—"and she's been cabling me about neglecting her. I always wire her every day." Chandler gestured. "Have yourself a drink."

Savoring a Scotch, Blakey said: "And is that the end of it—?"



Chandler wouldn't let him go on. "You're not suggesting it could happen again? Those—those things!"

"I meant—what happened after you were rescued."

"We were bundled into trucks and bumped to pieces half the night and then we were dumped in Central Park just as the sun was rising. They'd given us some clothes, thank the Lord."

"That's all? You didn't see who rescued you?"

"Men, with guns, that's all."

Blakey felt all the puff go out of him. He felt deflated. He'd been keyed up, certain—and now, whambo, fini, nothing, back to square one.

"And you didn't ask them, try to find out—?" He knew he sounded desperate.

Chandler said: "What's eating you, Blakey? You want to go back to that madhouse or something?"

"Not quite. But I'd surely like to know who those men in the armored cars were and where we could meet up."

"Well," said Charles, patronizingly. "If we hear anything, we'll let you know."

"Do that. I'll keep in touch."

When he said good-bye he ruminated on the fact that none of them had even mentioned going to the police. Who'd believe them? The idea wasn't worth thinking about.

The logical hope came to him that Hobe and Young Teke were like these two, safely back home.

He decided not to drop into a bar for a drink. He had to think, not drink.

On his way back to the hotel he saw casements along the way, muddled up with passing traffic and billboards and store fronts. He ignored them all. He was conscious of growing powers as a trajecter. He could sense casements a good long way off now, hanging as it were suspended in limbo. He was aware of being at the center of a nexus of thresholds. He now understood that if he sensed out to inspect what lay beyond, he might trigger an alarm system. Then he might conjure up unwanted hostiles. He was in no mood for that at the moment.

The map Lashiel had copied for him was unlike any map he had expected.

That was just what he should expect among the parallels—the unexpected.

The map really belonged in the guts of a computer. Lashiel had had it printed out on paper so flimsy you'd think it would rip; yet it was as strong as the best linen-based stock. There were simple rows of numbers, each number a coordinate upon each

world's surface. Each set of coordinates represented a casement. All you needed was a map of the world in which you were interested, locate the grid and orient it and each set of figures corresponded with a casement. There on Calverly they used a duodecimal system; but she'd simply written down each number as she held up a finger. Silly fatuous Harry Blakey had smirked when she ran out of fingers and started over; it would not have surprised him to find Lashiel had six fingers per hand.

"If you get the co-ordinates within a couple of miles—"

She used some Calverly mensuration distance equaling approximately three and a half thousand meters. "You should be able to pick up the point all right."

Blakey had the strongest conviction that as his powers grew he'd be able to locate a threshold over a greater distance than that.

The biggest stumbling block would be to obtain maps of the various worlds. Some of them just wouldn't exist at all. The Honshi had all their maps in their heads. Then you just drew a reconstruct of a globe, located the Prime Points, and laid out the grid. East and West presented problems; but Lashiel explained the methods they used on Calverly, and they'd worked to bring Harry Blakey home through the parallels.

The map he had from Lashiel was in the form of a book, a thick book of some two thousand pages of that superbly fine paper. Each page represented what was known of that parallel's casements. There were one hell of a lot for Earth. Even though the map was designed to be read through a transcription device, a magnifying glass could pick out the minuscule figures.

And, already, Blakey recognized that the folk of Calverly had only the most rudimentary knowledge of the threshold situation on other worlds. Already, here in New York, surrounded by the nexus of casements, he had found that. The map page for Earth showed only four co-ordinates for New York. He'd whistled in surprise at the density of the casements on some worlds. Of course, he'd put a thick check mark at the top of the page for Earth so he wouldn't lose it. But he saw that Earth was, relative to the groupings of worlds into which he'd stumbled, very much on the edge. Earth was right out in the boondocks. So was Honsh. The thickly clustering worlds surrounded Calverly and Demaid. And yet all these worlds co-existed, all of them in the same place. The method of travel limited the ease of traffic. No—he didn't mean that so much as some casements could let you through into a world from where you could go almost



anywhere in this cluster; other casements simply dumped you through onto a dead end.

When he went down to the Library and managed to get a look at the back issues and found no advertisement of the kind he sought, he felt himself to be at a dead end.

He mooched off to Central Park and stared morosely at the casement through which Chandler and Charles had been dumped back home. When no one was about he trajected through. The world was simply a desert; red sand, red rocks, a red sky and nothing else, apart from a sun that sucked his eyeballs dry. He checked out the casement and nipped back into Central Park. In that Desert World he'd not sensed another casement within the horizon range.

His map made no mention of that Desert World, and the threshold was not recorded.

When the phonetic dictionary stopped working he felt he could not blame Lashiel for not giving him fresh batteries. The thing gave out a recorded transcript when the written characters were tapped in. He went down to the drugstore to buy a fresh battery, carrying the old one he'd snicked from its compartment in the dictionary. No one had seen a battery like that. Not for nothing, not nohow. They even questioned that it was a battery at all.

He bought a battery, anyway, and a card of fusewire; no doubt he'd be able to lash up some kind of power circuit. But the phonetic dictionary obstinately refused to work no matter how he played around with it. He was frightened to push too much power through in case he melted it down to slag.

Before the memories completely disappeared, he jotted down the names of the parallels he could remember on the appropriate pages.

On the morning he made up his mind to take a trek through the parallels and go back to Calverly, and see Lashiel again—she was very sweet in his memory—and pick up another supply of batteries, he bought the papers as always and there it was.

Well. It could be what he was searching for, possibly.

Unpretentious, unadorned, the advertisement read simply: "Wanted. Strong adventurous young men for outdoor pursuits involving some danger. Military service an advantage."

He puckered his lips. No mention of pay. No idea what the outdoor pursuits might be. But it had the ring. He had answered three previous ads asking for adventurous young men, to find they were needed to sell brushes and cosmetics door to door. That might be adventurous, right enough—and damned difficult—

but the kind of adventure he meant involved shooting machine-guns at tendriled monsters.

Instead of nipping through the parallels he went down to the office block and joined the waiting line. There must have been a hundred young men. They leaned against the wall, inching along the corridor as the lucky one at the front vanished through the quickly opened and quickly closed doorway. No one spoke much. Some read racing papers, some chewed gum, a few idiots smoked cigarettes. Most just waited in a kind of dumb apathy, shuffling along as the line moved.

Following the sage advice of Jim he kept his pulses shut down, well under control. As he waited in line he ruminated not for the first time and certainly not for the last on his memories of Jim. Could that large, cheerful, competent man have been merely a child's sick wish-fulfilment? That possibility was very real. It saddened him to think that Jim had never really existed outside his own head. True or not, what Jim said was gospel to Harry Blakey. The line shuffled on.

A few of the young men walked back down the corridor looking displeased. By far the larger proportion did not.

So they were hiring on a good number, and no doubt they were in the back rooms kitting up already.

His turn came at last, and already there were more young men tailing on in line. He went into the office. Well, it was just an office in a run-down block—what had he expected?

Three men sat at a table. The carpet on the floor had three holes, a calendar showed yesterday's date, a single wooden chair stood before the table, and a casement glowed against the side wall.

A door in the opposite wall could easily be where the men who'd been hired on had gone. Blakey felt a lilting confidence that they'd been trajected through that threshold. He felt the bubbles of excitement rising. He'd done it!

From not one of those three men came the familiar pulse of a trajecter. Still—maybe they were very good. Maybe they could control their pulses as well as he could.

"Your name?"

"Harry Blakey."

"Please sit down, Mr. Blakey. Why do you want this job? There is danger in it."

He sat down. They didn't say that there might be danger; they stated that as a fact. About to open his great fat mouth and pour it all out, Harry Blakey hauled himself up. My God! Suppose—suppose these men were recruiting trajecters! Suppose they whipped



a necklet around him, chained him up, beat him to employ his marvelous gift in their service? He felt the room go around for two heartbeats.

Cretin!

He said, "I need some fresh air. Danger we all live with."

His tone surprised them. Now he sat back and looked at them. Well, they were not such a rum-looking bunch after all, except for the man in the middle, who had a ruff of white hair, and who wore a ridiculous suit of some kind of black and yellow check cloth. His face would ordinarily have been categorized by Blakey as a kind face, with deep lines of worry. But now—suppose he was a slavemaster looking for trajecters!

The man on his left was big. Was very big. He had a mass of unruly fair hair, and a fighter's face, and shoved casually onto the table before him lay a combat jacket. His shirt was olive drab. He looked as though he could swat most other men with an equally casual squash.

The third man had fair hair, also, and—oddly enough—in his fighter's face the nose looked as though it ought to be broken. Each of these two gave the distinct impression of acting as guards, as protectors, of the smaller man in the center. Still Blakey could detect no pulses whatsoever.

They studied him coolly. His alarm mounted. These were not the men he was seeking, the men from the armored cars. They couldn't be. . . .

"Yes, Mr. Blakey, that is true. Perhaps you'd care to tell us something of yourself. You have military experience?"

"Paras, tanks—do you mind telling me your name?"

"Not at all. I am David Macklin." He nodded to his left. "This is Alec Macdonald. And the third member of our triumvirate is Dan Fenwick."

Fenwick ricked his lips into a smile. "After all this time, Dave, you're making almost as much of a hash of it as when I first turned up for an interview."

"Well," said Macklin, "Sarah's not here, nor is Margie. I always feel lost—"

"Don't we all?" said Alec Macdonald.

Deciding that he was wasting his time, Blakey stood up.

"You must excuse me. I can see that this is not the kind of position I imagined—"

"Paras?" said Alec. "Were you in that—?"

"Yes."

"Are you a mind reader, young man?" demanded Macklin; yet although he spoke with some acerbity, laughter lurked.

"No. Everyone asks that. Now, d'you mind—"

"I think he'll do." Fenwick pulled a writing pad closer and started to write Blakey's name. "Any more out there?"

"Plenty," said Blakey, flummoxed. "But—that is—"

Macklin interrupted. "The pay is adequate but not generous. We're going on an expedition. You'll be fully equipped. If we can get hold of some tanks or armored cars you'll be able to cope?" He nodded. "Good. At the end there will be a large amount of money—"

"In jewels, mostly," said Alec. He laughed. "I hope the she-cat feels it this time."

"I'm not getting involved in some hare-brained mercenary mess trying to start a revolution, or fight for the wrong side."

"Nothing like that." Abruptly, Macklin was deadly serious. "You'll be fighting. Yes, that is right. But you'll be fighting to help free an enslaved people and redress wrongs that have already passed beyond bearance. We would like you to join us. Please?"

Astounded, Blakey was all set to refuse when his common sense caught up with him. He licked his lips. He could always duck out. And although they always said it was easy to buy a gun, it wasn't, not without the paperwork, and that he couldn't face. He said: "Do I get a weapon?"

Alec laughed. "You can't fight without—or can you?"

"Some."

"Well, if you don't get an M60—"

"No thank you," said Harry Blakey. "A Chieftain—"

"No chance. But you'll get an Armalite, maybe an Uzi—"

"Fine," said mercenary Harry Blakey. "I'm in."

He half-turned toward the casement, ready for the trajecter at the other side to haul him through. Macklin waved a hand. "If you'd care to go through that door, Mr. Blakey. We'll process the rest and then we'll brief all the successful applicants. I think you'll be happy with us."

Shattered, Blakey nodded and mundanely walked through the doorway. Trajecting through the parallels?—They'd no idea!



## CHAPTER NINE

---

"After Nam nothing was the same," said Chivers as the school bus bounced through the night heading into upstate New York. His body strained the combat jacket. A magnificently built black man, Chivers, with a face handsome as a pagan god's, all smooth sleek planes and a dimple in his chin. He held his M16 with the negligent yet possessive grip of a man who understood weapons. "They wanted us real bad, and then they didn't."

"The Tommy Atkins syndrome," said Blakey. He sat next to Chivers on seats from which the stuffing escaped. There were schoolbooks in all probability still lost down the backs of the seats, chewing gum rock hard stuck under them, and pens and pencils in every nook and cranny. The buses trundled along following a black sedan containing Alec Macdonald and Dan Fenwick. Where they were going Blakey had not the faintest idea.

"Tommy Atkins?" Chivers smiled. "Oh, sure—Kipling."

After they'd signed on they'd all wound up what affairs needed to be dealt with, packed their bags and all met up. At a small and undistinguished township they'd boarded the buses, no doubt bought for their scrap value, and been kitted up and given weapons along the route. Out in the woods. The truck with the weapons and ammo had driven off. Now they rolled through the night. Just where the oppressed folk were who needed to be free up here in Upstate New York escaped Harry Blakey. No one seemed to mind. The general opinion was that they'd be flown out.

Macklin had just said to Blakey, with a little apologetic half-smile: "No tank, Mr. Blakey, this time. But as an infantryman you'll be invaluable. You and the others."

Then he'd gone, his pepper and salt knickerbocker suit incongruous in that company. Alec—everyone called him Alec—sorted the men out. He was ruthless. If you'd been an officer, a noncom, then you were that if you were lucky. He'd personally vet every man, and the best men would win promotion. Blakey didn't give a damn. He'd signed on, and this jaunt promised a

liveliness he'd missed since getting back to Earth; but as soon as was fit and proper, he'd take off.

They all wore ex US Army combat fatigues, and their steel helmets nestled on the floor between their boots. Blakey still didn't have those boots of the pattern Jim had worn. But that was an ambition he'd fulfill one day, be sure. . . .

Blakey felt himself drowsing off under the influence of the steady jolting and swaying, the closeness, the darkness. He answered Chivers in his friendly way. Chivers was a great guy to have along, and Blakey guessed that the man would soon be called Cheerful Chivers. Blakey's head nodded. The voices dropped away inside the bus. Quietness descended. The bus rolled on. Blakey dozed off.

He awoke with a surge of nausea and a sudden and inexplicable panic flooding him.

But—not inexplicable!

No—he'd felt a sensation pass over him that was a twin to those he had at first experienced in trajecting through the parallels. He shook his head and swallowed. He must have been dreaming of those early days. Maybe they'd driven through a threshold and he'd reacted—in sudden alarm he opened his eyes and glared about. He was still sitting in the old school bus, Chivers lolled asleep at his side, the darkness remained.

Suppose, just suppose, one day he went through a casement and trajected and didn't realize until it was too late! He thought that unlikely. But it was a possibility he would have very carefully to bear in mind.

He slept again and when he awoke along with the others all stretching and groaning, dawn poured golden light in through the bus windows. He looked out. Other men were looking and now startled exclamations broke out about him.

They were traveling due west with the sun at their back. The road was atrocious. It wound through a forest. The trees looked—odd.

"I've never seen trees like them," said a thick-set man from the seat in front of Blakey. "And I've fished up here enough times."

"Had your eyes shut, Aitken," grunted his companion, and snuggled down into his seat, still half asleep.

"What d'you think, Blakey?" said Chivers. "I'm from Louisiana."

"Beats me," said Blakey. "I wouldn't know."

There were pines out there, and other trees that looked as trees should look. But, as well, there were trees with immensely long



narrow leaves depending like trailing fronds, and of a bright emerald green.

"Experimental stuff from the forestry people," said a wiry machine gunner called Howell. He sounded confident. "They'll be growing machine parts on trees next."

The men laughed and then the buses rolled into a clearing and a truck waited with breakfast. They ate a slap up meal, washed up, shaved, and Alec strode about watching everything. When Blakey restowed his grip he gave a final and unnecessary check to see that among his few belongings the map and the dictionary still snuggled in their plastic wrappings.

"Take yourselves packed lunches." Fenwick said. "We won't be stopping today—"

"I'll need to take a leak!" "And me!" "Me, too!"

"Then it'll be quick!" said Fenwick. He glanced at Alec, and the big man nodded.

"Very quick!"

"A pity you couldn't afford to buy some ex-Greyhound stock," said a waspish fellow with a droopy black moustache. He'd been issued a mortar tripod and stand and wasn't happy about that, along with his carbine.

"Aw, wrap it up, Poulter!" chorused those who knew him.

The buses started up, rolling along the road through the odd-looking forest, and the trip grew boring for Blakey.

They traveled all day, ate their packed food, and stopped when the clamor for relief reached breaking strain. The three buses and the car halted together, and Alec made a group of men stand guard with loaded weapons. No one took this seriously. It was a part of training.

Poulter was sounding off. "We're gonna pull a job. What else? We're gonna knock over a bank!"

"Aw, wrap it up, Poulter!"

Half asleep and half-awake all through the following night, Blakey reasoned that the reactions of the men were no more strange than any other. This was what civilian life in boring jobs or no job at all did to men who'd been tainted by violence. Almost all of them had been unemployed. No doubt the majority were unemployable. They were a band of brothers used by the State and rendered unfit for anything other than what the State had trained them for. This was unpleasant thinking, and Blakey turned his head the other way against the uncomfortable seat back, and thought of Duveen. That was unpleasant, too, now that that oaf Lonki had shown up. He thought of Lashiel, and prom-

ised himself to thank her again for the map and dictionary. Then he slept uneasily.

The following morning the same breakfast routine was followed with the exception that Alec made them stand guard in shifts. The truck waiting for them drove off back the way they had come. The driver shouted: "Good luck!" He must have been sent on ahead and waited in his turn. How much farther?

Toward mid-morning they left the forest and rolled out onto a wide and featureless plain.

The arguments as to where they were waxed hot.

"No houses! No telegraph wires! Nothin'! We ain't in the good old USA, that's for sure!"

"We've got to be! Where else in hell could we be?"

Blakey started taking an interest.

The convoy stopped and the men were called into a ring around Alec and Fenwick. Both men held their faces in stern lines. The sun shone down and a strip of moisture across Fenwick's forehead looked ominous to Blakey. The men listened.

"You may imagine that we're not still in the US," said Alec. "Well, you are, believe me. Things are a little changed, that's all—"

A chorus of disbelief and shouts for information broke out at this. Alec held up his hand. He looked grim.

"You guys signed on to do a little fighting. Does it matter where you do it? Now listen!"

They quieted. But more than one pair of eyes glanced uneasily about that vast and featureless plain.

"You all know the hammer and the anvil? Well, we're the anvil in this op." A few half-mocking catcalls went up at this. Despite all that was happening, the men still regarded all that as though they were off on a holiday adventure. Alec shouted them down. "Up ahead a ways is a rocky area. We'll ride up close, and then march in. We take up our positions. When the enemy falls back under the hammer that's coming in, we sock 'it to 'em! Now you all understand? There'll be no talking, no smoking, and strict fire discipline. You'll know who the enemy is."

"How?"

"You'll know."

"Hey, Alec," piped up Poulter. "That ain't good enough. Suppose we shoot some of our guys in the hammer?"

"Aw, wrap it up, Poulter!"

Alec shouted: "You won't mistake friend for foe, believe me. Now let's get to it."



Back in the bus Blakey said quietly to Chivers: "Say, Chivers. How'd the hammer and anvil work in Nam?"

Chivers turned on a shoulder against the seat.

"Lousy, usually. Charley just slid through, clean as sardines. Don't remind me."

Blakey did not. He had his own hairy moments he did not wish to relive. Up and down razor-sharp mountains in freezing conditions was very different from sweltering through the jungles or whatever in Nam among the rice paddies. The men being carried in these three buses knew what they were about. They alighted and picked up their weapons and ammunition and trekked for the rocks. The sky remained clear. Some dust puffed. One group under a man whose face looked as though some unkind giant had stepped on it led off to the right. They angled away and were soon lost to sight among the rocks. Fenwick took another group off to the left. Alec led on Blakey's group in the center. Observing the way the men behaved, by listening to the cryptic remarks, Blakey came to the conclusion that perhaps a half, perhaps less, had been among those recruited along with him. Some of these men had a much better idea of what was going on.

That made sense. The new recruits were to bump up numbers. The far more sinister explanation that they were replacements for casualties was one he did not relish; far more likely though it was.

Alex showed meticulous attention to detail in assigning each squad leader his position. He left it to the squad leader to choose the final position for the men. Later, Alec walked around checking. He seldom made alterations, and when he did everybody concerned had to admit the big man was right.

Blakey's and Chivers' squad leader was French, a lanky Virginian much given to expressing himself in a thick dialect calculated to infuriate his auditors. He had bad teeth and a prominent Adam's apple which jumped about like a rattler in a sack. But he knew his business.

"Chivers, get your ass down there! Blakey git up'n them rocks and cover. And if you git your durn fool head blowed off—"

"Don't come crying to me," said Blakey. "Yeah, I know."

He hunkered down between his two rocks, looking out to the left and over Chivers's position. He placed his rifle down and wedged himself into a comfortable position, pushed his helmet over his eyes and closed the lids down for a spot of shut-eye. Some hope.

"Blakey! Git over there—shift ass!"

He scrambled up and stumbled over rocks to where French pointed, a higher and a better position. When he got there he looked back. Chivers was one huge guffaw at him. Alec stood by French, conferring. Blakey puffed his lips, and settled down again. Away as far as he could see was nothing. The rocks went on until he supposed they either stopped or went over the horizon. The line shimmered in the heat. He took a sparing sip from his canteen and flopped back. This kind of activity and lack of it he was well used to.

"You'll know who the enemy are," Alec had said. The words echoed hollowly in Blakey's skull. How would they know? Apart from being shot at, of course, and if the hammer and anvil worked the enemy wouldn't know what was happening until they were hit. Blakey dozed in the heat.

Presently Alec appeared; Blakey didn't move but he opened his eyes and stared.

"You all right?"

"More or less. If the choppers—"

"No helicopters. Just wait until you get the signal; then open up." Alec was gone.

This was not much like the time he'd waited in the darkness with Bright Sword's Honshis to ambush the Gardesh. No helis? The hammer would have to move, then. He took another look out. The two casements he could see, a couple of hundred yards away, glowing with a viridian fire, he had left strictly alone. If the going got rough here he could always traject through one or the other of them. The thought comforted him. Nice to have your own personal bolthole on a battlefield.

Pointless beginning to think the banal thoughts of many a soldier: What the hell am I doing *here*? He was doing this for one reason—to get himself a firearm before trekking through the parallels. If payment for that was to engage in a fight, he'd fight for the price of his fire and his hire and then he'd call it quits.

Even so, even so—he started to fret that maybe all the problems of actually buying a weapon might have been worth it . . .

A man appeared climbing over the rocks two hundred yards off. Another man joined him. Then two more. They went leaping from rock to rock, diving into the ankle-breaking gullies, scrambling on. More men pushed through. Blakey woke up.

He took a good hard look between the slot of rocks behind which he lay in ambush. He saw. The first thing he saw was—these men were leaping out of the casement! They were being trajected into this world from the other alien world beyond the



threshold. The second thing he saw was these men were not men. They ran on two legs and they wore uniforms that might have been made on Earth. But their arms and heads—no, no, no . . . Their arms levered up vertically from their shoulders and were triple-jointed. The hands were thin and wiry, and those alien hands carried weapons. Their heads—Blakey felt relieved they were wearing helmets, for the loose hanging, shaggy, mucous-dripping heap of slag flesh that was each face couldn't have been tolerated had it not been partially covered by the helmet. Green eyes glared. Nostril slits quite clearly opened and closed. Oh, yes, Alec had been right. They'd know their enemy when they saw him.

The rights and wrongs, the intrinsic humanity of these macabre horrors, had to be pushed aside now. The situation was simple. The men from Earth had been hired to fight to free an oppressed people; these things ahead of them were the enemy and therefore the oppressors. Blakey felt complete faith in what Alec and David Macklin had told him now.

Among the men one, at least, couldn't stomach the horrors, couldn't hold still, let discipline slide.

Someone let off a full clip.

The slag-faced horrors still leaped out of the casement onto the rocks, ran scrambling on. Somewhere in that other parallel the hammer was driving them. And Alec's men were the anvil. And some damned fool cut loose with a full clip and ruined the anvil's effect.

Alec shouted so viciously that Blakey imagined the rocks shivered.

"All right! Open fire!"

The rocks echoed to the crash of gunfire.

But the damage had been done. Even Fenwick and the other group on the flanks wouldn't hold the enemy now.

As he lined up on each horror and pressed the trigger Blakey concentrated on the business at hand, sparing a last admiring thought for the way you worked an ambush when you had the parallels to use. The horrors were being shot down; but more and more poured through the casement. If the men shooting had time to look beyond their target it would seem that the enemy were jumping out of thin air. Blakey slammed in a fresh mag and lined up again. The noise slammed about between the rocks; the stink of gunsmoke hung on the heavy air. And the horrors were shooting back.

The ambush had been laid out with masterly skill. Lines of fire criss-crossed and the beaten zones spelled death to any of the

aliens entering. Had the anvil not been prematurely exposed the ambush would have been summarily successful.

As it was. . . .

Blakey felt the spirit in him and tried to squash it and singularly failed. He was only along for the ride and to grab himself a gun. . . . But what he had seen of David Macklin and Alec, even in that short space of time, had deeply impressed him. Of course they'd known about the parallels! Of course they knew about trajecters! And he was fully convinced that he would have no fear with them of being chained up. He crabbed away from his position, sneaked along the rocks, started to work his way down and toward the nearest casement.

If he could just get down to that gulley where the body of Aitken lolled, the back of the combat jacket a solid mass of red. Aitken would never go fishing up in Upstate New York again. If he could just get Aitken's thirty caliber into operation—he jumped. A mortar bomb went off directly in front. Poulter was at it then. He refused to think what Alec would say if he spotted Blakey apparently deserting his post. But the reason for his posting there was now gone. He slid down beside Aitken, and saw his number two, a youngster who'd never been anywhere near Nam, crouched into a ball, his eyes wide open, his face the color of sick.

Blakey shoved the body aside. It lurched and fell on the youngster. He did not move; but his mouth stretched wider and wider and a dreadful gargling stuttered from his throat.

Blakey lined up the sights and cut loose. The belt rippled and span. He cursed the youngster—uselessly—and kept on firing. His bullets cut into a group of the enemy and they tumbled apart like china dolls. They must have a name; they were the horrors for now. He kept on firing. The gun clicked dry, the last cartridge spent. He stared around for the ammo. Bent over, reaching for the first replacement cartridge, he sensed, he felt, he was just aware of the shadow over him.

He did not hesitate. He simply threw himself on in a tumbling ball following his bending movement. He rolled. He came up on a knee, saw the horror's uplifted arms like the arms of a guillotine—and then the lights went out for Harry Blakey.



## CHAPTER TEN

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Alec said, "It was all my fault. I am entirely to blame."

They sat in a row against the mud wall of a mud hut with mud underfoot and a corrugated iron roof above. They were both chained and bound. The heat beat from the corrugated iron in palpable waves. There twelve of them, a-dozen survivors of the band who had set off in their school buses to free the oppressed.

"Maybe," said Chivers. He leaned his head back against the mud. "Didn't work much in Nam, either."

"If," said Poulter, "that stupid bastard hadn't opened up—"

"That's right." Squad leader French said. "That was Anderson. He got his fool head blowed off in the first shots."

"Lucky Anderson," said Poulter.

Nobody bothered to say: "Aw, wrap it up, Poulter."

Blakey kept quiet. His head still hurt. Whatever the horror had hit him with, it had put him out like a light. He'd woken up when they tossed him in here.

Alec made a sound like a deep growl in his throat.

"No. That wasn't it, either. It was my fault. The plan was wrong." He sounded so distressed that Blakey turned half away. "Yet General Spriggs set it up. He laid it all out on a sand table—"

Blakey emitted a half laugh like a groan. Sand tables!

"You all right, Blakey?"

"Sure." No sense in dramatizing anything. "When did this Spriggs character last see action? When they used horses?"

Alec started to bluster up, then slumped back. "No. But, Blakey, among the Dimensions you'll run across places where horsemen are the Lords of Creation in their world."

"Dimensions?"

Chivers voiced the word first. Blakey's ears went up.

Poulter said, "What'n hell are they—?"

"Aw, wrap it up, Poulter," said French. From this Blakey deduced that French, among those present, knew what the Dimensions were. Harry Blakey did not. But he had a shrewd suspicion.

Down the row Marty piped up: "I'm thirsty. Don't they—?"

Alec craned forward to look along the row of bound and chained men. "You're Italian, aren't you, Marty? That'll be useful. They talked a lot of Italian around here."

Someone else said fretfully: "And just where the hell is here?"

Alec quelled the babble that followed. He raised his voice a trifle. "Listen. Some of you people were recruited in too much of a hurry. There was no time to tell you all about it. But the operation was supposed to be a simple anvil job, just as General Spriggs laid it out. We'd have been back in New York, no sweat. Then there'd have been time."

Blakey said, "Well—we have time now, don't we?"

When they quieted down again, Alec went on: "You're in a Dimension called Irunium—"

"What's with the Dimensions bit?"

"Shut up and listen, Arnold! The Dimensions are parallel worlds, millions and millions of them, all existing alongside one another."

"I've heard of that," said Chivers. "Stories."

Blakey slumped back against the wall. So here it all was. Just another name for the parallels. And he had been right, and he'd found his way to people who knew—and still they were not the men from the armored cars.

"We were in a Dimension called Redleaf—that'll do for a name. Our hammer party caught the target and as planned they porteuired through from Irunium to Redleaf. We were waiting. If it had gone as planned—"

"It didn't," broke in Chivers. "So what now?"

Amidst the renewed outburst of excited and frightened men gabbling away, Blakey savored the word—porteuired. Well, he'd say trajected. But it came to the same thing.

Alec confirmed this. "We don't have a porteur with us. Val Redfern put us through; but she was ordered to pull out when the action started.

Blakey almost said: "Did you keep her chained up?"

Once again his duty was clear. It was down to him, to non-risk-taking Harry Blakey to traject—to porteur—this lot through the parallels—the Dimensions—back home.

He sensed out. There were casements within range, of various sizes and capacities. As to where they led, that would have to wait until they were ready to break through.

"When," Alec was saying, "I'm dead you'll have to carry on somehow—"



"Why should you be dead?" Chivers wanted to know. "And not us?"

"She knows me."

Even to Blakey, not given to over-elaboration, that did not seem an adequate reply. The corrugated iron ripped away and sunlight burst down, harsh and blinding.

"All out! All out!"

The accent was distinctly Italian. But Blakey had to remember that the men using these words were not Italian. They belonged to this parallel called Irunium.

"Form up! Get in line!"

Dazed with the sunlight, blinking, the survivors stumbled across to stand in a lackadaisical group, borne down by their chains. Only four of them were whipped, and these yelped more from the sting than the pain. Blakey knew what to expect. When he could more or less see he was stumbling along on the heels of the next ahead through a village of mud huts. The dust rose in thick white clouds, choking, flat and gritty on the tongue. A few people—ordinary men and women—cowered away as the prisoners and their guards passed.

Alec, shambling along at his side said: "Irunium's a sight hotter than I remember."

Blakey groaned at the double entendre, and Alec gave him a sidelong grimace that might have been a smile.

"How do we get out of this, Alec?"

"We don't, unless Dave can fix a porteur to come and get us."

"Will we know?"

"Depends who comes. How good they are. Now shut up. It's too dry to talk."

"All right. One last thing. What d'you call these slag-faced horrors?"

"Shroths. That's as near as you can get a tongue around their damned name."

The Shroths, if that was their name, urged the men on in a straggling column out of the little village. Ahead stretched a dusty trail between broken rocks, hard and unyielding. The sky burned. Blakey's mouth turned into a furnace to melt beryl steel. His whole body ached. The chains hung on him, clashing dolorously, and the bonds on his wrists cut. If he trajected through a casement he'd have trouble breaking free of the chains and bindings. His head hung down. He lumbered on the trail with the rest of them. They were all young, fit and strong. Had they not been they would not have survived.

The trail cut down between two flanks of barren hillside. In a shallow valley beyond rolled a wide sluggish river; dark brown in color, washing along between muddy banks and roiling with mud in the waters—but a river. Somehow or other they were all lying in a row by the bank with their heads in the muddy liquid, gasping and choking and blowing.

The guards let them be. The sounds of splayed feet sucking across oozing mud was all a part of the messy scene.

After a time they could sit back on their haunches, shivering, and stare with lackluster eyes about them.

A casement existed in the center of the river, a nice wide fat one, shining away with a purple and orangey hue. Blakey did not sense out to see what lay beyond. No one wanted to talk. They just hunkered there in the mud, wrapped in chains, every now and then sloshing more water over themselves. The smells were vile; and no one cared.

A boat appeared on the river.

She came sailing out of the casement, piece by piece, a haughty, arrogant specimen of shipwright's art, flaunting a high prow and a higher stern. Immense flags flew. Brightwork glittered. She was propelled by a triple row of oars, all rising and falling like wings. Three fighting towers stood along her length and—the incongruousness of it all made no impact on Blakey—on the fighting tops of this phantasmagoric barge the muzzles of machine guns and machine cannon snouted.

The moment the barge appeared Blakey was bombarded by pulses. Over there, in that boat, there must be at least three and possibly as many as five trajecters. He hunkered down.

Alec said, "She isn't aboard." His voice shook. "Her flag isn't flying." Then he took a grip on his nerves. "And I'll tell you something else. I thought it odd. We're not in Irunium at all. That damned boat has come to take us there."

Blakey said, "Alec, listen. If we got through to another par—Dimension, how would we cope? We're all chained up. You have any friends in the Dimensions?"

"Plenty. But we're not going anywhere without a porteur—and the ones over there aren't friendly."

The barge hauled through the water and when she was level all the oars whipped up parallel, held over the water. She lost way and came to a stately rest. Then the oars dug in again to hold her steady. Blakey began to get visions of himself chained to the loom of an oar. Oh, no, he said to himself, that's not for me.

A boat lowered and pulled across to the bank.

The men at the oars wore red kerchiefs about their heads and a



glint of gold at their ears attracted Blakey's immediate attention. In the stern sheets sat a man wearing a blue shirt and a ridiculous blood-red cocked hat. At his side sat a portly man wearing fawn shorts and a solar topee. Blakey looked carefully. He remembered the men who'd hired on Bright Sword and the remnants of his village: Now what if they were one and the same?

They were not.

His Under-Excellency Caldini shouted with a sweaty-faced and unpleasant coarseness. He waved an automatic about. The prisoners, herded into the boat, crouched on the boards and Blakey saw the oarsmen wore blue breechclouts. Their feet were bare; but he guessed they'd wear white rope-soled shoes on other duties. In their ears the golden bells glistened.

"Give way!"

The blades went in and the boat pulled for the barge.

Alec whispered: "Her Personal Bargemen."

Chivers started to say something and a whip cracked down. He shut up. Blakey was trying to decipher the incoming pulses. He sorted them out. There were four separate pulses, one wild and fierce, two of medium strength and one dull and intermittent. None appeared to have any control. He wondered if the stronger or the weaker would be the better trajecter—porteur, as Alec would say.

When they were lashed up over the side and down onto the deck Blakey received a chaotic impression of bargemen at work, of wisps of girls in wisps of clothing, of armored men, of strange creatures. He saw that there were no oarsmen. The looms of the oars inboard were connected to cranks powered by electric motors. No doubt the bilges were stuffed with batteries, or dynamos, although he could hear no machinery. Maybe they ran on nuclear power. A whip slashed his back and he went stumbling down wide steps forming a companionway to sprawl into a man at the bottom who cuffed him about the head and so manhandled him into the brig. This was what the small space must be, with a stout wooden door containing an iron-barred grating. When that shut the box turned into a hot and stuffy nightmare.

"Everybody get set," said Alec. "No moving around. Take it steady." The darkness pressed against them.

To keep from screaming aloud with the heebie-jeebies took an immense toll of willpower. Blakey sweated. They all sweated. They propped their backs against the wooden walls and they sprawled in the darkness, and they sweated it out.

Aware of the presence of a casement, Blakey did not sense out. He felt the quick shift in his mental balance, a subtle

disorientation, and knew they had been shifted through from one Dimension to another. He would, in order to conceal from everyone that he was capable of trajecting people and objects through the parallels, have to call it porteurage, the trajectors porteurs and the casements would be portals. He must remember this. It was vital.

They stayed in their midnight prison for two days and nights, measured only by the short intervals when they were thrown food and pannikins of water. The water, foul though it might be, tasted heavenly. When they were herded out they looked like shattered husks of men. Lashed up the companionway to that brief chaotic impression of the barge, they went over the side, down a gangplank and so stood on a jetty fronting a fantastic city.

Alec coughed up spit.

"The City of Diamonds," he said. "Now we are in Irunium."

The river wall studded with towers enclosed a city that shimmered in the sunshine. The impression of the city was essentially one of compactness and lift, of clustering buildings rising to peaked towers and spires, with low-rounded domes between. All around stretched a sea of grass. Each crenelated tower held artillery, and over the gate in front of them machine guns and flamethrowers frowned down.

"The City of Diamonds," breathed Alec. "Once a mortal enters there then all hope is gone."

"If we work together," said Chivers, "we can escape."

"Yes. Val and Scobie Redfern escaped. So did Mike Macklin. But look up there!" His head lifted.

Against the sky a flight of seven helicopters bored on in formation. Hueys, bristling with armaments, they looked like primeval hunting beasts out of a bloody past.

"Where do you go in Irunium? The Contessa owns it all. Owns it, body and soul! To escape from this hell you must have a porteur."

"We'll find one," said Chivers. "Come on, man! Snap out of it!"

Alec shook his head. "God help us all," he said as the guards lashed them on to climb the ramp and enter the dim shadows beneath the archway leading into the City of Diamonds.

Inside the city existed marvels to astound even so blasé a customer as Harry Blakey considered himself after his jaunt through the Dimensions. Beaten along, the prisoners staggered through the archway onto a stone-faced square. Avenues stretched away paralleling the walls within and extending into the heart of



the city. And the things that moved along these avenues! Blakey and the men gaped. Things—creatures, ghastly creations from nightmare, graceful forms of paradise, hunched and cowed figures of mystery, armored men swaggering with a clash of swords, great ladies carried in palanquins bedecked with jewels and gold—things, people, animals and objects completely out of Blakey's experience passed and repassed in a bewildering flow of activity. The place was exotic and mysterious, beautiful and ominous, a city to love and a city to hate. As the lash sliced across his shoulders, Harry Blakey knew which of those options he favored.

Among those mazing throngs flitted people clad in dull gray, sometimes a gray shirt and trousers, sometimes a gray breechclout, sometimes a gray tunic. They stood aside whenever their path crossed that of anyone else who was not like themselves. They carried burdens. They were cowed. Blakey knew just who they were. He'd often thought that gray as a color would suit him; now he revised that opinion.

And he saw porteurs.

In every case he saw the glittery chain first. Each chain fastened a porteur by the neck, and each chain extended to the wristlet of a man or woman wearing the ubiquitous fawn clothes. Smartly tailored clothes, these, sharp of crease, fashionable of cut, freshly laundered. The automatics belted to the waists of men and women alike were heavy, solid, and yet were not quite Colt .45s.

There was an odd alien look to them.

Alec said: "The Valcini, God rot 'em."

"They're from Ironium?"

"No. Not from Earth, either. They lick-spittle for the Contessa, and ape Italian ways because of the quality of Italian ways and because they started off around the Big Green—"

A whip landed slap slice on Alec then, and he gasped, and shook his shoulders.

Chivers said, "I'm going to cut me a mean slice from these bastards with the whips."

Poulter spat. "A mean slice, Chivers?"

"Yeah. That, I'll keep. The rest, I'll roast."

Then French fell down, entangled with his chain, and the flurry of blows brought yells from the men as he was extricated and hauled up. They were flogged on. No one paid them any attention. More slaves being brought into the City of Diamonds, Blakey deduced, was no new thing.

Across the square they avoided the main and brilliant avenue

and were thrashed down a side turning. Here their guards halted before a high wooden gate set in a stucco wall. The doors of the gateway swung open as a bell rang and a file of frog-faced creatures ran out on bandy legs. They were clad in reddish armor that owed more to copper than bronze. They wore tall spike-crowned helmets from which fleeced scraps of skin and hair. They carried leaf-shaped swords and oval shields of leather-covered wicker. They formed up around the slaves and the guards who had flogged all the way from the barge turned about and marched off.

Blakey looked at the new guards.

Their froglike faces held blank and indifferent expressions he found puzzling. Alongside their jaws the lick of blue was very pronounced, and the patches of gray and yellow over their skin looked almost painted on.

"Hoshoo!" said their leader, gesturing with his sword.

"What th' hell—?" gasped Poulter.

"Hoshoo! Hoshoo!"

Alec puffed air through stiff lips.

"Do as they command, you guys. They chop folk for the Contessa. They'll chop us without a second thought. No trouble."

"Who are they?" demanded Chivers as they set off between a double file of guards. These guards did not prod with their swords or spears, did not lash with whips. They just acted with the unthinking knowledge in them that prisoners and slaves did what they were told to do.

"They're Honshi. Pets of the Contessa's. Don't rile 'em."

Blakey shut his mouth with a snap. Almost, when Chivers had demanded who they were, he'd said: "Honshi, of course."

He marched on dangling his chains. That had been close. How the hell, Alec and the others would want to know, could he guess these peoples' name?

But the most important and devastating fact was this—these Honshi worked for the evil people of this evil place. One glance told Blakey they were not Hoshen Honshi. They must be the breed of Honshi against whom Bright Sword had warned him. Was Bright Sword here with his people then? Were they guards—or were they slaves?

The party hurried along stone-flagged ways. Under a wall pierced by many windows stood a party of Honshi, on guard. They looked alert. As Blakey passed he saw, set in a recess, what these men guarded. A portal glowed in the recess, wide enough for two people to go through aside. The Honshi alkady in



command saluted. The alkady commanding the guard party returned the salute. Alec looked disgusted.

"Anyone would think the stinking Honshi were human!"

Blakey opened his mouth; shut his mouth. You learned more by listening than spouting your fool head off.

Control of the portals between Dimensions would be all important to a culture with knowledge of them. Blakey did not need to be told that all the portals in the City of Diamonds would be well-guarded. The Honshi conducted them into a large and gloomy building with a packed dirt floor. Other people in there were lying on the ground, and the air was filled with a long low moaning. The men from Earth joined the rest of the slaves.

"It'll be the mines for us," said Alec. "Digging out her diamonds."

Almost immediately, Honshi appeared with a Valcini in his cool fawn shirt and slacks. He went along picking people out. He picked out Alec and French, half, a dozen of the others. They were herded off. Poulter went with the next selection. Then Chivers was picked out. They all went with different Valcini, out into mysterious destinies. Blakey was left among the remaining slaves. He felt the terror in him so badly he thought he would vomit.

Why had he been left? Why had he been singled out?

Could it be—was it possible—did these damned bastards know he was a porteur?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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The irony of the situation did not appeal—it appalled.

Blakey sat on a tiled floor surrounded by miniature mountains of rusty iron and corroded bronze. At his side stood a bucket of grease. Next to that stood a bucket of brickdust. He had to spit a lot. He picked up a chunk of reddish metal, discovered it to be iron, and started in. Brick dust and spit. And when the iron gleamed with a soft gray-black luster, he greased it all thoroughly.

Then he picked up a fresh chunk of the stripped-down armor and began all over again.

He wore a pair of frayed-edged gray slacks. Nothing else. His body was painted up with rust and grease and brick dust like a

savage from a primeval world. He spat and polished, and greased, over and over again.

The irony lay simply in this—he'd joined the disastrous expedition of Alec Macdonald's to gain a weapon for himself. And he'd ended up cleaning and polishing the armor of the opposition.

The wide low-ceilinged room contained immense quantities of armor. There was not a weapon in sight. Six other people, men and women, sat amidst their own piles of rusting junk and spat and polished away. No one had spare spit to talk much.

He gathered that the Valcini who ran this place had been off on an expedition with their minions to a world of extreme damp and heat. In that Dimension the rain never ceased to fall. Whatever they'd gone to get, they'd obtained, and fought for it, and so came back through the portals to Irunium. And now they threw their armour down for slaves to clean and polish.

His relief when he'd discovered this was what the Valcini who had picked him had wanted him for had left him feeling weak. His companions, dragged off by other Valcini, were about their menial tasks. At meal breaks in the room where slop was served in earthenware bowls, he'd seen Chivers, and caught up with the news. Alec and the first group had been sent down the mines.

"From what I hear, man, he ain't never coming back."

"I'll give Alec the benefit of that one. He's a tough character—"

"Sure! But you should see the guards they have. Man! I'd sooner roll a grenade under them as wish them good morning."

The guards mounted over the armory were a mixture of three alien races. There were the Honshi, who were not Hoshen Honshi. There were the dripping-flesh, green-tinctured, slag-faced Shroths—if that was how you got your tongue around their name. And there were the women, beautifully formed girls in tight dark-blue uniforms and high heels who carried whips and knew how to use them. From the tips of those high-heeled boots to the delicate curve of their necks they were lasciviously shaped women. Blakey tried not to look at their heads. He spat and polished and kept his gaze strictly on the piece of armor over which he slaved.

Chivers had caught the job of mucking out stables.

"They ain't horses, man."

One of the monstrous-headed girls walked past, flicking the black tip of her whip like some obscene insect-tongue. Chivers and Blakey concentrated on the slop and chunk of bread in their bowls. These guards came from a Dimension called Smefatcherin. Blakey called the guards Smefs, and was dismally aware how stupid and lacking such an appellation was for creatures so



grotesque. They were vicious with a joy in viciousness, inflicting pain for the pleasure of it.

"We're gonna escape, Blakey."

"Yeah? So we get out of the city. Then what?"

"We find us one of these porteur characters, that's what."

"You got any ideas on getting out?"

"Some. Poulter got hisself sent to carrying bundles. Always an obliging sort, Poulter. He has access to the street."

"So?"

"So when we get the word, we break out. We'll pick us up some more likely recruits, and—"

"Just let us get out. Then we'll see." Blakey, much as he liked the big black man, could not tell him that if they found a portal he, Harry Blakey, would porteur them out of this Dimension of nightmare. But, that was what he would do.

Much heartened, he went back to start in on the piles of rusty and corroded armor. He spat and polished and thought of ways of grabbing a weapon to assist the break.

Two Shroths brought in a new slave and flung her down among the piles of rusting junk and kicked her a few times, and went out. No one paid her much attention, and the tame slave, Ernli, told her what to do. Her dark hair flowed down over her face as she bent her head. She wore only a dingy gray skirt, much torn, and there were weals across her back. Her skin was very white, as though she were accustomed to wearing clothes and they had recently been torn off. Blakey did not see her face; but as she polished away he saw her body give a convulsive shake from time to time, and guessed she was still sobbing.

Well—who wouldn't?

Ernli, the tame slave, had explained mainly by gesture, with a few choice Italian words thrown in. The girl made no reply. Something about the way she sat, spitting and polishing, and the graceful movement of her arms, her air of forlorn misery and abandoned hope, touched cynical old Harry Blakey. He wondered about switching in the little silver pip in his skull and speaking to her. But he was quite genuinely frightened of doing anything that might lead anyone, slave or Valcini, into suspecting he was not as he seemed.

Toward the end of that shift, with a face stiff and a mouth drier than any damned desert, Blakey shoved the last piece of armor aside and stretched, groaning. A Shroth came in, his booted feet hard on the tiles, to inspect the amount of work done before they went off for slop and the dismal barrack beds all in a row behind the iron-barred cages.

The Shroth's green slag-heap of a face turned this way and that, seeing the piles of gleaming greased armor beside each slave. He stopped by the new girl slave. Even Blakey could see her output was down. It was, clearly, not good enough for the Shroth.

He lifted his whip and started to beat the girl. He hit with cunning drawing strokes. Her white back, where the marks of previous whippings stood out, glistened suddenly with a fresh line of red. She arched up. She screamed.

Just how or for what damnfool reason it happened, Blakey couldn't say. But he sprang up, aching all over, took the Shroth's disgusting neck between his hands, and squeezed. At the same time he kicked him a few times. He enjoyed that. The whip flayed the air. The Shroth made gargling noises. Ernli started to shriek in fear. The other slaves cowered back.

Blakey tripped the Shroth, went down on top of him and freed his right hand. He reached. He had the strongest distaste for letting his hand come in contact with the Shroth's skin. He snatched up a piece of rusty iron and laid it alongside the guard's head. It made a ghastly squelching sound. The Shroth shuddered, jerking like a landed fish. Then he collapsed. Green gunk oozed among all the green slag-flesh.

Blakey shoved up on his knees. He took deep gulps of air. He felt a surge of revulsion flow over him.

Then he backhanded Ernli. Poor old Ernli went head over heels into a pile of rust. "Shaddap, Ernli!"

"Oh!"

He swung back, staring. The girl was half-crouched, her body, like all the slaves', stained with grease and rust. She lifted a hand and flung the hair from her face.

"You—you're from Earth!"

"Yes," said Harry Blakey. "And it's time to get the hell outta here. Come on."

He reached down, grabbed her hand, jumped up and ran for the open door. She followed. He could feel her weight dragging his arm. Outside, the corridor to the mess room lay one way, to the barracks the other. He chose the mess room, said curtly: "Walk naturally. Act as though we've just been let out. We're only a few minutes before time."

"All right."

Slaves were jostling in already from other areas in the slave quarters. Among that medly of half-naked bodies Blakey spotted Chivers and Poulter. He moved toward them, aware of the Honshi standing at intervals with ready spears.



"Hey, Blakey—?"

"We make the break now."

"Hold on, hold on—"

"Aw, wrap it up, Poulter! We go—*now!*"

"Let's," said Chivers, picking up an earthenware bowl, "go."

"You've been out on the street, Poulter. You lead."

"Oh, sure! I'll lead. I always get the sticky end."

They moved quickly to the far door and, at the entrance, a hubbub and an outcry drove them on.

"They found the guard I clobbered."

"You did?" said Chivers. "Hey!"

Unexpectedly, the girl said, "I know the way. But we must be quick. The Honshi will be here dreadfully soon."

"Hoshoo!" said Blakey. "Lead on."

They moved down the corridor past the toilet area which was as far as they were normally allowed. A Honshi with his wide froglike face blank, switched his spear down. Not without a pang, Blakey struck him. He hit hard and with knowledge of where to hit a Honshi, as Bright Sword had taught.

He bent, picked up the spear, threw it to Chivers. He took the leaf-shaped sword. They ran on.

A Shroth let rip a sound like a rat's squeal when a terrier nips him as he spotted the four running humans. He leveled his rifle. The gate he guarded looked to be a solid affair. Blakey bent his head to charge on, leaf-shaped sword pointed, making a desperate effort to beat the bullet and knowing he had no chance in hell—

Chivers took three steps and cast the spear.

The heavy blade went straight through the Shroth's head. The broad blade sliced. The alien creature fell down. The girl said nothing. Poulter said, "Jeez!"

By the time Blakey picked up the fallen rifle Chivers, like a panther, reached out to rip his spear free. "Did a bit of javelin, field events man," he said. "Never thought it'd come in handy like this, though."

They gave the rifle to Poulter and Chivers eased the gate open. From the corridor at their backs the sounds of uproar continued. At any moment their pursuers would round the far corner and see them. So there was nothing else for it.

Chivers opened the gate, they stepped through, and Blakey closed it. They stood in a stone-walled yard, with a gate in the corner, and two slaves carrying water just about to enter. Without a word the four fugitives started across.

Chivers gave the two slaves a ferocious grin, and as they

cringed back, slid past them and stuck his head around the side of the opening.

"All clear. Jest a road—and trees."

Blakey eased up and looked. Chivers was not one to make a mistake. The road, dusty under the sun, looked smoky in the heat. They walked out.

"What about this rifle?" said Poulter. "If'n them Valcini see me—"

"Aw—wrap—" began Chivers. Then he stopped. "The man's right, Blakey."

"So you carry it by the muzzle as though you don't know what it is. You're taking it to be mended, for God's sake."

The girl said, "No. Wrap it up, like your friend said."

"Huh?"

She put her hand to her waist and undid the single large button. The skirt fell and she stepped out of the circle of wrinkled gray cloth. She wore a pair of yellow briefs; the back top edge was stained with the blood that must have oozed from her whipped back. "Here. Wrap it in this. Hurry."

The rifle was a Springfield model '03, and ancient though the weapon was and loath though Blakey was to lose his newly acquired sword, he figured the rifle would be of more use. He put the sword down; Chivers, with a grunt, dumped the spear, and they set off.

"Walk miserably," the girl said. "Hang your heads. You can get about the streets if you know how to act."

"They'll be looking for us," said Chivers.

"And one rifle like this antique ain't going to do no good," put in Poulter.

"We'll find that out when the time comes." Chivers wiped a finger and thumb down beside his nose. His beard, beginning to sprout, was fearsomely black. "Now, Poulter, you said Arnold and Marty were around and hanging available."

"We meet up by a garage Arnold mends autos at. Marty got lucky—speaking Eyetalian, I guess. He works in the kitchen of a restaurant."

Blakey said: "Grub and transport. Couldn't be better."

Past the trees they joined a wider road lined by three-story buildings. A few people passed, mostly slaves and odd-looking aliens, with the occasional palanquin being carried by animals or men, and twice a car passed—one a jeep the other a gold-plated Cadillac. Nothing looked out of place in this City of Diamonds, where wealth jostled abject slavery.



"We do not want to go out onto the boulevard," said the girl. "We must reach your garage by the back ways."

"You know them?" said Blakey. Then he said: "I'm Harry Blakey."

"Carol—Carol Keeffe—"

"Walk tight," snapped Chivers. "Honshi."

The bandy-legged fighting men with their froglike faces passed. Carol gripped Blakey's arm tightly. He kept his head down; but his gaze rolled sideways and he watched the Honshis strutting along, their spears all slanted. Not Hoshen Honshi. They were guards hired by this madwoman Alec was so much worked up about. If it came to a fight, Blakey felt he wouldn't hesitate. . . .

When the Honshi had passed, Carol said breathily: "You know what those bits of hair and—?"

"Yes," said Blakey. "You were saying you know the way to the garage?"

"If it is the one at the back of the Academy."

Poulter said: "Arnold said something about an Academy. Military, he thought—"

"Then let's go there, pronto," rapped Chivers. "And keep the lips buttoned, hey?"

As they walked along like slaves Blakey saw more of this phantasmagorical place called the City of Diamonds. The wealth astounded. It was displayed in the most bizarre ways. One whole wall of a restaurant they passed appeared to be a single shimmering mass of diamonds.

Blakey cocked an eye at Carol, and she nodded.

If they *were* real . . . ! Blakey began to get ideas.

The more he saw of the creatures here the more he was astounded at the fecundity of nature. Sobering thought told him that all these people were fashioned as they were by their own worlds, that they were not mere sports, genetic freaks thrown up at the whim of some cosmic jest. The sun stood just above the towered wall of the city, and its level rays struck upon glistening eyeball in some ferocious face, glinted upon the fangs adorning a grinning mouth, struck sparks from the jagged indentations of a harness of armor upon the broad back of some striding creature, all swords and machine pistol and tall, pennon-bearing lance. The jumble of the City of Diamonds fascinated Blakey. He guessed that the Honshi City to which he had never been must be something like this. But there, he reasoned, in the Dimension of Honsh, would be no lavish outpouring of wealth as was to be found here.

Carol led them meekly along keeping to the gutter and out of

the way of these important folk. Presently, having crossed a square in which trees grew and a fountain tinkled and from which she warned them quickly—"Slaves are not allowed to drink there!"—they reached a long low single-story building. The walls were fashioned of concrete, pierced by tall lancet windows. They moved along in the shadow of the building, and Carol said, "This is the back of the Academy."

"And there's the garage," said Poulter. "And that's Arnold. I'd recognize those feet anywhere."

A pair of boots stuck out from under a Chevvy vintage 1955, and Poulter walked up and kicked the soles heartily.

"If that ain't Arnold—"

But it was.

He came out smothered with grease, cursing, and with a wrench brandished.

"Oh. It's you. What's the score?" He saw at once that this was not a social call.

"We're bustin' out. You're in. Let's get Marty."

"Aspet, aspet," he said, dropping into the atrocious bits of Italian they were all picking up. "There's Forsythe and Northrop in back."

"Go gittem," said Chivers. "And jump!"

"There's those creepy Shroths hanging around—"

"I've got the medicine for them." And Poulter tapped Carol's skirt bundled around the Springfield.

"Yeah? Well, if'n you knock over one of them green-faced walking slag-heaps, I claim his rifle."

Arnold went off into the blue shadows of the garage, whistling, walking as though about important business—which he was, although not for the masters who might imagine it was for their benefit the slave jumped so willingly. Blakey cocked his head at the building across the way.

"Academy. We likely to get a lot of soldier boys strutting about from there?"

"Soldiers?" Carol looked surprised. "Oh, no. That's not a Military Academy." She shivered then, and her face with its weird painting of grease and rust looked drawn. "That's the Contessa's Academy of Porteuring Science."

Instantly, Blakey felt chilled.

But Chivers came quiveringly alert.

"Where they keep porteurs? Guys who can git us out of here?"

"Yes—"

"That's great. Then we grab one—and we're all set!"



Blakey was looking at Carol. He noticed that her eyes were a very deep dark blue set in a pleasantly formed face, full cheeked and yet perfectly formed, with a mouth with that betraying softness in the line that indicated generosity and vulnerability and tenderness—at least, that soft mouth did in Blakey's book. He never did like girls with thin lips.

"Tell me, Carol . . ."

"What? Oh—yes, of course. You mean—what am I doing here?"

"What are we all doing here?" said Poulter.

"Aw—wrap it up, Poulter," said Chivers.

"I was—it was frightening. I'm a computer programmer and I was going—it was raining and I didn't have a raincoat. So I took a cab and then—well, you're here and so you'll believe me; but I wouldn't if anyone told me."

Blakey smiled at her. "We'll believe you, Carol."

"The cab turned into the tunnel and then the rain had stopped and the sun was pouring down and things—Shroths, they were, that I know now—they dragged me out and—and—"

"And they tossed you into the armory to clean rust—"

"Oh, no." She shook her head. "No. They brought me here by helicopter and I was told I was to be trained. But it was hard. It hurt. And I couldn't do it right. I was Polarized. That's what they told me. Polarized. So they whipped me . . ." She gripped her hands together. Blakey started to say something, anything, to comfort her, when he realized what she was saying.

"You mean—they *selected* you. They brought you here to Irunium because you have the power." Quite deliberately, he sensed out. Her pulse was faint, faint and with an off-key beat to it as though blocked by some substance that filtered her power as a screen—a polarizing screen—filters light.

"You're a porteur!"

"No—no!" She was gasping, pleading. "I'm not! I'm not! I couldn't do it! They were cruel, horrid. They made me keep on and keep on—and then they said I was Polarized—"

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure. Something about only being able to porteur within known parameters. They said after I'd learned my lesson, what it was like to be a slave, they'd put me to work shifting freight. I don't know what—"

"Here comes Arnold—and Forsythe and Northrop are with him." Chivers heaved up. "Don't fret," he said to Carol. "We'll find ourselves a porteur and get out. You'll see."

"Oh, yes—please!"

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Recognizing a slave-porteur presented no problem. He or she was one of the unfortunates with an iron collar chained up by a glittery silver link-chain to a strutting Valcini. The male Valcini wore disgusting two-tone shoes, sharp-pointed, decorated, cream and brown, black and white—ghastly. The party of fugitives left Arnold's garage and picked up Marty from the back of his restaurant. Marty was in, in a big way, and ducked back inside to re-emerge with bowls packed with steaming goodies. Everyone ate heartily.

"The chef is going to blow his fuse when he comes to service tonight," smirked Marty. "Eat up, folks!"

"Now we go back to the Academy," said Chivers. "And we pick ourselves a porteur. Carol—you'll have to tell us the best portal."

Lights sprang up along the boulevards and cross avenues. In the spaces between the lights attenuated. Traffic on the streets continued heavy. From the activity anyone would think the City of Diamonds was a normal town, with folk commuting and going out for the evening. Perhaps, surmised Blakey as they walked through the shadows back to the rear of the Academy of Porteuring Science, maybe that wasn't too far from the truth.

Carol said, "Every known portal is guarded—"

"Yeah. Alec said that. Some friends of his escaped but they've shut that bolt hole. We'll just have to knock over the guards." Chivers smiled; but the smile held no friendly intentions toward the guards. "We can be quick—we will be quick."

With the coming of evening the temperature dropped a trifle; it remained warm enough for the half-naked humans to feel no discomfort. But Harry Blakey had experience of the Dimensions—not much, perhaps, as he now saw. He was nowhere near the seasoned Dimensions Traveler he had imagined himself, but he did know enough to say: "We may need warm clothes."

In a tone that conveyed distress that she could not be of more help, Carol said: "I'm afraid I can't tell what sort of world lies beyond a portal."

"The porteur will tell us," Chivers assured her.



"Yeah?" Poulter said. "What if he lies?"

"Aw—"

"He'll be going through with us, Poulter. If we suffer—he suffers!"

Blakey kept very quiet. Of course, he'd sense out what lay beyond the portal for the sake of his comrades and for Carol. Of course he would. Conscious that he trod very thin ice, he attempted to act as just another unfortunate stranded among the Dimensions. The sight of the glittery chains, and the way the slave-porteurs cringed got to him, unnerved him, made him feel sick.

The Valcini and his porteur came walking down past the back of the Academy. They walked out of a small door much loaded with bronze plaques. They made no fuss whatsoever when Chivers and the others took them into custody. The Valcini was not quite as fat and sweaty as those usually encountered; he was just as sharp and important in his fawn shirt and slacks and his two-tone shoes. Blakey took the auto from the holster. He whistled.

"I thought I knew firearms. Anyone seen anything like this?"

No one had.

The automatic looked something like a Colt, or a Browning, but it was not. It was alien. The mechanism was familiar. Blakey said, "Somebody out in the Dimensions is doing a roaring trade copying designs."

"Yeah."

No one objected when Chivers took the belt and holster for the auto. Chivers had been a sergeant in Nam; Blakey, for one, was quite content to let the powerful black man lead on. He tried to stick close to Carol. Everyone else had the same idea. As they walked, or ran, the sight of Carol in those skimpy yellow briefs, her dark hair aswirl, gave everyone a jolt of the old adrenalin.

Her smile—under the circumstances—was masterly and impish, as she said, "Take off your shirt, Valcini."

It was left to Poulter to let out a great sigh of regret when Carol put the shirt on.

Carol said, "Aw—wrap it up, Poulter!"

And they all laughed.

Blakey took hold of the chain connecting Valcini and porteur. The porteur himself was a fine robust man, strong-faced, with a shock of dark frizzy hair. His skin was of a liquid amber hue, and he wore a yellow tunic and on his feet were good strong brogues. Blakey fingered the chain. When he tested it he found it to be unbreakable by his human muscles.

Carol said, "Here's the key." She took the key from the top pocket of the shirt.

Chivers unlocked the porteur. At once, as the collar fell away, he massaged his neck. The collar was well-padded.

"How do we talk to this guy?"

The Valcini started to say something and Arnold lifted the wrench he'd thoughtfully brought along. Walking across, Carol put her hand into the Valcini's dark hair, twisted, and brought out a jeweled hoop. The men gasped.

"No. These aren't diamonds. This is a translator. You put it on, with the right studs depressed, and you can understand the languages you've selected. It is an old model. I'm surprised—"

"Here. Let me." Chivers took the band, settled it about his head. "It's got to be set for this guy. You! You'll find us a good portal and take us out of Ironium. You can escape with us. We'll look out for you. What's your name?"

"Cluff. You'll never escape the Contessa."

Chivers understood, and so did Blakey with his silver pip switched in. The others did not and wanted to know what the guy said. Blakey pressed his teeth together. If he spoke now this porteur Cluff would understand him. He brushed aside any thoughts that he was selling his comrades short. A local porteur would know far more than Carol, and Carol knew more than he did about conditions. He'd bail out his friends if it came to it—of course. . . .

They were standing in the shadows of an alleyway entrance. No lights illuminated the slot at their backs, and the narrow street to their front was only patchily lit. No casements were handy; Blakey would make damn sure the porteur found a good one. From up the street the sound of clumping boots echoed down, eerily in that shadowed space.

"Guards!"

"Keep quiet. Hunker down. They'll never spot us here. Arnold, lay that wrench where it'll do some good."

A soggy thunk sounded, and Blakey guessed the Valcini had gone to sleep. The breathing of the men sounded loud to Blakey. He was at the front, and eased himself down in the shadows by the entrance to the alley. The sound of footsteps neared.

"Quiet, you guys. . . ." Chivers' voice was a whisper.

Somebody moved in the darkness and a chink sounded.

Blakey sweated. The guards moved nearer and the sound of their voices reached in, light, chilling with a clicking hissing such as would be imagined by anyone attempting to listen to insects talking. This was no imagination. The Smefs were there,



striding long-limbed on, outlined against the light. Their lascivious female forms and those heads. . . . Blakey tried to remain as still as a mouse. He hadn't yet made up his mind just what horrendous form of insect head their heads reminded him of; he didn't want to think about it.

Maybe they didn't remind him of insects at all; maybe the racial abhorrence he felt stemmed from memories of magnified pictures of spiders' heads. All he knew was that these unholy Smefs enjoyed inflicting pain on others. That damned them, as far as Harry Blakey was concerned.

They strutted on, passing the narrow mouth of the alleyway, and as they passed, Blakey, looking up, saw their heads silhouetted against the patchy light of the street. Those inhuman heads did not even turn to glance down the alley.

He relaxed and felt himself shaking.

Chivers' whisper floated gently.

"Back down the alley—there's a way out at the far end."

The men began to move—and Blakey, rising to follow, froze.

Masked by the noise of the Smefs, unheeded through his own terrified absorption of those unholy monstrosities, a second party of guards passed in the opposite direction. The two parties said nothing to each other apart from a brusque all's well from the alkady to the Smef leader.

Honshi!

The men at Blakey's back were moving without caution, the damned porteur chain chingled and rang as it dragged the iron neck-hoop along the stone, a clatter sounded which Blakey would swear was Poulter dropping the Springfield.

The Honshi halted at the entrance to the alley.

Blakey hunkered. He was shaking.

"Who's there?"

He swallowed. He tried to get his tongue to work.

"Just a party mending the road," he got out. He did not fully comprehend why—but a vivid picture of Bright Sword rose before him, he could hear the chief speaking, and so he spoke as he had when he'd conversed with Bright Sword, when he'd joked and laughed with the folk of the Hoshen Honshi as they trekked across the inhospitable land dodging or killing the Gardesh.

The alkady of the Honshi party sneered.

"You are Hoshen Honshi, slave! You address me as sir!"

"Yes, sir," said Blakey.

"We are the Hideki Honshi! We serve the Contessa. Now get back to work, you crawling louse upon a baboon's arse!"

"Yessir," said Blakey.

When the Honshi marched off on their bandy legs, Blakey felt the sweat thick and cold, like axle grease, upon his forehead. That right bastard had recognized him as Hoshen Honshi. Blakey took a shaky comfort from his success in that. It meant he had mastered the tongue, he had fooled the Hideki Honshi. With a shake of his head he padded off down the alley to rejoin the fugitives. Now to find a portal!

Discovering that Carol was a porteur, even if not a fully operational one, had been a surprise only because he was shut down. Had he been sensing he would have picked up her signal without difficulty, weak though it was. There were levels and levels of sensing, and he supposed they must be something like active and passive sonar. He did know that he'd much prefer actually to *see* a portal outlined by its arch of lights; no paranormal sense was then required apart from the very act itself.

Now he deliberately allowed his scanning sense to come into operation. He just hoped he was passive, and no damned spying porteur could pick him up. Immediately the locations and sizes of a number of casements became apparent.

The pulse he was picking up from Cluff, the porteur, roared in thick and strong and wild. There was not a shred of control. Cluff was radiating out in a rip-roaring flood to all the world that he was a porteur. Blakey had to come to the conclusion that Cluff, and the other porteurs here, just didn't *know* they were pulsing out.

What Jim would have said, Blakey could guess.

The locations and sizes of the portals here in The City of Diamonds did not impress. The strong sense of a couple of large casements came from somewhere deep in the heart of the city; as was to be expected, the Academy had a thick cluster of casements running from mere rabbit holes up to portals that would take locomotives; a scattering of man-size portals over the city suggested ready means of travel for those who had the need and the gift. The Valcini had the need and their slave-porteurs the gift. Blakey walked carefully on and came out of the alley after the others.

The river gave only a few small portal indications; quite clearly the barge had porteaured through into Irunium a good way off—over two miles. At the moment there was no moon in the sky and the stars glittered. A tiny breeze blew. Up ahead, along the street they were following, a portal existed that would take a couple of people comfortably side by side. When Cluff walked on past, Blakey said nothing. He drew level with the arch of lights and sensed out, to receive a chaotic impression of ice-floes



and barren whiteness and cold. Cluff was right. That Dimension was useless.

He wanted to curl up and shut everything down. The idea that someone, somewhere, in this city was monitoring his pulses left him feeling weak, with a revulsion he was coming to think must be peculiar to a trajecter. The idea that his mind could betray itself filled him with horror. He supposed a non-porteur would not, could not, appreciate just why and how that so profoundly affected a person with the gift of porteuering across the Dimensions.

The next portal ought to be more promising. As Blakey passed the one giving ingress to a world of icy desolation, he stepped over the two Honshi guards. They were Hideki Honshi. They slumbered. Whoever had hit them had hit them shrewdly.

He walked along more smartly. There was a certain thing he wished to ask Cluff.

The party clustered where this street debouched into a small square. Lights shone from the trees, the sounds of revelry floated from a restaurant across the patch of grass and on the air the scents of rich food and drink made Blakey realize that despite Marty's welcome provisions, he was still hungry. Cluff just stood there, occasionally rubbing his neck. All across the back of his yellow tunic the embroidered eye glowed in fine stitching. Blakey eased up to the porteur's side.

Slap bang in the middle of the patch of grass a portal glowed. Blakey sensed out. Trees, a zephyr breeze, the sense of gentleness riding a long serene evening . . . A good Dimension.

Cluff said nothing.

Blakey said: "Cluff." As the porteur turned, Blakey switched off his silver pip and said to Chivers: "Hey, Chivers. Mind if I borrow your translator? Want to ask this guy something."

"Sure, man. Here."

With the translator in place around his head, Blakey said: "You look an important man in the world you come from, Cluff. You know about this porteuering business?"

"I was the mayor of my town, before I served the Contessa. Yes, I know."

"Fine!" Blakey had no difficulty now in assuming the genial manner. "What's a Polarized Porteur?"

Cluff indicated his contempt. "One who does not have the full power. They may only porteur from and to a world to which they have already been. They are second rate."

Carol, able to understand what Blakey said, touched his arm. "Harry! What does he say?"

"Why, that you do have the power, once you know where you're going to and have been."

Cluff laughed, strong, confident. The Valcini stood, held by Forsythe and Northrop, swaying. The chain dangled. "She is crippled!"

"Any portals about, Cluff?"

The man's eyes flicked betrayingly to the grass patch. Then he looked away, quickly.

"Over there, hey?" said Blakey, bluffly genial. "Fine!"

"I did not—" began Cluff.

"Say! You do want to escape, don't you?"

"No one can escape from the Contessa."

Taking the translator band off, Blakey dangled it. He said to Carol, "There's a portal over there in the middle of the grass. Can you sense it?"

Her face indicated strain. She wiped a hand over her cheek, and the brick dust and grease smeared. "No—"

"Try!" Then, Harry Blakey tried himself. He did what he considered to be a diabolical infringement upon the private self of another person. He guided and nudged just as Jim had done. He assisted. He sensed out to twin with Carol's pulse.

She gasped. "I can feel—"

"Just put your mind to feeling that portal over there. It's there all right." He eased her pulse forward, and refused to admit his intrusion upon her privacy as an evil act. Cluff, it was now clear to Blakey, was useless, and there was no time to find another porteur. "Feel, Carol!"

She strained, and her pulse flickered and brightened and faded, and so grew again.

"Yes—" she said. "A bright white spot—and green—a kind of green radiance all about it—"

"Is that what it's like?"

He felt surprise that she could not see in however a shadowy way the arch of lights which to him glowed so brightly. All the signs were good for the Dimension beyond the portal. Yet she saw only a bright white light and a green glow . . .

The body within the fawn shirt trembled. Blakey put his arm around her waist and supported her. Beads of perspiration glinted on her forehead. She closed her eyes.

Blakey wasn't sure; he just hoped that was a good sign.

"The portal's there, Carol, and you can feel it. That's great! Pretty soon you'll be able to throw people about in the Dimensions like rubber balls—breaking through barriers harder than steel!"



"I—I don't know—"

"Well, that's for the future. Right now we have to get Cluff to—"

"That's right," said Chivers. Blakey handed across the translator band and when it was adjusted, he said: "Right, Cluff. Suppose you tell us if that portal's okay and then start putting us through? Hey?"

"You will never escape the Contessa—"

"Save it! Don't keep on that. Would you like to begin?"

"No."

They all understood what that curt monosyllable meant, accompanied as it was by a violent shake of the head and a flattening motion of Cluff's hands. "No!"

"Now wait a minute—" started Poulter.

"He has to put us through!" Marty and the others looked wild.

"I'll twist his neck for him if he don't," said Chivers.

"I will not porteur you—the Contessa—"

Blakey said, "He'll do it, Chivers. Look, we don't have all night. The place is slap bang in the middle of the grass, and, as you can see, there are—"

"Four Honshi."

"So that means the Dimension the portal leads to is a good 'un. Check?"

"Check."

The scheme was quickly arrived at. They'd form up two abreast and start in a column across the square toward the grass. Carol would guide them directly to the portal. If the Honshi interfered—as they would, of course—they'd be taken care of. Then Cluff would porteur them all through, two by two, just as fast as he could. He would go last.

Blakey said: "I'll stick with Cluff."

"If he won't cooperate—"

"He will."

"I will not," said Cluff. "The Contessa—"

"You will cooperate." Carol walked across with the glittery chain. The Valcini stood looking stupid. She looked determined, her dark hair a mess, her face brick-red and greasy, the shirt already crumpled. "Otherwise we'll put this chain, this dypoc-control chain, on you, Cluff. You know what it can do. You'll cooperate."

Chivers caught Cluff's shoulders and forced him down. Arnold took the chain and opened the neck hoop.

Cluff squeaked: "I will cooperate!"

"That's nice, man," said Chivers. "It's all settled nice and peaceful." He looked at the party. "Let's go!"

Two by two they started out for the grass and the portal to another world. The sounds of laughter and the clink of glasses could not distract, could only suggest a normalcy everyone in the party of fugitives had long since abandoned.

The four Honshi went down, and only two had to be shot. The sounds, flat and cracking in the evening air, would bring other guards running by the score. The escapers would be long gone by then. At the front, Chivers and Poulter stood to one side to act as a covering party. Northrop and the Valcini reached the portal.

"Now, Cluff!" called Carol.

He understood what those two words meant, and he fleered a quick look up under his lids at Blakey at his side. Blakey stared back. He saw quite clearly that Cluff wouldn't porteur them through. He'd wait and submit to being chained up with the dypo-control chain. By that time other guards—guards who, unlike the Honshi, would carry guns—would roar into the square. This man Cluff, this porteur, was perfectly willing to risk a bullet from Chivers for fear of disobeying his Contessa. Harry Blakey did not hesitate.

He trajected Northrop and the Valcini through. Forsythe and Arnold, Marty and the others, they went through like pips from the fingers. Carol went. Chivers and Poulter went.

At the tail of the column Blakey and Cluff reached the spot on the grass where the portal existed. Cluff was quite clearly in a terrible state. Blakey clapped him on the shoulders. The porteur wouldn't understand what was said to him by Blakey with his silver pip switched off; but by big friendly signs and a huge grin, Blakey conveyed the impression that he was congratulating Cluff on a good job well done.

Cluff held up his hands. They were shaking. He shook his head violently. "No, no—" that, quite clearly was what he was saying. In a torrent of words he was no doubt disclaiming any responsibility for what had occurred.

Over the sounds of revelry which had not halted for a heart-beat when the two shots cracked out, the trample of the guards brought an ominous note. They heralded, for Blakey, the end of the proceedings. The guards were too late. He flung a quick glance over his shoulder. Smefts with their ghastly heads illuminated by the lights in the trees, Shroths with their slime green slag-flesh, Honshi with wide froglike faces, rushing on—"Hoshoo!"



He swung back ready to traject Cluff through the portal. He'd done it! He had to be through fast, now, and he felt the blow on his head as an infringement of his plans. Why should he be lying on the grass? Why should he have this numbness? He couldn't stand up. He couldn't see anything save the solid mass of booted feet as the guards closed up around him. That, for Harry Blakey, was the last thing he saw for some time.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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With a blindfold tied tightly around his head and his arms drawn up and back and lashed horizontally to a rough wooden pole, he wondered just how much of him was still alive. His head ached and rang; his mouth was as dry as a brick kiln. By soft echoing sounds and the rumble of voices he judged he stood in a fair-sized room. He could feel no breeze on his naked torso. His whole body ached.

One portentous problem he had to face about this crumbling away of his delusion that he was an experienced Dimensions Traveler lay in the realization that he had always taken his trajecting ability for granted. It was a great gift, Jim had told him that; yet he'd accepted it matter-of-factly. He'd gone tripping lightly from one parallel to another, hardly heeding of the awful forces involved. These people did not regard Dimension travel like that. They looked at it in a far more practical and realistic light. He would have to begin to think like them, to see the ramifications, to understand a little more of what being a porteur meant in life.

If, that was, he had much more life left to him.

Occasionally the tramp of booted feet and the clang and clink of weapons told him that guards were moving. He did not think he had been badly injured; if they'd shot him he fancied he would be dead. He felt hands on his face, reaching around to the back of his head. The hands were not gentle. The blindfold fell away and for a moment whorls of acrid light stung his eyes so that he could see nothing but a kaleidoscope of colors.

"Hold your head up, steechla, and let us look at you."

Thick fingers twisted his chin up.

When he could see he expected that Carol and Chivers and his

other companions would be hanging up as he was, lashed to cross timbers. All he could make out at first was the fierce and bearded face of the fellow pushing up his chin. He was a Valcini, fawn-clad, fat, greasy, and as he stepped back Blakey saw past him out to the extent of the hall. He could make out no other prisoners save himself. The hall, covered by a roof of beaten gold, illuminated by many lamps, held a bright and yet cruel feel to it, as of a chrome-plated trap about to snap shut. Yet the hall itself with its rows of triple pillars reminded Blakey irresistably of an ancient Egyptian temple, thick, leaf-crowned columns, images painted in brilliant hues, and the stinking waft of incense.

Yet—and the realization did not please him—the dichotomy of chrome and ancientness did not exist. This place exuded a bright and sophisticated evil.

He hung between two pillars midway along one wall. Either side of him the forest of thick pillars extended, matched by the ranks opposite. Idols stood here and there. And a computer console fed by thick red cables occupied its own section just proud of the pillars. The guards wore tight blue uniforms over lascivious bodies and their heads were parodies of spiders' heads. Blakey found himself wondering if these people could, truly, be naturally produced alien humanity, or if they were the results of genetic engineering practicing a black and blasphemous art.

"Now you are awake, you can answer questions."

Blakey worked his tongue around his mouth. He didn't have spit enough to gob into this bastard's face. He said nothing; just hung there from his bonds.

Then he saw Cluff chained up to a Valcini who looked remarkably like the fellow to whom Cluff had been chained before.

Cluff did not look happy. His frizz of black hair bristled, his amber skin looked pale, and his face jerked.

What the situation and the questions boiled down to was this: "Cluff says he did not porter you. He swears this is true."

"Well," Blakey managed to get out. "If he didn't then who did? Of course he did—" He became aware of danger in this line. Cluff was quite clearly besotted with fear or misguided devotion. The Valcini would be more likely to believe him than a slave—so, Blakey said: "Can I have a drink? And, maybe Cluff didn't porter us—maybe it was the girl—whoever she was."

Cluff said sharply: "She was Polarized!"

"All right," snapped back Blakey, just as sharp. "Maybe



she'd been to wherever it was they went. How do I know? I don't understand the first thing about these Dimensions."

The Valcini sniggered. "Of course you don't, steechla. Best leave that to us."

Blakey held his tongue on two counts. One—what the hell was a steechla? Two—he would be happy to be regarded as a man who knew nothing of the Dimensions.

The two Valcini walked a little way off, with the chain dragging Cluff after them, and put their heads together. The hall stank of incense, the lights blinded, and the guards stood in their ranks and their spider heads gave no indication of their thoughts.

Blakey desperately wanted to know what had happened to his comrades. Carol, Chivers, the others, even aw shut-up Poulter—they had to have made good their escape! Had to!

With an abrupt and altogether frightening speed, Cluff shrieked. He writhed. He danced about and doubled up and flung his arms about and rotated his head in an abandonment of agony. His muscles jerked like coiling serpents. His open mouth gargled and shrieked and froth blew from his lips.

The fit lasted less than half a minute.

Then Cluff fell upon the marble floor.

"Get you up!" commanded his Valcini, and stirred him with the toe of his two-toned shoe. "That was nothing! Speak the truth, now—admit you porteured the slaves through!"

"I did not!" Cluff spat and dribbled and the tears fouled his cheeks. "I did not—I told them they could never escape the Contessa!"

"Well, at the moment, you are wrong!" There was no satisfaction in the Valcini's spiteful voice. "They are still at large and we have not recaptured them. And that is your fault, Cluff!"

"No—no—I did not porteur—" His voice broke into a shriek of agony and again he writhed and danced and shook in the grip of whatever was happening to him.

"Admit it, Cluff!"

"No—"

Watching, Blakey saw the Valcini press a stud upon his bracelet in the moment before poor old Cluff danced his jig of agony. So that was it. The dypo-control chain was not just an ordinary slave's chain-you-up kind of chain. Oh, no. That glittery length of evil transmitted a pulse of power that tied Cluff's muscles in knots, that lanced through his head in agony, that reduced him to a mewling wreck. That was the way the Valcini kept their porteurs under control.

Blakey felt a drop of sweat fall upon his chest.

The bearded Valcini glanced at his wristwatch.

"Late," he said. He would have said more; but Cluff's Valcini broke in swiftly. "That is her right, Mordano, as you know," and his eyes flicked eloquently to the squad of motionless guards. Mordano rubbed his beard and looked savage.

"I believe Cluff to be lying. He fears just punishment. It is unlikely the girl, being Polarized, could have done it. And there was no one else. That leaves Cluff."

"I concur, Alderino, with that judgment. Now we wait."

Hanging from the crossbeam Blakey listened as the two Valcini talked. They were bored with this tiresome detail of escaping slaves and a porteur who had betrayed the Contessa. He gathered the Smefts had used a slingshot on him, and the flung stone had put him out like a light. He further learned that the spider-headed women preferred to use their slings, a racial weapon, rather than the Springfields issued to them in the Contessa's service. Missile weapons of a reasonably advanced pattern could safely be entrusted to the Shroths. The Honshi were not to be permitted guns. All the time the incense stank, the lights shone, and occasionally a yellow-clad man or woman would walk across to the computer terminal and fuss about there.

Blakey began to feel lightheaded. His arms were somewhere or other in a bath of minus fifty degrees nitrogen. They were no longer attached to his shoulders, he was confident.

He stuttered out, "Do you mind if I have that drink now, please? I think I'm near collapse."

The two Valcini ignored him, went on talking. He had made sure his silver pip was switched off, and as he could understand what was being said, he gathered that they were all, including Cluff, wearing translator bands, or he had been provided with one to facilitate interrogation. His head hung down. He felt awful. He heard an item of news that gave him a crumb of satisfaction. Cluff had porteaured his Valcini, this Alderino, back from whatever Dimension Blakey had sent him and had brought him back to the grass of the square. Then Cluff under orders sent the guards through. Blakey in his hazy understanding gathered the fugitives had shot down the first guards through the portal and had vanished into the forest.

A crumb of comfort; but to Blakey captured and hung up and feeling ghastly, a damned hard and crusty crumb. . . .

"If we'd known she was going to take all this time we could just as easily have taken the slave to the cells." Mordano rubbed fretfully at his beard.



"No blame can attach to us for restraining him in the nearest suitable place!" Alderino sounded alarm.

"Of course not!" Mordano sweated. "I hope not!"

After more wristwatch consulting and sweating and talk, the Valcini were clearly in a much worse state. Listening, Blakey among other items picked up the interesting fact that of late other—and undefined—rivals had patronized Honsh to employ Honshi. The Contessa, it seemed, no longer enjoyed a monopoly of Honshi services. This went some way to explaining Shroths and Smefts; Blakey, on the verge of passing out, made himself listen, fighting his weakness, storing information.

Both Valcini were firmly of the opinion that Cluff far preferred to take the punishment of the dypo-control chain than to admit his guilt in porteur escaping slaves to safety. Far rather. Blakey's head lolled and he forced himself to look up at the fresh sounds echoing down the pillared hall. Everything went very quiet but for these new sounds.

Without having to sense out actively; but merely by passively acting as a receptor, Blakey was aware of the rich raw power of the porteur accompanying these new arrivals. Also, he could feel a more subtle aura reaching him. He made himself open his eyes and look.

The procession of guards and Valcini and Bargemen moving in stately fashion along the marbled floor arranged itself in what was obviously a pattern centered upon the small four-seat flying platform skimming two feet above the floor. Everyone paced that golden gleaming skimmer. The driver was merely a Valcini, harder-faced than most, dark and competent. The man at his side wore a yellow tunic, high-collared. Around that collar a silver band shone dully. The chain extended back to the rear seat where Blakey could see one person swathed in a voluminous yellow poncho-like covering, and a second figure wearing a cowled crimson robe. A white arm rested on the back of the seat and the glittery dypo-chain was fastened to a golden bracelet upon the white wrist.

The raw pulses from the porteur in the front seat might have bothered Blakey had he not been able to mask them and concentrate on the far weaker pulse from the person swathed in the yellow poncho. He licked his lips. It looked as though this was the moment of dread everyone had been waiting for.

The retinue with its glitter and stamping boots and weapons and monstrous alien figures from nightmare formed up. The skimmer stopped. The driver let his head sink down to his hands resting on the controls. The porteur jumped out, with plenty of

slack chain, came around the side of the vehicle. The crimson-robed and cowed figure stood up. A dainty foot in high-laced black sandals reached for the floor. The porteur assisted the woman to alight. She took three steps forward and threw off the crimson cloak.

Cluff was down on the floor, his nose rubbing the marble, his back end high in the air. Mordano and Alderino stood as stiff as ramrods, sweating.

"Tell me," said the woman in a voice in which syrup flowed over razor-sharp steel.

As the two Valcini babbled out the story of the slaves' escape and the capture of one of them and of Cluff's guilt and denial, the woman stared fixedly at Blakey. He stared back at her with a frank appraisal unusual with him. He saw in this woman contrasts and conflicts leading to intriguing possibilities.

Were her eyes blue or violet?

The incongruousness of the thought gave Harry Blakey a jolt. If the very real horror of his situation got to him . . . As it was, he—the real Harry Blakey who lived inside the body people called Harry Blakey—tottered dangerously close to the gulf. He thought, then, that all his illusions about being a romantic Dimensional Traveler were swept away.

Dressed all in a white silken robe, which from gathers at her throat fell in subtle shadings from the tips of her breasts, she held within herself the flame that dominated so completely. Her face was smooth and pale and soft, perennially young with costly cosmetic care. Her eyes were wide and seductive and either blue or violet, as the mood swept her, their long dark lashes kohled and shining. Her rosebud mouth, too soft and too sweet and too red, puckered into a Cupid's bow of distaste as she turned to look upon Cluff. As that small regal head moved the mass of dark hair, curled and coiffed, upswept, glittered with the solid mass of diamonds threaded into its darkness.

"Up, gandschell. Look at me."

Cluff reacted. His face looked up, and the awe and the fear there blanched that rich amber skin.

"Tell me, Cluff. You know me. You know how I care for my people of Irunium. Tell me, Cluff—did you porteur the escaping slaves into Andrie?"

The porteur shook his head. He opened his mouth and tried to speak. He made a gargling choked sound, and so shook his head again and again, his black frizzy hair bouncing.

"He must have, Contessa—" said Mordano.

"Quiet."



Mordano stopped speaking as though he had been decapitated. His blue-veined hand grasped the butt of his automatic and that broad hand trembled uncontrollably.

Andrie, Blakey was saying to himself, Andrie, so that's the name of that Dimension.

The woman barely turned her head to speak to one of her Personal Bargemen. "Fetch Pontecchi." The fellow took off at a dead run. He must have used a telephone or radio, and Pontecchi some form of powered travel, for the fat Valcini waddled in very soon after, sweating and bowing, exuding an aura of slavish fear. The woman just said: "The girl Carol Keffe. She was Polarized?"

"Yes, Contessa. Without a doubt."

The woman had heard this from the others; Blakey felt no surprise she checked it herself.

"Has the Keffe girl ever been to Andrie?"

"No, my lady—at least—"

"Yes?"

At the single word, at her tone, this pompous portly Pontecchi jumped. His face sheened. He swiped at his forehead with a tissue.

"Not since she was placed in the Academy."

As Pontecchi ran the Contessa's Academy of Porteuring Science, he should know.

She lifted her hand casually and a copper-tinted sprite clad in gauze and pearls ran with a goblet of sparkling wine. The woman drank a little, daintily, and threw the goblet over her shoulder. It was expertly caught. Blakey, with little experience outside films and TV, fancied the gesture a pantomime, overdone, an attempt to impress him. He could be wrong. The aura of this woman overpowered.

She looked at him again with the brooding, scrutinizing gaze. She smoothed her right forefinger over the golden bracelet on her left wrist. The glittery chain attached to her porteur jingled softly.

"Harry Blakey."

The way she said that stroked feathers of alarm up Blakey's spine. He was vividly reminded of a cat stretching and extending sharp claws from the soft pads.

"Many people have this magical power, Harry, very many and they do not know. It is a gift and a privilege. My Academy helps these people to develop their art. I think you have the power, that it was you who porteured the slaves."

"Contessa!" rapped out Mordano.

She let him have a single look, and then returned that dark gaze to Blakey.

"I believe Cluff. I do hold reservations about Keeffe. That leaves the last to go through the portal. Blakey was putting the slaves through, and, maybe he did not know, maybe the girl assisted. That is known."

"That is indeed known, my lady," burred Pontecchi. "A twinned or boosted porteur—"

"Quite. Cut him down."

They had to help Blakey from the wooden crossbeam. His arms kept on wanting to rise to the horizontal, and he felt a dull surprise they were still attached to his body. They led him across to the skimmer. The Contessa bent to the figure swathed in the yellow poncho-like covering. Watching her, Blakey saw the change in her features, the smoothing of the planes, the softening of those overripe lips.

"Soloman, my little vivi. Tell me, tell me true."

Receiving the weak pulse from the man in the yellow poncho, Blakey was aware of a fluttering, like a bird beating its wings against the bars of a cage. The yellow covering fell back. Blakey saw. The man was grotesque. A tiny manikin, his enormous knobbed head appeared far too heavy for his frail neck muscles. On that bald and shining pate, ridged and contused, he wore a blue velvet cap, perched incongruously. The feather in the cap was broken at the tip, and had been mended, and so broken again. He wore dark red velvet, and a white ruff about his neck. His eyes, large and luminous, appeared sunken under downdrooping lids.

He licked his lips, a shrunken, pathetic figure; yet in him Blakey without needing to sense out, received the overpowering impression of a towering force. The weakness of the pulse was the weakness of enfeebled old age. He turned his head, with an effort, as though seeking, and he stared unblinking upon Blakey.

Could this grotesque sense that Blakey was a porteur?

No doubt existed in Blakey's mind that during his experiences among the parallels he had grown himself in stature. He was conscious even over the past few hours of that. He was sure that this man and the robust fellow at the end of the Contessa's chain were porteurs; yet he did not think he had sensed out and thus revealed himself to acquire this knowledge. With Carol he had done so. There were mysteries yet to be explained among the Dimensions.

The woman bent closer and she smoothed her hand gently over that shining bald head.



"My little vivi—tell me, Soloman. You are the greatest porteur in all the Dimensions. Tell me true."

His shrunken face quested. Blakey knew the little manikin was sensing out. Blakey's pulses were all shut down, as Jim had so often taught and cautioned him. But, suppose . . . ! Suppose this Soloman could sense past all the careful safeguards!

Blakey licked his lips, feeling the weight in his guts, feeling every nerve end exposed and tormented. The woman was clever, quite obviously, for she had riddled the puzzle through without fuss. If it wasn't Cluff and it wasn't Carol, then it must have been the last through. Suppose he let a little chink of a pulse through? Perhaps then they'd believe he was one of these people with the powers lying dormant, all unknown, a latent. Then they'd take him to their Academy and train him. Well, that would be better than being killed, or sent to the mines. But, dare he risk it? And if he did not, might not this wizened little fellow suspect that he could control his powers in ways unknown to the porteurs of Ironium? And, then, might they not open up his skull and prod and pry about around his brain?

Soloman spoke in a voice like a graveyard gate. "It is difficult—he is opaque—nothing there—but—but . . ."

The woman said: "Put a dypo-chain on him. That will assist."

Roughly, Blakey was forced down, a hoop thrust about his neck. The chain dangled. The woman picked up the bracelet and held it between her fingers. Her right forefinger poised over the stud.

"Now we shall see—"

The shock made him feel as though every single last atom in his body and brain had been dissected one from another. He couldn't cope with the force of the agony. It was beyond belief. He knew he was trying to scream past locked muscles that clamped his jaws in a funnel from which no sound emerged. He knew very little past a purple and scarlet forest of pain.

Soloman said, "There! Yes—a faint impression—he is latent—there is no doubt of it."

The woman smiled. Blakey, coming back to life, saw Pontecchi flinch as though struck across the face.

"Good! Now, you see, Harry Blakey. Now you can be of service to me. I reward my people well, I care for them and I receive very little gratitude. But I am sure you will be different. Once your marvelous gift has been unlocked, you will serve me, and there is no other fate in all the Dimensions so great as to serve with loyalty and utter devotion the Contessa Perdita Francesca Cammachia di Montevarchi."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Graziosi, the rake thin and dyspeptic Valcini in charge of the Contessa's Transportation Corps, motioned to Pontecchi to take a seat in his office. They let Blakey stand.

"Any good?"

Pontecchi spread his hands, and then mopped his forehead.

"I've not trained anyone like him before. Cyrus—you remember Cyrus, or was he before your time? Got himself killed by some slaves—he would have been fascinated. He can shift freight well enough. It's too early for me to say if he will ever become a personal porteur."

"Too early, Pontecchi, or you don't know?"

"When you have my experience, Graziosi, you may know a little more about the Dimensions." Pontecchi stood up with a grunt of effort. "I'll leave him with you. File a report on his performance."

When the chief of the Porteur Academy left, the chief of the Transportation Corps lolled back in his seat.

"You'll shift freight, offal, and like it. One step out of line, one mistake, and you will be punished." He called in Honshi guards who marched Blakey off.

As they marched along the corridors of the featureless building Blakey, after a single glance at the Hideki Honshi, reflected that he had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire, and was now apparently well on his way to investigating what caused the fire to burn. The Academy had been a surprising experience. The Contessa scoured the Dimensions for people with the gift of porteur. If they were latents the academicians encouraged them to discover the extent of their gifts. The encouragement took the form of electric shocks, dypo-chain controls, rewards and punishments, the rewards minuscule the punishments horrific. Whilst it was true to say there were many people among the worlds with the gift, few could be brought to any great pitch of effectiveness. There were many deaths. Porteurs were still fabulously exotic creatures, a good one commanding much expense and care—and discipline.

They sat Blakey down on a hard bench before a scrubbed



wooden table on which a yellow circle had been painted. Blue lights shone down. A Honshi guard stood stiffly. A heap of diamonds, each one carefully documented and checked by a Valcini with a calculator, glittered at the center of the yellow circle.

“Porteur!”

Blákey hurled the gems off this world and into another.

He'd successfully withheld the extent of his powers at the Academy, avoiding punishment by keeping abreast of the training schedules. Now he worked as a shifter of freight in the Transportation Corps. He worked well, for if he did not he would be jolted by such pain from the dypo-control as would divorce his brain from his skull, convulse his body into knots of agony, suffer such pain as would eventually drive him insane.

He lost track of time; but eventually he decided he had better think seriously about escaping, remote though the chance seemed. The portal he was using was small, just large enough to pass a double handful of gems. There was no way for him through there. The other Dimension was simply another office. He did not know on which world it might be.

The Contessa mined her diamonds in Irunium, and despatched them to many worlds among the Dimensions. In return her own Dimension grew wealthy. Blakey could very easily see how she dominated both men and women; her fascination was undeniable. Passionate, willful, accustomed to having her own way, she acknowledged no peer in all the parallels. And this was the woman against whom David Macklin and Alec Macdonald and their friends had set themselves!

Working long hours, Blakey was glad to get off shift and fling himself down on his pallet in the guarded barracks. They used him in various locations, and more and more he was taken by a Valcini and another porteur into other Dimensions to work there in the network of distribution. The Contessa had contacts in what must be thousands of Dimensions, her diamonds attracting the best prices, her demands always rapacious and always met.

These small portals were known as nodal points and the chains effectively prevented a porteur escaping his employer through a larger gateway. Blakey decided he would have to work his way up so as to gain access to the city.

He learned more of Irunium. A couple of times he with others was taken aboard vehicles for a journey due east across the sea of grass to the Big Green. This tropical rain forest exercised a fascination upon him. It was a huge sprawling world of its own, fecund, voracious, merciless. They called it the Cabbage Patch.

Once, he was told, the local natives had fought for its possession, and had for a time won. Then the Contessa's superior skills and powers had triumphed. Where the natives were now, the Dargan, no one seemed to know.

When you went through a portal from one Dimension to another you might, of course, emerge at any point of the globe. Blakey did not make the mistake of confusing what he found through any particular gate, of taking it as representative of a whole world. But the Contessa did rule all of Irunium. Each Dimension held its own worlds, round and entire. Most of them would be cut up, divided; Irunium basked under the sovereignty of the Contessa di Montevarchi.

One day when Graziosi, the chief, came around on an inspection tour Blakey in his humble way asked if he might be assigned to a more interesting and more useful occupation.

The chief promised to consider the proposal.

Whether as a result of his request or not, Blakey was assigned to go with a party into a Dimension called Wadtonalia to freight through a consignment. He wore a yellow shirt and trousers, although the eye stitched on the back of the shirt indicating his status as a mere freight shifter differed from the eye emblazoned on the shirts and tunics of porteurs proper.

When he fell into conversation with one of the girls chained up to her Valcini, he discovered the solution to a problem that had been puzzling him.

"Oh, they have had trouble with Macklin and his gang of villains before," Cheryl told him. She was a hard-looking girl, big-built, with a mass of loose fair hair. Her mouth was of the taut and tooth-chewed kind. "They know Macdonald recruits idiots for Macklin. You were lucky the Contessa took you on."

"She doesn't bear a grudge, then?"

Cheryl expressed her contempt for his stupidity.

"I've no love for the Valcini; but the Contessa keeps them in order. But for her I'd still be a slave down the mines."

Blakey decided not to pursue the conversation.

Certainly the Montevarchi posed imponderables. A figure of mystery, she yet seemed crystal-clear in her desires. You lined up in your allegiances when she was around. She exercised intense fear, induced frantic worship, yet remained aloof and icily removed from human understanding.

No chance for escape presented itself in Wadtonalia. He returned to the City of Diamonds much disheartened.

Just as Cheryl, at the end of her chain, was about to follow her Valcini to wherever in the city they lived, she said: "Blakey,



you can have a good life here. I know. I live well and do an interesting job—of course, my employer is rather high up in the hierarchy. But you could work your way up, too. Look at Curt Moben. He can never replace Soloman, of course; but now he works for the Contessa—he has reached the highest peak open to any porteur in all the Dimensions!”

Incautiously, Blakey said: “Does she jolt him with his dypoc-control chain?”

Cheryl looked shocked.

“Of course not! That is for recalcitrants. They have to be used, for we porteurs are precious. I’m surprised at you!”

“Come along, Cheryl,” said her Valcini. “Time to be going.”

“Right with you, sir,” said Cheryl.

“All right,” said Blakey. “I’m willing. How—?”

But Cheryl walked off with her Valcini, the glittery chain between them more a lover’s link than a sign of slavery.

Graziosi put Blakey onto shifting heavy packing crates from another world into Ironium. Blakey flicked them through the portal. By this time he was taking for granted the uncanny business of moving diamonds and gold and freight around among the Dimensions, pushing produce through intangible barriers unbreakable by the most powerful explosives. And, all the time, around him, unseen, unfelt, unguessable, lay the millions upon millions of other parallels, all co-existing, all occupying the same space. How could anyone grow blasé over that?

As though the crate shifting had been a test, Graziosi sent for Blakey. The office looked the same. When Blakey marched in a woman rose from the easy chair, half-smiling at Graziosi, who smirked away, thin as a lathe.

“This is a porteur, my lady—Harry Blakey.”

“Blakey.”

She studied him openly. He looked back. Her face was darker-skinned than he generally cared for, smooth and olive. Her hair, very dark, was combed and brushed away from a central parting. She looked Victorian, and now Blakey understood what was meant by the old cliché of a woman having hair like a raven’s wing. That did not so much refer to the color as to the shape the hair made, sweeping like wings across her head. Her mouth was full and pleasant. Then he saw what she was wearing.

She wore a fawn-colored safari shirt-tunic, and breeches, and brown boots highly polished. A heavy automatic was belted at her narrow waist. She saw the way he looked at her, and, he hoped, misread his reaction. She smiled.

Graziosi, ingratiatingly, burred: “This is the Lady Sophia

Carmen di Norvese. You have been assigned as her personal porteur."

A glittery chain jingled and the hoop went around his neck over perfunctory padding, the bracelet around her left wrist. She looked at it. She put her fingers over the stud and then raised her dark eyes to look at Blakey. Her tongue crept out and wetted her lip.

"Just once, Blakey—to remind you." She stabbed the stud.

When he had recovered, still feeling sick and shattered, she marched him out. He went, went like a beaten cur dog at the end of a lead. He'd porteur her wherever she wanted to go if only she wouldn't hit that stud again. . . .

His life thereafter developed into what he called not being a cur dog but a lap dog. What, exactly, this Sophia Carmen di Norvese actually did in relation to the City of Diamonds and the greater schemes of the Contessa, Blakey did not know. For the first few days when he was not chained to her, he spent the time in a small attic room high in one of the villas along the Street of a Thousand Lanterns. It was picturesque. He was issued better clothes, and now the eye across his back stretched from shoulder to shoulder. He was given decent shoes. His room was his own, simple and spartan, but the bed was comfortable and the toilet necessities more than that; the Norvese was fussily strict about the appearance of her personal porteur. Blakey stored all the impressions away.

She stabbed the stud four more times. Blakey remembered each one with scarlet and agonized horror. On three of the occasions he had to admit he'd been slow obeying; the fourth occasion baffled him.

Unused to the chain linking them, he'd gone around the left side of a pillar while she had led on around the right. They'd swung in, jerked off balance, and she'd fallen into his arms. He'd felt her lean against him, and caught her perfume, before she struggled up. She hit the stud like a mad thing. Surely, he said to himself afterwards, he'd been a dolt to go around the wrong side of the pillar; her reactions could not be a response to that.

Perhaps she just hadn't liked his hands on her. Perhaps, not being married, or divorced, or widowed, there was no man in her villa anyone was aware of, she had a phobia against men.

The morning when her major domo summoned him downstairs and he found the Norvese kitted up, with a bandolier of cartridges over her shoulder, an express rifle propped against the wall, and wearing on her black hair a stupid looking toupee, she



said: "Blakey. I've been invited to a new hunt. Are you ready to leave?"

"Yes, my lady."

"We're going to Jundagai. The hunting there is very fine. If you behave yourself you may be allowed to take a part."

Jundagai, or the small part of it he saw, turned out to be a nice tract of land, forested, cut into gullies, with pretty streams. The animals that were hunted and which, when shot, were brought into the tented camp were quite unknown to Blakey. Some of them looked monstrous. The hunting party of eight settled in and Blakey became bored out of his skull until they said he could go on the beaters' line. One day of that, chasing through rough country and hollering and waving a cloth and expecting at any moment some monstrous beast to rear up and bite his head off, was enough. He went to see Sophia di Norvese.

"I'm a porteur, my lady. I'm too valuable—"

She stood in her tent with the lamplight soft on the expensive furnishings. She wore a deeply cut white gown and her dark hair, unpinned, cascaded freely down her back. She lifted a glass of wine.

"Valuable, Blakey? You—why, yes, you are to me." She sounded surprised. Outside in the darkness around the campfire the dinner table was being prepared and the hunting party would eat well—as always. She laughed. "You are very good at porteurage. I thought a little freedom would be nice for you."

"There's no freedom with the local hunters everywhere ready to blow me apart at the slightest hint of trouble."

Her head went up. "You call me my lady, Blakey."

She reached for the dypo-chain control, lying across the back of a folding chair. He chilled. The guards outside would rush in, overpower him, the chain would go on—and he'd writhe.

"Of course, my lady." He took a step forward. The shape in the white dress, unrestrained under the deep cleavage, was very good. Like any sensible man, Blakey admired a girl's shape just as much as he admired her cleverness or brainpower or wit. He wet his lips and said: "I prefer to be with you."

She regarded him with a very level stare.

Presently, she said: "I admit no man into my life, Blakey. I take what I want from whom I want. If I wish to take you I will let you know. Now get out."

With emotions akin to those of a sodden and squashed paper cup, Blakey got out.

He mooched over to where the other porteurs had set up their tents. They did not exactly employ slaves themselves, that idea

would have repelled Blakey; but they considered themselves a cut above the other people ministering to the Valcini. All the same, guards maintained around the clock watch on them.

Sensing out again, for there were no portals within easy reach, he tested himself against himself. He reached out as far as he could, trying to feel and see and hold the essence of each distant gateway in his mind. Without any conscious decision he was now training himself far more strictly. He was no longer the wet-behind-the-ears idiot who had so blithely set off for a gentle stroll through the parallels.

The next day one of Sophia di Norvese's friends, a woman with petulant mouth, heavy make-up, a well-developed moustache and a body sagging with fat, the wife of a senior Valcini official, had her personal porteur flogged. The poor devil writhed and shrieked and at last fell silent and bloody as the Hideki Honshi cut him. He was taken down and thrown on his face in the tent, and later a medical girl came in to doctor the meat-pudding that was all that remained of his back. His spine showed, pinkly white amid the blood.

"That," said O'Shea, an Irishman who didn't mind porteur-ing for his mistress, for, he would say with a wink, she favored him, "That can happen to any of youse boys."

"Not me!" declared a fellow with a prominent nose who came from some outlandish Dimension. "My lady likes me!"

"Sure, sure she likes you. And she'll pudden your back, any time she likes."

That was merely one incident in a succession that told Harry Blakey that he had become slothful. He had no business here, porteur-ing a willful woman about. He needed to be back on Earth planning a crusade to wipe out the City of Diamonds. Also, believing implicitly that Carol and Chivers and the others had got home safely, he badly wanted to see them again.

The local people who made their living out of outworld Travelers hunting in Jundagai, a proud and stiff-necked lot, hereabouts were the Hunt of Rov Ranga. A large-scale event was promised, and Sophia di Norvese insisted that her porteur accompany her as an additional gun bearer. Blakey blinked.

They set off, wine-d and flushed, traveling in a weird assortment of vehicles. Jeeps mingled with Land Rovers, with skimmers, hovercraft and strange vehicles of unguessable means of locomotion. Blakey carried an express rifle, a beautiful and enormous British job, a Westley Richards double .600 Nitro Express. If he ever had to shoot it, what he shot at would be opening its jaws to chomp him down in a single gulp.



The hunt went more or less as planned. Twice Blakey handed the big double across so that the Norvese could blast some unfortunate beast. A bandolier of .600 shells crossed his chest, left to right, and another right to left. They moved across a gulley choked with vegetation, came cautiously out to the hillside beyond. Trees nodded upslope, the wind tasted like nectar, and, looking around, he saw only two others near at hand. The fat and petulant woman who had flogged her porteur broke through the screen of scrub and panted up, with a hunter of Rov Rangka's in attendance.

At once, grim and forbidding, the hunter said: "No father until the others join. There are zagrid up ahead."

Blakey knew what a zagrid was and did not wish to meet one. Sophia di Norvese smiled. "We shall go up to those trees and wait for them, hunter."

The fat woman wailed. "I can't climb that hill—"

The Norvese smiled again. "Wait here, Melonia, then."

Blakey followed up the hill, while the hunter and fat and petulant Melonia settled down to await the others. Up beyond the clump of trees he could sense a portal. When they reached the trees he looked between the trunks and saw the archway of lights. They pulsed a friendly orange and yellow. The world beyond conveyed the scents of flowers.

"Blakey. I spoke to you some time ago about my wants." She sat on a mossy bank under the trees and held out one leg. "My feet hurt. Take off my boots."

Blakey did as he was bid. She lay back, her hair raven's wing black and sheening blue in the half light. She put her hands up past her head and stretched. "Take off my tunic." Blakey did so. "Now take off my shirt."

When he had done that Blakey looked down at her torso. She was very well-formed, no doubt of it. He glanced between the trees. The archway to another world shone beckoning up there. He looked back at her and saw how deeply she breathed, and the flush along the cheekbones in that olive face. Without being told to do so he bent and began to remove her breeches.

"No, Blakey. You do it when I tell you, not before."

Repelled by the cold calculation he stepped back. All his desire detumesced. She was nice—but there were a million like her among the Dimensions, and up there a portal waited.

She licked her lips and just as he was about to walk off she said, "Right, Blakey. Take off my breeches."

He got a hand under her waist and lifted her and pulled and her arms went around his neck and hauled him down. She kissed

like a cobra. He could feel her naked body against his yellow shirt, burning, and the cold calculation of it all vanished. Presently, when she lay with her eyes closed, Blakey stood up. He told himself he had been clever; had he walked off first she'd have shot him in the back. He took her alien automatic and the big Westley Richards, put the bandoliers on, and walked stealthily away. By the time he reached the portal and looked back, Rov Rangga's hunters were streaming out of the gulley and climbing the hill. The Norvese had worked it all to satisfy her own lusts; she had worked it to satisfy Blakey's desires, too. With a mental thank you, my lady, he portoured himself through the threshold.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Whatever the names might be of the Dimensions Blakey traversed in this section he had no idea. They seemed uniformly pleasant, warm, filled with sunshine and fresh breezes—and universally empty. That they would not be empty seemed self-evident; in these particular areas of their surfaces they were deserted. This bothered him.

He kept a running tally of the times he portoured, and attempted to remain more or less on the same spot in each Dimension. Reaching for the feel of the parallels, attempting to come to an understanding of the mechanics of the ways in which the Dimensions abutted, one to the next, the succeeding ones branching into perhaps a dozen different pathways, the following world ending in a dead stop, he had to admit that he could find no clues to locating himself. He refused to think he was lost. He could always retrace his steps.

Portals were not lined up exactly on the same spot in each succeeding Dimension so that he had more often than not to walk a short distance. In a world where the brightness crisped with the tang of early autumn he marched purposefully down a gulley toward the arch of lights at the far end. He had brought down a small animal in the previous world and, using the skills he had been taught, had cleaned and gutted it, cooked it professionally, and eaten with gusto. Walking up to the new portal he stopped, sharply.

In the grass lay a small white object. He picked it up.



For a moment Blakey stood there, weighing the object in his hand; then he turned around and started off for another portal distant some mile or so.

The white object curved from his fingers into the grass. It was a small ivory comb, with a few teeth broken. The carved symbols told him that he did not know to whom it had belonged; therefore he had walked away. The Honshi like to be neat and tidy; this was a pubic hair comb.

Had the comb belonged to a Hoshen Honshi he would have known. Then he would have stepped gladly through the threshold.

Even so, he couldn't be certain that the Dimension through that portal he had rejected was Honsh. Honsh was on a dead end, many portals opened into the world, so he had seen, but they tended to loop in the groupings. He bore that in mind in case he did lose his fool self. Also, he wondered if the absence of life in these Dimensions had anything to do with that Honshi comb. . . . Maybe everyone had been run off. . . .

He no longer feared hot pursuit through the parallels. If the Norvese had reported his disappearance—and he could see reasons why she might withhold that information—they'd need time to organize the chase. After the first few obvious directions they'd be confused. As to tracker dogs and bloodhounds, careful planning of his route ought to take care of them.

At length he had to face the decision he had been putting off. Portals tended to clump together, Jim had told him that long ago. Also, the parallels coexisted not, as in the familiar analogy, like leaves in a book. Rather, they were akin to bunches of grapes on a vine, groupings around a central locus. When, at last, he felt he was getting nowhere, he began to retrace his steps.

In a world where, coming this way, he'd simply walked from the portal along a trail between gigantic trees to another portal, he found the way ahead thoroughly blocked. Among the trees the light fell golden green and muted. And a thing like a children's dinosaur cut-out book come to life roared and hissed and charged along the trail for him.

There was no time to race back for the threshold from which he'd stepped. All he could do was unsling the big Westley Richards, line up on the target, and let fly with both barrels.

Even at their relatively slow velocity, the two 60 caliber slugs must have done terrible damage. They must have burrowed in, smashing bone, cutting through flesh, boring on and on deeply into the monster. The dinosaur, breathing fire and slaughter, took not the slightest notice. It hissed and barrelled on, a ponderous mountain of scale and muscle and insensate ferocity.

Blakey gulped. He twitched his fingers up and took a fresh cartridge from the other bandolier, the one in which the bullets' Spitzer tips were marked in red. He'd wondered why anyone would need this kind of ammo in a 60 caliber; now he knew why. He loaded two, raised the rifle, took a quick bead on the fearsome eye beneath its overhang of horn and scale and God knew what not, and pressed with a delicacy of aim most professional in the circumstances.

Then he took a flying header into the undergrowth at the side of the trail.

The dinosaurian monster flailed past. It screeched so loudly it made Blakey's head ache. Claws, teeth, one eyeball, a tail alive and frenziedly slashing, all went past like a runaway loco. Moments later a sound like a ton of wet concrete hitting the foundations sloshed up.

Blakey crawled out onto the trail. The dinosaur lay on its stomach, arms and legs sprawled, and with only really one side of its head left. He swallowed and sat down quickly.

The sun stood directly overhead, as it had when he'd passed this way before, and the shadows were all mere splotches underfoot. He could see a blue sky without clouds high above, and as he looked along the trail in the opposite direction it seemed to him, impossible though it was, that the forest curved upwards. Haze obscured vision, and the seeing was difficult; but he had the uncanny feeling that there was no horizon, that the land and sky did not meet in any rational way. He hefted the rifle, took a last sorrowful look at the primeval monster, and went along to the next portal and trajected through.

Just what he was going to do when he got back to Jundagai remained nebulous. He'd heard the gossip of the camp and knew that an old quarrel between the Contessa and the Hunters of Rov Rangga,—something to do with a PPL—had been patched up. He would have to brave the camp and Rov Rangga's fortress to get back to Irinium and from thence to Andrie. It would be tough.

He popped out in Jundagai at the crest of the slope where Sophia Carmen di Norvese had brought him to satisfy her lusts. Below him a lean lethal shape of ocher fur fled through the gully, half-visible, pursued by the hunters. A voice shrilled at his back.

"It is the escaped porteur! Hold him fast!"

He whirled.

Valcini, Hunters, porteurs, a crowd of them rushed toward



him, and with them were Shroths, slag-faced and green, who lifted their weapons to shoot his legs from under him. He turned for the portal and bullets scythed the space between. Instinctively, he belted for the crest and dived over it, hurling himself on, hearing the crack of bullets about him.

Another gulley showed downslope and—like an oasis in the desert—another portal! Small, faint; but there, undeniably there!

He rached down the slope so fast his stride lengthened into enormous bounds. Just before he reached the gate he sensed water and wetness and said to himself: "What the hell!" and went through all asprawl.

He hit hard wood and winded himself, and lay there gasping and feeling as though he'd splintered every last bone.

A voice said, quickly: "Wait for the rest!"

A hand under his armpit levered him up. His rifle was snatched away, the alien automatic twitched from the holster. Men held him, hard men. A girl with a figure to knock out a fellow's eyes at fifty paces swayed forward. Her head moved in an odd, sinister way, as though she sniffed some occult breeze.

"Yes," gasped Blakey. "There's more. They're after me."

"And you came through on your own?"

He did not have to think to answer that betraying question.

"No. Poor old Alf—he put me through and they must have shot him—Shroths—"

A cheerful voice sounded up at the back of the crowd.

"Let them come. I have the son of Thomas ready."

With disciplined speed the men drew back and formed and Blakey saw he was on the deck of a boat. The sails were furled. There were a large number of weapons in evidence, and the man who was clearly in charge pointed here and there.

Then a man short of stature, a man of immense energy in every movement, with a craggy fighting man's face, said: "Why not back off, Bob? Let them—"

A huge fellow, an enormous bear of a man with an equally huge axe cocked over his shoulders, laughed and snorted.

"What, my bantam cock? You want to back off?"

"You great buffoon!" yelled the squat dynamo. His muscles would have looked big on an elephant. "Let the fools fall in the water!"

The leader laughed. "A capital idea, Fezius!" He gave the order.

The boat's engine started and she moved gently back a score of yards. Everyone, weapons ready, waited.

The first Shroths through the small portal simply fell into the water. Their Springfields disappeared. Then the porteur O'Shea appeared, screaming, to vanish with a splash. Ominous thrashings in the water and the occasional flick of a scaly fin indicated what was happening. Only one Valcini came through, much to Blakey's regret.

When a few of the Hunters toppled out, the man who looked very much like them and who carried an old and battered Thompson submachine gun spoke up with regret. "The son of Thomas will remain silent today, it seems. They are of Rov Rangga."

"You'll get your whacks at 'em, Olan," said a man with a pleasantly tough-looking face and a quirk to his lips.

"Yes, Cy, that is true, and I trust in it, by Quanchi, yes!"

Presently no more men fell through from one world to another. The man who was the leader, this man called Bob, walked across to Blakey. The others crowded up. They all wore sober kits of drab green, with cartridge belts and pouches, and they all looked competent.

"Now, then, I am Bob Prestin. You are?"

"Harry Blakey. What—?"

"You quite clearly know of the Dimensions. From Earth? Of course. Well, so am I, and so is Cy Yancey," indicating the man who had promised Olan the Hunter a future chance with his Tommygun. "And this bundle of dynamite is Fezius—Sir Fezius of Fezanois—and our gigantic comrade is Oag Offa, both of Venudine. Olan, as you realize, is of Jundagai. Zelda is of Ettore and Jorine of Civastry. And this, Mr. Blakey, is the Dimension of Querquetian." Prestin smiled in his friendly way. "You will have to be reminded of all this, of course, if you are what I think you are."

"What's that?"

"Someone who is escaping from the Hunters of Jundagai."

"We-ell—yes and no."

"Oh?"

"You haven't exactly explained yourselves, have you? I mean, what are you doing hanging about here? And—"

"Quite right, Mr. Blakey. I assume you were snatched from Earth and were then used as quarry in a Hunt—?"

Cy Yancey said, "He doesn't seem as shaken up as you'd expect."

"And," pointed out Olan. "The Hunters do not usually let the quarry take revolvers and rifles with them."

Prestin smiled. And Blakey realized that the man had been up



with that thought all along. This fellow Prestin, Blakey decided in a hurry, was a fellow to watch. . . .

By the way these people talked and the way their body movements indicated relationships, he saw that while Prestin was the leader, Offa the giant looked to this chunk of human dynamism called Fezius, and Olan the Hunter looked to Cy Yancey, as did Zelda. Jorine, as luscious as Zelda, seemed to keep a little distance. Both girls were trajecters, and they did not wear chains. Their pulses were good, Zelda's more powerful than Jorine's, and they had not a shred of control.

"He'll want to go back to Earth," said Yancey.

"Please—"

"Not so fast," said Fezius, looking fierce. "How do we know what he says is true? Your effeminate guns brand him." The sword at Fezius's side looked as though he could cut a dinosaur in half with a single blow.

"They made me a bearer," said Blakey.

"Ah!"

"Now perhaps you'll tell me what the hell you're doing?"

Yancey said: "You didn't happen to meet a lady called the Lady Kallipses Koltmann of Burntash by any chance?"

"No."

"Pity. I always wondered what happened to her."

Zelda, flashing an eye at him, said: "You always were too sentimental, Cy, dear."

"Suppose," said Blakey in a voice he recognized as huffy and indignant, "suppose you spit it out—now!"

"It isn't that easy, Mr. Blakey." Prestin still smiled his friendly smile, relaxed, casual. "If you've been taken from Earth to Jundagai and then escaped, bearer or no bearer, you probably will have no conception of the multiplicity of the Dimensions—"

"Try me."

"Let's chain him up until we find out," snarled Offa, swinging his axe in a menacing sweep. Fezius looked up.

"You great buffoon! Suppose he knows about the Montevarchi?"

"Do what?" shouted Blakey. He put a hand to his head. "You know that she-cat?"

"Now," said Prestin, "we can get down to cases."

He assured them, devoutly, that he had no other wish than to get even with the Contessa for what she had done to him. He, Harry Blakey, would be only too pleased to join up. Then, horror-struck at his own guilelessness, he added: "Unless—unless you work for her, too!"

"No, Mr. Blakey. We do not work for her."

"You're on your own, then?"

"No. We are all associated as a result of past adventures and misfortunes in the effort against the Contessa. We do have a leader. His name is David Macklin."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

---

The sophisticated entertainment to be found on Dramcheniar fascinated and appalled Harry Blakey. The Dimension was reached by a mere two parallel hop from a dingy office in New Jersey. Here, to a pulsating night spot in the Dimension of Dramcheniar, David Macklin brought them all before the council of war.

They were all there.

As a routine out on the polished floor went through a complicated series of dances in which oddly shaped people formed erotic patterns with oddly shaped other people, Macklin's forces gathered. Blakey sat at a table, sipping Scotch brought in from Earth, talking quietly to Carol. His joy at finding her alive and well, and the rest of the folk with whom he'd begun the escape, pleased him with his acknowledgment that he was very fond of her. She wore a number slashed to the navel, transparent here and there, in an enticing shade of cherry red, her legs in dark stockings—with tops—visible to the thigh in the slit gown. She was heavily made up, in a clever way, with brilliantly emphasized eyes, and a red mouth, and eyelashes a mile long. She looked very demure beside most of the women in the place.

The music thumped heavily. The scents of good food and drink coiled. People danced when the floor show retired to give them space to gyrate. There was no false sense of shame on Dramenchiar. If you wanted to do something that pleased you, you did it. More than once Blakey leaned close to Carol and kissed her, and she kissed back. Other couples and trios carried on, in their own fashions, and everybody had a good time.

"I'm still Polarized, Harry," she said when he gave her lips a chance to speak. "But I'm very strong."

"When Sarah picked you lot up, I was dancing attendance upon a very strange lady." He did not elaborate on the Norvese.



"One of these days we'll see a lot more of the Dimensions under our own steam."

"When the Perdita is gone, if not forgotten," said Margie. She sat close to Prestin, and Blakey could see they made a good pair. He remained puzzled by Prestin. The man's name was Robert Infamy Prestin. Bob Prestin. Every now and then he let slip a pulse of great power, it seemed at random, quite unconsciously. Prestin was a porteur, and knew he was, yet he appeared to have the ability all unknown to him to shut down his pulses. What Jim would have made of him, Blakey did not know.

The evening rollicked along in good company, with everyone having a splendid time. Zelda looked staggering in a dress that covered her and yet allowed the bloodshot eye to see wonders. Jorine, not to be outdone, was lavishly displayed. These two girl porteurs had hair-raising stories to relate of the Contessa's Academy of Porteuring Science, where they had been trained after being kidnapped from their own worlds. Sarah, in an ultra-modern gown from the haughtiest of coutures on Earth, looked petite and racy and ravishing. Fezius was enraptured by Sarah, and the two of them really were not fully aware that anyone else existed. Offa had found himself a lady of proportions to match his own, and was more often than not engulfed by a bosom of a formidable magnificence. Yancey was into an interminable argument with Olan over guns. Dan Fenwick, who had managed to extricate his people from the disastrous debacle of the anvil, was in good form, making jokes and ogling the girls. All the others were there, at different tables, Chivers and Poulter and those who had escaped, with full glasses and the desire to live it up.

And David Macklin was there, dressed in a correct evening outfit with ruby stickpin and cufflinks and all, very alert and smiling and boiled shirt front.

Alec Macdonald was not there.

As Macklin had said, gravely, "We must get Alec and the others out of the Contessa's mines. We must!"

This last celebration was held because of that.

Val and Scobie Redfern came across to tell Macklin that it was all set. Val's round, saucy face with the hazel eyes matched her gown, which was round in the right places and very cheeky indeed. Scobie Redfern held her arm, beaming, his mop of tow-colored hair slick under the lights.

Although all these people might just be considered names to him, Blakey already felt a kinship with them. They were like a private club. Once they accepted you, you were in and one of

them. Each one had been through traumatic experiences among the Dimensions. Each had a story to tell.

"The Wizards have okayed the deal, Dave," said Redfern.

Macklin nodded, his white hair an odd contrast to Redfern's towheaded mop. "That is good. We'll move across first thing in the morning." He gestured about. "The folk may have heads."

Val laughed. "They'll be going to the right place."

Blakey, taking it all in, marveled at the number of porteurs. Val was a porteur. Of them all, only Prestin seemed to have any control over his pulses, and he didn't know it.

"What's with the Wizards?" he said to Redfern.

"Oh, they're really super-scientists, I suppose. We had a run in with them, and then we helped them. They're in Senchuria. They'll freshen us all up, ready—"

"Yes," said Macklin. "Ready!"

"Senchuria!" Blakey recalled what he'd heard crouched under a jeep with bullets cracking about his head. He had to be exquisitely careful. But he lusted to *know*. . . .

"Dave," he started, and leaned away a little from Carol so as to indicate to Macklin the importance of what he had to say. Carol, too, was involved; they all were. "We're going up against the Montevarchi to rescue Alec and the lads. Are there any other folk among the Dimensions doing similar things?"

Macklin sipped at his glass, and then put it on the table and made rings. "Yes, of course. We know some, not all. The Contessa has made many enemies. She has her friends, too . . ."

Prestin had wandered over with Margie, and he cut in to say, "We had a garbled story of a maniacal host of chariots helping her out. It didn't seem likely; but it's what he heard."

"The bitch deserves to be tied to a chariot and dragged around the Arena," said Margie Lipton.

"It wasn't the Arena, it was the Circus—"

"I know, I know!"

"You want to steer clear of the Arena the Valcini keep up! They let bits of the Big Green loose, and that's not funny."

"What," broke in Blakey impatiently, "about these other guys running about the Dimensions tangling with the nasties?"

"Well," said Macklin, "there's Big Jack and his Merry Men. There's Alan Watkins and Phil Brandon and a group centered around their old division. They might be in Senchuria when we get there; they've used the facilities, I know that."

Phil, said Blakey to himself. Phil Brandon.

Could these unknown folk be those who had saved him?

Macklin was musing on. "I wish we could combine some of



these people. But they have their own battles to fight. And, of course, Roland Crane doesn't want to know, although he's always willing to help with funds."

"He has plenty," said Prestin in a gravelly voice.

"And," said Margie in her severe voice, "there's Stephen Justin, although *he* seems to think it's all magic!"

"We're on our own, Blakey," said Macklin. He looked tired now, the elegant evening attire somehow accentuating his shrunken appearance. "We've recruited. We know what we're up against. We just have to go in and get Alec and the others."

"Amen to that!"

The following morning they all porteaured through to the Dimension of Senchuria. Blakey took no part in trajecting. He had overcome any scruples. If it became *absolutely necessary*, he would reveal he was a porteur. Not otherwise.

Vivasjan welcomed them, clad in his scarlet robe, mellow and serene with continued health. They stood in a crystal room of great beauty and simplicity, introduced to the Wizard of Senchuria in turn. He was most affable, for Macklin had brought produce required in Senchuria in return for the ease and resuscitation the Wizards could give. It was explained to Blakey that here in Senchuria, in this part managed by the Wizards, everything had a price and that price must be paid.

He did not feel overly jaded after the previous night's frolics, although some of the party looked distinctly under par. They were assigned beds in a long, pleasant ward-like room and with the accompaniment of soothing music the machines could do their work. Blakey had to admit that he felt enormously refreshed, alive and vigorous. He felt young again.

Prestin laughed.

"I used to have to wear spectacles, gold-rimmed, very fancy. Now the Wizards have treated me I no longer need specs."

When Blakey understood that here you could actually be treated so as to live more or less forever—not quite; but near as dammit which concept would appall a mathematician—he said: "But why doesn't Dave Macklin take the treatment?"

Prestin lost his smile.

"I wish he would; but there is something in his past, something I can only guess at to do with the Montevarchi. He has told me he will never take the rejuvenation treatment of the Wizards of Senchuria until whatever score he has with the Contessa is settled. One way or the other."

Blakey chilled at the words. Later he made up his mind that he would remember his way through the parallels back to Senchuria.

The idea of having your lost youth restored appealed to him, with the blood thumping around his body, and Carol smiling under her lashes at him.

From Senchuria when they were—with the exception of Macklin—restored to bouncing vitality, they ported into a very different Dimension. This was Graydoron. Here the skies lowered, the wind cut, the moors were bleak and abandoned. Here in corrugated iron huts they sat down with the heaters going to plan their next moves. Outside, parked behind barbed wire, stood armored cars, one tank—an ancient M48—and a huddle of trucks. The school buses, also, were there.

They clustered in their ex-theater seats, listening as Macklin with the assistance of maps and a blackboard, drew out the plan of campaign.

"Some of you have been down the Contessa's mines. Bob knows them and we can count on the assistance of Todor Dalreay of Dargai. They are the real people of Ironium, the Dargan, and they have been dispossessed. We have had reports of a man called J.T. Wilkie who was a mining engineer for the Contessa. But no one knows where he is right now. So those with the knowledge go down; the rest of you form the interference."

Blakey did not ask about General Spriggs. He fancied that gentleman would be lurking about somewhere, with his ideas of hammer and anvil. This time there could be no mistake.

Blakey leaned forward to speak to Chivers, who sat next to Poulter.

"We stick together, Chivers. Right?"

"Right, man."

"And me," chipped in Poulter.

"Aw, wrap up, Poulter," said Marty, chewing a candy bar. Arnold, Forsythe and Northrop emitted wheezing noises that might have been construed as chuckles. Macklin looked up for silence.

"Dan Fenwick goes with Bob Prestin. Cy Yancey will lead one interference party. Scobie Redfern another." He looked about at the packed room. "We are not very many. Some of you are newly recruited, and have no experience. But this time we have been careful, and fully briefed you all. You know the score. There are Shroths and Smefts and Honshi and Trugs."

"And," said someone from in front, "all the others."

"Precisely. We all back each other up. No solos."

Everybody except four of them wore comfortable combat kit that had not come from Earth. A drab gray-green, it contained pockets in the most unexpected places; but Blakey knew good kit



when he saw it. The four exceptions were: Fezius and Offa, who wore well-used harnesses of armor; Olan, who wore hunting armor of a very different pattern—and who, incidentally, would never be parted from his tommy gun; and Sarah, who was gorgeously dressed in an outfit to be featured in the next but one issue of *Vogue*. David Macklin, privately, expressed his distaste for the combat kit and longed for his own pepper-and-salt clothes; but they were far away through the Dimensions on Earth.

The briefing session proceeded. The routes in were conned and section leaders jotted down their own notes. Scales of equipment were settled. The crowded room resembled, to those who could remember, the jammed briefing rooms of bomber crews. When they broke up everyone knew the individual tasks required.

Blakey overheard Prestin speaking to Fenwick.

"I just wish Dave wouldn't insist on going."

They spoke quietly. Blakey listened unashamedly.

"We've shilly-shallied about long enough, Bob. This is the big one, the last one. If we don't settle the Contessa soon—now!—she'll be impregnable."

"Oh, I know that. All we've been able to do is pick and claw at bits of her damned empire. But she is frightfully strong—and that's an understatement for you! She has tremendous resources to call on. Dave's—"

"But at least others in the Dimensions have been taking notice lately. She can't get any panecos, and her arsenal is more limited than she lets on. She's still using Springfields according to this fellow Blakey. Since Wayne finally made the break and took his gang of mercenaries off on their own account, I think she's not as powerful as she used to be."

"Wishful thinking?"

"If it is, I'm sticking with it."

Prestin pulled his lip. "That's probably wise, Dan. But I still don't like taking in the girls—"

"They're tougher than the men, you know that!"

"Yes."

The two moved off, still talking, and Blakey joined Carol in the throng leaving the briefing room for the canteen. He spotted Yancey and said: "Cy. What's a paneco?"

"Ask Val or Scobie."

When he found them, tucking into a lavish meal, they told him what a paneco was. "Comes from a Dimension called Narangon. It's a Paraquatic Negative Coherer, a small-sized hand weapon, and it destroys all it touches—well, almost all.

The Naragonese refuse any more deliveries, and the weapons we had ran dry. The Contessa—”

“She can’t get any, either,” broke in Val, although Blakey had the impression Redfern wasn’t going to say that. “She’s getting her stuff from Slikitter, and they’re not happy with her. So we hear. Altinum is right out. No—she’s got to come to Earth. Most of the Dimensions within easy reach are not as advanced as Slikitter or Earth. We’ll beat the bitch with the same weapons she has.”

Blakey sat down and started eating. He felt a little troubled. But with these new comrades about him he felt buoyed up, confident. Against Hideki Honshi swords, against Smefts and their Springfields and slingshots, against Shroths with their somewhat better equipment—the lads and girls here now ought to come out on top. Thus he consoled himself.

From Altinum came the skimmers. When the ones in use wore out, no more would be forthcoming. Then it would be jeeps, Landrovers and Slikitter vehicles.

Blakey hankered after a decent tank.

A fight broke out between two of the new men. There was a quantity of swear words and fisticuffs and one bloody nose and one black eye. Prestin broke it up ruthlessly. Macklin sorted it out, and Prestin said: “Sack ’em both. Send them home. That’s what Alec would have done.”

“Alec’s not here, Bob. And we need every man to get him out.”

“Yes.” Prestin rounded on the two who stood held by their arms by others of the company. “If you two want to fight so badly, we can accommodate you. You’ll go in different sections and you’ll fight monsters and the Contessa’s devils—not each other. Got it?”

They got the message.

Two other men fell sick, and when it was explained that the Wizards of Senchuria had treated them, and therefore they couldn’t be sick, they admitted that their nerve had gone. They were porteured home. If they babbled about Dimensions and monsters, who would believe them? The men in the white coats?

Cy Yancey was adamant that the best route for his group to take lay through Querquetian and Jundagai. A recce patrol had been keeping tabs. Redfern, leading the other group, worked timetables and rendezvous with Yancey. Blakey took himself off to see about kitting up in a style to which he wished to become accustomed.

He insisted on retaining the British Westley Richards .600



Nitro Express. He'd lugged the damned great cartridge belts around, hadn't he? But he was pleased to yield up the alien automatic for a Browning 9 millimeter.

Dickering with a hard-muscled lump of professional mayhem called Tom, who ran the armory, Blakey was angling for an Ingrams. He was aware of Prestin and Redfern entering, deep in conversation.

"I worked down the mines for the Contessa, you know, Bob," said Redfern. "I'm wondering if I ought not to be in the group—"

"Dave has outlined the plans, Scobie. Dan and I will do all right down in the mines. We'll find Alec and the others."

"Of course you will! Just that—"

"There's Moke," interrupted Prestin. "He'll be useful."

Blakey had seen the man called Moke during briefing. He'd become more accustomed to the sight of alien humanity by now; but this Moke, who hailed from Myrcinus, was a sight. Four feet tall, covered in a fine reddish fur, he possessed arms each of which was the same four feet long. He was a brachiating human being. Blakey had been warned not to play craps with him.

Now Moke said: "My people will be ready, Bob. You'll see."

That, surmised Blakey, was the way of it. Here they were, a motley collection of people dedicated to stopping the mad ambitions of the Montevarchi, and probably aware of only a few of her devilments among the Dimensions. What they did know was enough. She wielded untold wealth-derived power. There were dark stories current about her abilities to escape from traps, to slip and slide away bafflingly. Many people had reported seeing her, and of those eye-witnesses' stories many did not tally. Were her eyes blue or violet? That question held a significance Blakey still did not comprehend.

His belongings had been returned to him, having been safely kept after the debacle of the hammer and anvil, and if they had been inspected nothing was said. The map was still there, and the powerless dictionary. No one questioned him to ask what the odd-looking book with the two thousand incredibly thin pages of figure coordinates might be. These people had their own codes of behavior, and the kits of dead men and women were returned when a home address was known. Otherwise they were kept safely. There was always the chance, however remote, that one day a comrade given up for lost would return from the Dimensions. Harry Blakey had, for one. . . .

The rest of the day passed in preparation and the members of

the expedition retired to their corrugated iron huts early. Here on Graydoron night fell early. Each person had a private cubicle with bed, chair, necessities. Married quarters were set off at right angles to the rows of huts. Lights began to go out around the camp. The electronic surveillance equipment switched on and the first sentries in the guard rota took up their posts. Blakey had caught lucky—not even stick-man—and he'd been let off guard duty because, he assumed, of his harrowing recent experiences. He looked at the yellow trousers flung down in a corner. Losing his shirt in the dimensions had been lucky, although he'd cursed at the time. The great glowing eye stitched across the shoulders would have branded him a porteur for the Contessa at once.

Would Prestin and his buddies have shot him out of hand? No—of course not! If they could release the porteurs the Contessa enslaved, as distinct from those like Cluff who were too scared to do anything else, they'd cripple her.

He shaved carefully, splashed, pulled his new shirt straight, and went off to find Carol's quarters. He knew where she'd be; he was not an old campaigner to miss that.

The huts looked like sleeping monsters, presaging what lay ahead. He saw more than one furtive figure slinking to a light o' love, and smiled, and so knocked carefully on Carol's door. Inside, noises ceased and the slot of light under the door vanished. He frowned.

The door opened. Carol stood there and made no move to step aside to admit him. Her smile flickered and vanished. She wore a midnight blue negligee and the feathered hem looked gorgeous against her skin. The corridor light splashed across her face, and Blakey felt all the old Adam in him.

"Hi, Carol! Can I come in—?"

"Harry! I didn't—"

"Who is it, Carol?" The man's deep voice from the room, sounding perfectly natural, clanged like a runaway steam loco in Blakey's head. His lips ridged as though cast in concrete.

"Who's that, then?" he said roughly. "Lonki?" and blundered blindly out into the night.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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At breakfast Carol walked over deliberately with her tray and sat down next to him. He stuffed bacon into his mouth and chewed.

"Look, Harry—you'd vanished, gone. We were lucky to get home with Sarah. And there was nothing between us—was there? I was pleased to see you come back, of course, and—"

He swallowed. "And you felt sorry for me?"

"No!" She picked up her fork and waved it dangerously. "Well—yes! I thought you looked—"

"I can do without your pity, thank you."

"Harry!"

He did not feel inclined to say he was sorry. They both spoke in fierce suppressed whispers, heads half-bent, isolated in their own argument in the busy canteen.

"You don't own me, Harry. I felt enormous gratitude when you rescued me—I was, I was—"

"You were. Don't owe me gratitude, Carol. And I didn't imagine I owned you—whatever that means—"

"You damn well know!"

She slashed at her eggs and bacon, making a mess in the plate, swirling her breakfast around. If she started to cry, Blakey told himself, that's it. I'm off . . .

Instead, she said: "You didn't ask me who—"

"I don't particularly care to know."

"Chivers."

"Why tell me? I thought I knew the voice—hell, Carol, so what?" He had mastered himself now. "He's a great guy. I like him. And, I suppose, after I got left behind, you and him—sort of—got on?"

"Yes."

"Well, you couldn't have done better."

He pushed his unfinished breakfast away, stood up, looked down on her—and saw her as he had seen her, half-naked smeared with grease and rust and brick dust. "All the best, Carol." He went out of the canteen and didn't see much until he

almost collided with the old M48. He put a hand on the cold metal. It stung. Tanks—now those he could understand.

"Tanks?" said Prestin blankly when Blakey managed to corner him later on, Macklin being definitely not available. "They won't be much good down the Montevarchi's mines, will they?"

"Out on the sea of grass—"

"Todor is taking care of that. You're detailed to go in with Dan and me. You know that."

Heatedly, blindly, Blakey burst out: "And I suppose that's because you all think we shouldn't have escaped without Alec and the others!"

Prestin's lips tightened up. He said no more; but he walked off to yell at a group loading a truck with mortar bombs.

Swinging away with his face as savage as a lion mask, Blakey controlled his trembling. He made himself whistle. In another age he would have been whistling insouciantly. Words formed in his head in time with the lilting rippling tune.

"Hoshoo! hissed the Honshi, Hoshoo!

My sword arm hires for rue,

Hoshoo, Hideki, Hoshoo—

Hold still while I pubick you!"

There were lots of Dimensions—lots and lots.

Tom, the steel-muscled gritty professional, wouldn't let him have an Ingram.

"You'll have to be satisfied with a Sterling—"

"What! An Uzi, then—"

"Here, boy. Catch!" The Sterling whirled through the air at his head. Blakey took it cleanly. He glared at Tom. Tom's square, hard-bitten face just smiled back.

"The old Sub Machine-Gun L2A1 is a fine weapon, boy," said Tom, turning back to his shelves to haul out an M3. "Here," he bellowed at a man waiting in line. Catch!" The grease gun was caught cleanly enough, and its new owner gave it a pat.

"Forty-five calibre," he said, emphasizing the 'ee' sound. "That'll knock over them Shroths!"

Macklin's men were armed with a fearsome selection of weaponry, garnered from many a murky corner. Blakey saw MAT 49's, Beretta Model 12's, a few Uzis and an Ingram or two. Some of the back-up troops were issued with Owen SMG's, and now they were so taken with them they wouldn't give them up, swearing that they never jammed. The men issued with



Armalites and AK 47's affected to look down with great contempt on those unfortunates who had been condemned to carrying old-fashioned and conceptually outdated SMG's. There was some high-spirited tomfoolery and bickering. Picking up a satchel of magazines, Blakey took himself off to think his personal problems through.

He heard his name called and half-turned and there was Chivers, looking worried, hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, Blakey! Carol told me. Hell, man—how was I to know? Carol and me—we—"

"Got on?"

"Went through a hairy time together, sure. Look, you sore? You want to take a poke at me, or sump'n?"

Blakey eyed the big handsome black man. Chivers was very good, Blakey guessed, and also guessed that he didn't quite have the training, expertise or experience to handle Harry Blakey. He shook his head.

"Talk sense, Chivers. I don't carry that kind of grudge."

"Glad to hear it. I wouldn't take kindly to beating your head in."

Blakey brushed any retort aside. He nodded to the Uzi slung over Chivers's shoulder. "That's nice."

White teeth blinding, Chivers smiled. "They made me a squad leader, old French being gone and all."

"Congratulations."

After a few more random and meaningless words, the men parted. Blakey marched off, head high. What the hell? Why should he be so disturbed? First there was Lonki, now this—well, he had no one to blame but himself—and, perhaps, a flung stone from a spider-headed woman's sling. He made himself think of the Smefs as he walked on, for one thing, he hadn't seen any menfolk among them. And that brought up the whole question of the sexes here in Macklin's outfit.

Blakey could see perfectly clearly the odd way the men treated the women. People like Prestin and Yancey and Redfern—they handled women with the mores of two decades and more ago. There was nothing wrong with that, of course, if the women didn't object. But in the world in which Blakey had grown up, after leaving home, women had shouldered their way in to an altogether different advantage. He didn't see why the girl porteurs shouldn't take the various parties in; they'd be protected by the men in ways a little more concerned than other men would be, perhaps, and in all probability they'd not give a thank you for that special and privileged treatment.

After his more recent experiences he'd given up the self-indulgent notion that he was a hardy and experienced Dimensions Traveler. Now he felt that in the matter of the female sex he had been more manipulated than anything else, and the thought sobered him, until he remembered one or two little incidents, and they cheered him up, so that he was not all downcast as the expedition prepared to set off.

As he was just a rank and file man he was not privy to the inner councils of the leaders. The plans had been set up, decided on, orders issued. Now was the time to implement.

Scuttlebutt had it that Macklin had planted a spy in the City of Diamonds, and his—or her—return with certain information was what had sparked off the larger objectives over and above rescuing Alec Macdonald and his comrades. The various parties mounted their vehicles and started off for the different portals to take them via the Dimensions to their target sites in Irunium. To his amusement Blakey caught one of the old school buses again. Poulter wandered up looking savage and miserable. He was lugging a flamethrower.

"Just my luck," he said. "Flamethrower. I ask you—?"

"Aw—wrap up, Poulter," rose the chorus.

Blakey boarded the bus with the others and settled back. He did not sit next to Chivers, and Chivers made no move to join him. The man sharing the seat with Blakey was Hudson, a chunky, beetle-browed man who dumped his flamethrower with a grunt. He did not say much, and that suited Harry Blakey.

The lead bus started up and trundled out of the barbed wire enclosure, following the Range Rover carrying Prestin, Sarah, Fezius and Offa. The bus in which Blakey traveled rolled out last, followed by a truck with food and ammo. This sortie was to be quick and sudden, and not prolonged.

Dan Fenwick, in a Range Rover, was scouting on ahead with a porteur Blakey didn't know. Each bus, this time, was provided with its own porteur for inter-Dimensional travel. Up beside the driver sat the hunched form of Mark Richman, another porteur who had the magic gift and was willing to use it in the service of Dave Macklin. Outside the windows of the bus the cold wind scythed the gorse, and up ahead shone the lights of a casement. Those lights, Blakey knew, shone for him but for no other of the men and women in the convoy who could traject through the gate.

They went through smoothly, and Blakey began to think that in this matter of competence in trajecting he could start to distinguish between good and not-so-good porteurs. This guy



Mark Richman seemed very good. The bus trundled along a dusty track, with mountains on the horizon, heading for the next portal. Chivers had a map open on his knees, keeping track of their progress.

Six portals and six Dimensions later they rolled out into a fantastic world of enormous flat-topped trees, gigantic creatures wallowing in mud baths, flocks of birds darkening the sky. The convoy trundled out of the forest and all before them spread an immense vista of rolling hills, winding streams, blue and green distances stretching away under a blinding sky. To their left and sprawling half into the forest and half out onto the open plateau loomed a chalk cliff honeycombed with the entrances to caves. Numbers of apelike people clad in skins and shaking stone-tipped spears crouched, leaping up and down, shouting defiance.

High in that glittering sky contrails traced arrow-straight whiteness across the blue. A Dimension, then, with Stone-Age savages here, and a high civilization somewhere else. Just like Earth.

The men threw candies to the savages. If the sweets might rot the primitive teeth was not a problem; harsh nature would take care of hunters who could not chew.

"One more to go," said Chivers. "We're ahead of time already. Man, this is some trip."

This party detailed to break into the Contessa's mines had to let the other parties put in their initial strikes first to draw attention. Blakey guessed that, if there had been a spy working for Macklin, he or she knew of a secret way into the mines beneath the City of Diamonds.

Just past the end of the cliff face a casement indicated their next exit and the entrance onto a fresh Dimension. The two Range Rovers halted, side by side, and the truck and the buses rolled up and parked in parallel. Blakey stretched. He could see the casement, glowing blue and green, a fine thick threshold, if on the narrow side. He judged that it would not accept the vehicles. He was right.

The men alighted and formed up. The leaders strode about looking, as Blakey surmised, not so much important as concerned. Poulter humped his flamethrower and looked murderous. The details carrying replenishment tanks and spare ammo were the folk Blakey felt for.

Prestin spoke up.

"From here on in we walk. We wait just beyond this portal for time. When it hits, I want you all to hit." He said no more but walked off to the end of the front rank, his eye caught by a sloppily fastened machine-gun. Fenwick walked across to the

portal, his porteur put him through and followed and the men shuffled up in single file, each one bowed with his load, reached that special place between two worlds and took another forward step and vanished. Mark Richman stood to one side, helping put people through. Sarah and Fezius with Offa, who looked inclined to wave his axe about, were deep in conversation. Prestin came up with them as Blakey, shuffling forward in line, reached the portal. The flamethrower adorning Hudson in front vanished. Blakey could see space before him and feel that inward coiling, an incredible sensation that mingled physical and mental reactions into a swirl of other-dimensional pressures. He popped through the portal.

He couldn't understand—for a betraying moment long enough—what was going on. Then he didn't believe. And by then it was too late to save himself.

The portal opened into the ruins of a colossal and mysterious building and among the tumbled columns and walls of crystal shards the men in single file tumbled straight into the nets and nooses of the waiting monsters.

Blakey had met these particular terrors before.

He'd seen and smelt their pink-slimer ooze, felt the horror of their bunched tendrils, seen the speed and ferocity of them as they'd attacked *Joy of Comfort*. Nets filmed delicately against the gray walls. Bludgeons in tentacles rose and fell. Popping through the casement one at a time, the men were overpowered one at a time. The noise hit Blakey as he was dragged entrapped in a net forward and away from the portal. Hudson was down, Poulter was down, just about everyone was down.

Someone was screaming: "Tob'kliacs! Tob'kliacs!"

Struggling and squirming like a trapped salmon, he was dragged away. Marty appeared in the casement, sweating, and was instantly netted and hauled down. Blakey got himself up on a knee. Monsters clustered, it seemed each with a quivering and alien glee to be the next to hurl his net. They were probably making a competition out of it, a challenge, see who could throw his net the best. As each man stepping through the portal was snared so he was dragged away and the next monster stepped up.

The noise was not as bad as it might be. Any shooting from the people who stood a little back and at a higher level had been done. Dan Fenwick's porteur lay riddled with bullets. Fenwick himself, trussed with rope and not the filmy nets of the beasts, lay nearby, a trail of blood from his porteur wetting his cheek. Blakey looked away quickly.

Chivers appeared in the portal. His black face showed blazing



anger as he understood what was happening and he lifted his Uzi. Nets fell about him, started to tauten, to drag him staggering forward. The tendriled beasts hauled, Chivers yelled passionately, and Harry Blakey lashed out with all his power, forcing Chivers back, hurling him headlong back through the portal between worlds.

Chivers vanished.

"Find the porteur! Kill him!"

The bull-voice battered from the platform where the men and women clustered to watch the spectacle. Blakey, tripping in nets, hunkered over and hoped no one would give him a second glance, let alone take him for one of this magical breed who could hurl people from one world to another.

"No, Ottorino, do not kill the porteur."

Blakey quivered. He knew that voice. He felt a tentacle slice across past his ear and he kept his head down—but he looked, with an arm over his face and his eyes glaring, he looked. She was up there, on the platform, and yet he couldn't make her out among the armored guards and the fawn-clad Valcini.

"You are as bad as your namesake, Ottorino. Porteurs are the most valuable of all commodities among the Dimensions. You know that, I have told you many times. Find the porteur, by all means, and quickly. Then she—or he—may be corrected at the Academy."

Blakey put his arm close about his face. Around him the nets were dragged off, men and equipment clattering over the stones. Rifles, machine guns, grenades, all were expertly taken from them by the twitch of a tentacle. Any resistance was snuffed out before it had a chance.

The men were herded into a huddled group under the guns of Shroths who appeared from the ancient ruin's shadowed archways like rats creeping through the eyeholes of a skull.

The whole extent of the central area under a high-vaulting dome was incredible in size to be spanned by a single dome. The ruins in their tumbled profusion could not detract from the sheer majesty of that overarching dome.

The narrow if thick portal through which the expedition had stepped to disaster was matched by another and even narrower portal at the diametrically opposite side of the area. That, Blakey guessed, was the entrance to the Contessa's mines in Irunium. Well, she had struck first. He still could not see her on the ledge among the Valcini and Bargeman and guards; but she was there all right, and she was no doubt thoroughly enjoying the discomfiture of her enemies. Macklin was rumored to have

sent a spy into the City of Diamonds. It seemed certain that the Montevarchi had sent her spies into Macklin's camp. That could be the only explanation for her placement of the trap just here.

There were other casements within the lofty domed area, scattered among the detritus of a vanished glory.

Valcini ran with upraised weapons for the portal through which Chivers had popped, to make an even more summary exit. The Valcini led on Shroths and Smefts, running to plunge through the portal into the barbaric world of the cave dwellers. Uselessly, Blakey watched them go, fuming away to himself and keeping himself well-hidden among the prisoners. Soon the chains would come a'rattling out. . . .

Most of the members of the expedition had been captured; a minority had been killed. Guards pushed the tangle of men against the angle of ruined walls. Then they waited. Blakey knew damn well what they were waiting for . . .

In those moments the men around him expressed themselves in colorful ways. But they were badly shaken. They'd been taken. They'd been caught off balance. Now they faced death or the Contessa's mines. Blakey as a mere rank and filer kept himself to himself. Someone had fouled up. The Valcini who had taken their guards through were no doubt chasing Prestin and the few remaining with him. As he surmised that he saw a figure appear in the portal, stepping through to reveal itself as a Shroth carrying a box of ammunition. Blakey recognized the box.

"They're looting the truck," said Poulter.

"I just hope the others got away. . . ."

"Well, if they did or if they didn't, they ain't gonna be much use to us, are they?"

Dan Fenwick, dragged in with his men, regained consciousness and sat up. He looked terrible. He knew what had happened to his porteur; he raised a hand and touched the blood on his cheek.

"Tob'kliacs," he said. "Damned slavers. Slavers of the Dimensions, these disgusting Tob'kliacs. And the Contessa used 'em. Well, my lads, now we have to get out of here."

"How do we do that?"

Before Fenwick could answer—before anyone could even begin to think of the enormity of the question—guards shoved in and started to sort the men out. Whatever system was used, the Tob'kliacs, with their tendrils rippling and their pink slime oozing, had their say. They were sharing out the spoils.

Clawed hands, trendriled hands, snatched away their prizes. Blakey was grabbed and hauled out. The guard screamed up, her



spider-head shrilling obscenely. The answer floated down from the platform.

"Turn his head so that I can see."

Each prisoner in turn was twisted to show his face. Up there, on that high platform under the dome, field glasses would be trained down, pitiless eyes scrutinize every feature.

Blakey's head was twisted up.

The familiar voice floated down, trembling with a passion that need never be controlled.

"Harry Blakey! How nice to see you again!"

The Smef's white fingers gouged into Blakey's neck; her proboscis, with her stingers aimed directly for the side of his eye, dripped poison at each tip. The moment Blakey made a move to escape she could drive that stinger cleanly into his eye—if she didn't kill him outright she'd blind him for life.

The woman up there on the high platform under the dome called down: "Send Harry Blakey up here. I wish to see this ingrate again, closely."

That woman was far far more deadly than a regiment of spider-headed Smefts ever could dream of being.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

"The Norvese was extremely foolish. But I can understand why she might become infatuated with you. You are young and strong and naïve; some women feel for oafs like that."

Blakey just stood there, on the high platform under the dome, surrounded by guards and Valcini. He now realized why he had not been able to see her before. He had been looking for a woman clad all in sheer white. The Montevarchi had changed her clothes for this expedition; she had donned her war gear.

He'd heard Margie and Sarah both call the Contessa a cat and a bitch and all manner of names; he hadn't heard them say in so many words that she lacked taste. She might overdo it, she might be overly overpowering; her tastes might run riot with her taste. But she dominated. She suffocated those who would be suffocated. Blakey stared at her, wishing she were not the enemy.

The turquoise all-in-one coverall she wore clung to her skin-tight, patterned in loops and whorls of sequins. They used to call

that type of garment a cat-suit. It emphasized the narrowness of her waist and the flare of her hips, across which she wore a crimson-leather gunbelt, at a slant, dragged down by the complicated-looking gun in its half-holster along her right thigh. The sequins blinded. Blakey checked a gasp. Well—they would be, wouldn't they, in the City of Diamonds, from the Contessa's mines? Sequins—for the Montevarchi? Oh, no—she was patterned in cunning outlines of ranks and files and massed diamonds, glittering like multi-faceted eyes upon her body.

Up around her head and encircling her dark piled hair rose a bowl of crystal, like a shell against which her head revealed all its old imperiousness of outline, her face its arrogance of look, her eyes—blue, brilliant, merciless eyes!—a new and hard glance of absolute authority. Her rosebud mouth in its soft wet parting smiled so sweetly as to send a thrill of pure horror through all those with her.

"Harry Blakey. You I shall take in hand myself." She gestured, and, instantly, the hardness was gone. She was a lone and vulnerable woman, appealing for sympathy and help. "I treat my people like kings. I give them everything. There is no greater destiny among the Dimensions than to serve the Contessa Perdita Francesca Cammachia di Montevarchi. In Irunium the only law is my will. And that will ensures the good life for my people. Yet what of gratitude do they show me? Perhaps in you, Harry Blakey, I shall find a receptive spirit fit to match my own."

He licked his lips. After all, most of this woman's evil nature and vile deeds had come to him by hearsay. Except—Carol in her half-naked state smeared with rust and brickdust and grease, the whip marks cruel across her back. The slaves he had seen, the evident terror she inspired in those about her. . . . Yet in that melting mouth lay a promise, in those eyes, those eyes of a gentle serene blue that promised, lay a glimpse of heaven. . . .

His mouth was parched. He was young, and, he knew now, inexperienced and untested despite what he had been through. Promises were cheap. Deeds counted. He held up his hands.

"Would you free me then, Contessa?"

She blinked. She showed surprise. She had not expected that particular tone of voice.

"The Norvese said certain things about you, Harry Blakey. But your gifts came to you through me. Was it not I who had you trained, who revealed to you your great and magical gifts?"

Blakey kept silent. No, he was saying to himself, no, you arrogant woman, it was not you. He thought of Jim in a flashing moment of absolute belief in the existence of that man who had



taught him so much in his youth, and then the moment was gone, and he felt despair.

Down below in that vast and tumbled space of ruins the prisoners were being porteaured through the wider casement off to one side. Noises spurted up. The Tob'kliacs rippled away to another portal, vanished. The trap had been sprung. Now the forces were being redeployed to deal with the other prongs of David Macklin's attack.

"Take Fenwick to the correction cells below my quarters," she commanded, and instantly Bargemen moved, shepherding Dan Fenwick away.

Blakey forced himself to watch what went on and to grasp the relationships of the various portals in this place the Valcini referred to as the Dome of Fragments. From the portal where the disastrous entry had been made there was a considerable drop to the floor where the small portal must lead into the mines. The men had been dragged down there in the nets of the Tob'kliacs, and now they were herded away up ramps to thresholds at different levels. Fenwick was porteaured through a splendid thick and lucid casement set at the head of a flight of stairs curving around the dome. Blakey began to get the idea that whoever had built this place in the ancient times had known of the Dimensions, and had built the Dome of Fragments with steps and platforms before each portal. The place was like a junction on a railroad system.

Quietness stole over the hall, the kind of quietness that must overtake a cathedral when the last of the funeral mourners depart. The place lay abandoned and deserted, with dust filling the crevices, dust along the threads of the stairs, dust sifting in the airy spaces under the dome. The Montevarchi said to her porteur, "Take us home, Curt."

"At once, my lady."

Curt Moben, in his high-collared yellow tunic with the porteur's eye emblazoned all across the back in gilt wire and silks, grimaced and ducked his head. His face was that of a strong and independent-minded man, wide-lipped, with a dark dimple in his chin. He was clearly a man of action. Now, with the silver collar around his neck attached to the dypo-control chain, he was merely the porteur at the moment favored by the Contessa as her personal servant. He led off and the rest followed, closed up around the Contessa in habitual protection.

They went through the portal at ground level and into a stone-faced corridor where Hideki Honshi stood guard. The alkady

saluted respectfully as the Contessa passed along to the portal a hundred yards down. This led into an anteroom blinding in its light, its colors, its mirrors. Here the guards took up accustomed positions around the walls. Moben and the Contessa walked on to an ivory door inlaid with ebony. She half-turned her head. "Bring Blakey. Four guards only."

"Yes, my lady."

The ebony and ivory door led onto a hallway with a bank of elevators. They went up with that smooth rush that told Blakey they were ascending in a high-speed elevator, going up past floor after floor. He was not surprised when they came out to a crystal-windowed tower room with a wide panorama of Irunium spread beneath them. There was the river with a few barges, there the sea of grass. The sun shone refulgently.

"When the sun goes down, Blakey, your friends will appear."

She sounded so confident, so casual, taking a goblet from a copper-skinned sprite, drinking, flinging the goblet to be expertly caught. Blakey remained silent.

"Look, Blakey. Mark well what you see."

He could see all right. The walls of the City of Diamonds massed with men. The snouts of machine guns and cannons frowned out over the sea of grass, along the river. Inside enclaves behind closed gateways waited tanks, tanks of a kind he did not recognize, which meant they had never been manufactured on Earth. When Macklin's men put in their attacks designed to confuse and draw attention to let the mines party in, they would be met by so overwhelming a volume of fire they would be smashed utterly.

"Oh, yes, Harry Blakey. It is all arranged. But it is you who interests me now." Her smile would have charmed a cobra. "I am now quite certain you are not what you pretend to be."

When he made no reply she went on: "But you do pretend, don't you? You can confide in me. After all, I understand the mysteries of the Dimensions."

"Pretend?" said Blakey. His voice sounded weak, and he was not pretending over that.

"I am accounted a patient woman. I reward my friends and I punish, I regret, I punish very heavily those who displease me. I would like you to be my friend, Harry. Please do not make me punish you."

With full sincerity, Blakey said: "I can assure you, my lady, I do not wish to be punished by you. But I don't know what you mean." His voice gathered a little strength.



"You pretended not to be a porteur."

"But you trained me—"

She moved a little way off across the shining floor. Her figure assumed an image of glittering diamonds, outlined, blazing, shimmering in the light. Blakey blinked. She lifted her voice. "Soloman. Tell me."

An old, tired voice, wheezing with the disillusion of the years spoke from a curtained alcove.

"If you did not swear he was there, Contessa, I would not know."

She swung about, triumphantly.

"There! Blakey—you see? You do see? If Soloman who is the greatest porteur in all the Dimensions cannot tell that you are a porteur—then how do you explain that?"

Blakey said: "I can't."

"I offered to have your skull opened and your brain examined. And I will do it. You must do better than that!"

He said: "Can Curt Moben tell?"

She let out a laugh like the sound of ice cubes in a crystal goblet. "Curt? He is all power and bluster! And Soloman is failing. I need—" She stopped herself, and put a hand to her diamond-studded breast, and breathed out, shakily. Then: "Soloman is no longer to be trusted—are you, Soloman?"

"If my lady says so—"

"I do say so! Do you forget my word is law?"

"No, my lady. I have served you faithfully—"

"Have you? Have you! I may travel the Dimensions freely now, may I not? And is that thanks to you? Is it? Was it not your tribe who insisted otherwise? The girls I have sought for, and trained, and used! Because your tribe said so!"

"People change, Contessa." The curtains parted and a diamond-studded wheelchair rolled out powered by batteries, making a gentle hum upon the warm air. Soloman sat in the chair, his wizened body ludicrous as ever in the red velvet, the feather, broken at the tip, drunkenly swaying from his cap. The light glimmered across the contusions upon his immense bald scalp. "You have changed, Contessa. Your power has grown immeasurably."

"That is my rightful destiny!"

"And do you blame me for that?"

"I will blame whoever I wish for whatever I wish. Now I want you to tell me about this porteur Harry Blakey."

"Then I would say that unless we knew him to be a porteur, we would not know."

"That is what I thought. So that leaves us with the inescapable conclusion that in this man we have something we have not encountered before in the Dimensions."

"Yes, Contessa."

"Unless—" Her head jerked forward with a movement irresistably like that of a rattlesnake to Blakey's appalled insight. "We know the Dimensions group together. We have explored this grouping and some of the nearer concentrations. But you know of more, Soloman. Because you are not of these Dimensions, you are the greatest here. But, perhaps—no! Not perhaps! Certainly, there are others like you and Blakey in those other, remote Dimensions!"

"Yes, Contessa, what you say is true. But the ways are narrow—we have never explored in those directions—"

"What was the name of the Dimension? Where we could not go? Tell me, you old dodderer! Tell me!"

And Soloman lifted his shrunken face beneath that dome of a head and said: "The parallel was Internin, Contessa."

"Internin! As soon as I have destroyed David Macklin and all his friends, we shall go there! You will take me, Soloman. There we will—"

Soloman interrupted. In his ghostlike voice he said: "I could not take you through Internin. The way is barred for me, and for Moben, and for any other porteur of these Dimensions."

"You defy me!"

"No, Contessa. It is just that I am unable—"

"I will have you disciplined. You will feel the bite of the dypo-control chain again. Have you forgotten? Do you think my destiny prevents me from anything?" She panted from the vehemence of her thoughts, congested, suffused, a glittering figure of diamonds.

Soloman's sigh breathed of lost hopes and desires, but he spoke with a vigor like that of the last of a candle flame. "I am soon to be gone from this world, Contessa. I feel my death upon me. It will not come too soon. I have served you faithfully, because—you would not understand. Do you remember, in the old days, when you and David were so happy? I joyed in those days for you both. You were not of my world, not of David's world, you were like a spirit—" His voice faltered.

She stood, unmoving, staring like a snake about to strike.

"He loved you, as did I. I joyed in serving you and I thought, I thought the bad days would go and by serving you faithfully I could help to change you—but your change was against all



David believed in, against what I felt and could do nothing to alter. Do you think I can joy to see another take my place?"

A thought so outrageous and so gorgeous struck Blakey that he shut his eyes. He opened them to see the Contessa lifting a beringed hand and striking Soloman, striking him cruelly upon that wizened face. The old porteur did not cry out; but he shrank back into the chair as a snail recoils back into his shell.

"Guards!" screamed the Montevarchi. "Bring a dypo-control chain! I will see what that will do!"

Blakey moved up close to the chair as the Contessa sprang away, screaming at the guards who ran out, scared witless.

He bent and stared into the old man's face.

"Soloman. Do you know a man I call Jim? A man whose name is—" And he rolled out the name Jim had told him, the name of glory, that he knew abashed Jim to use. Soloman's face flushed. His faded eyes swiveled up in shock.

Blakey rushed on. "He was my friend. He taught me. Soloman! He called portals casements, and he and I are trajecters! And—"

Soloman said in a voice hushed and barely audible: "There is a casement, thin and barely definable, in the floor of my alcove. Can you sense it?"

Blakey sensed out, hard and exultantly. The casement was there, like a manhole, and beyond it the impression of cobbles, wind, trees. "Yes."

"Then you are a true trajecter, Harry Blakey. The man you call Jim—yes, I knew him. It was to escape him that I came into these Dimensions."

"Escape him!"

The Contessa was still shrieking for guards, and the floor echoed to the thump of booted feet.

"If he found me now, he would take me back—take me back to answer for my crimes. But that is all nothing, now, all past. The Contessa no longer has power over me. I am gone, Harry Blakey—gone from this parallel and all the others. Now do you run for the alcove and traject yourself, escape! As for me—if you see Jim again—"

"I shall tell him Soloman. And he will forgive you—"

"Oh, no, I do not think he will do that." Soloman's hat slipped off, the feather snapping clean. He laughed, a bubbling exhalation of worn-out lungs. "No—go!"

Curt Moben had not heard that quick whispered conversation; but he saw. "Contessa—!"

She swung back, her face a single knot of fury. Blakey launched himself at the curtained alcove. He could feel the

casement there level with the floor and he dived for it, head down. He heard the Contessa scream: "Is there a portal there?" And Moben's quick: "No, my lady!" And then he thought the special thought and catapulted headlong out of the parallel of Irunium.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

Out of Irunium he leaped like a diver off the high board. No conception of what he might find could deter him. Only to get away from the Contessa, to escape her, to flee from the horror of the dypo-chain control. . . .

He fell headfirst into slanting sunlight, and twisted over, his shoulders hit a soft surface and he rolled forward on a mattress and his feet hit a wooden bedhead. He sat up, swallowing, feeling sick, staring owlishly around.

The cobbles, the wind, the trees—they were there all right, outside a wide window from which the sunshine poured. The room was small, comfortably furnished, exuding an air he found extraordinarily welcoming. A ladder extended up from the bedhead. If you climbed the ladder you could porteur yourself through the portal that lay against the ceiling. He'd dived headlong and missed the ladder, landed on the bed.

A voice shrill with alarm shouted: "You're not Soloman!"

He twisted around and stared up, expecting a fresh horror.

The lad could not have been more than thirteen or fourteen, dressed in a pair of shorts and slippers. His face was freckled. He looked as startled as Blakey. But, startled or not, the rifle he held centered on Blakey's chest was real and hard and menacing, and the boy's finger lay upon the trigger. Blakey got his breathing steadied down. He smiled.

"Hullo—no—I'm not Soloman. He sent me."

"Is he all right? We haven't seen him for a long time."

A shadow fell across the doorway and a man entered, a man who was the grown up edition of the boy. He wore a long tunic, belted, and his face was clean-shaven.

"You say Soloman sent you? Why has he not come himself?"

Blakey switched around on the bed and sat on the edge.



"I think I can tell you that. He is old, now, and I do not believe he can leave his chair. The ladder—no, he couldn't manage that. And to drop on the bed. . . . No, I don't think so."

The pair looked distressed. "But Soloman is our friend. He has done so much for us—we owe him everything."

Blakey said, "D'you mind pointing that rifle somewhere else? Thank you. Soloman saved my life—he knew I'd be safe here with you."

Still unsure just how this could go, Blakey felt relief when a woman walked in, took in the situation at a glance, and smiled before she spoke.

When she said: "Where is Soloman? What have you done with him? Danno—aim your father's rifle straight!" and the lad leaned back to bring the weight of the rifle up and the muzzle wobbling about, centered on Blakey's midriff; Blakey felt all his relief ooze away.

"Hey!" he said. "Hey, wait a minute! Soloman helped me—and he said he felt his death on him, and—"

"He was always saying that. I believe you have done him some harm."

Then Harry Blakey saw what he had to do. There were two reasons, the obvious one being that the act would prove he was not the villain these apparently friendly people took him to be. The other and more important reason was that he saw that he had acted if not as a poltroon then as a very jelly-spine individual.

"Wait here," he said, and, then, "Have you a weapon?"

He did not think the lad Danno would hand the rifle across. The man understood at once, and reached behind the open door. "Here." He threw a spear across to the bed.

Blakey snatched it up. He'd use it as he'd use a rifle and bayonet. He climbed the ladder from the bedhead, swallowed, and porteaured up. He sprang out into the curtained alcove and the scene that hit him told him at once that he had made the right decision.

The Contessa had left that shining windowed tower room; but her voice racketed in from outside, fading.

"If you're lying to me, Curt, you'll regret the day you were born!"

Soloman sat in his chair and writhed. The dypo-control chain ran to the wrist of a heavily-built Valcini, who kept the torture stud fully depressed. His bearded face expressed a perversity of pleasure in his work. The woman Valcini stood with her hands on her hips and her legs wide-spread, her head thrown back, and she laughed, straining the fawn shirt.

"You will tell us, in the end, Soloman. The Contessa has given you to us, so abandon all hope."

Blakey leveled the spear and ran in. He held the blade flat and thrust it between the Valcini's ribs. He ran on, twisting the spear and trying to drag it free as the Valcini screeched and shot upright. If Blakey had dragged the spear free he would probably have killed the woman, too; as it was he let the spear haft go and slugged her cleanly across the jaw. She fell to the floor. Soloman stopped writhing. His expanse of scalp ran with sweat.

"It is no use, Harry Blakey—you should not have come back—"

Blakey grabbed the Valcini and hauled him across to the alcove, dragging him to the limit of the chain; then he wheeled the chair across, and one more trip brought Soloman in his chair and the Valcini over the portal.

"The chair will not pass—"

Blakey ran back to the room, snatched up the woman and dragged her by a foot. One of her two-tone high heeled shoes fell off. He dragged her to the portal and sent her tumbling down, vanishing from the world. Then he ran back for the shoe and threw it at Soloman.

"Leave us, Blakey—"

Blakey picked Soloman up in his arms. The wizened form felt as light as a chicken. He kicked the Valcini straight and ported him through and instantly followed. He caught the second rung of the ladder and held on, feeling the branches of fire erupt along the muscles of his arm and shoulder.

Very carefully, he climbed down the ladder, kicked the Valcini off the bed, and put Soloman down. Then he stepped back and took a whooshing gulp of air.

"The damn blood will betray the portal," he said.

"If Curt Moben cannot sense it, no one else the Contessa can employ or torture can find it." Soloman's voice grew in strength even as he spoke. He looked about and saw the father and mother and their son Danno. The lined wrinkled face smiled.

"It is me, Soloman! And I do not think I shall ever go back through the hole in the ceiling."

The woman said: "Put your father's rifle down, Danno. And put the safety on!"

"Yes, mother."

"This is Durnal and this is Danli, and this imp is their son, Danno." Soloman's hand made circles in the air. "And this is Harry Blakey."



After that it was all a babble until Blakey managed to get a word in edgeways.

"Look Soloman." They were in the next room seated at a table, Soloman having been carried by Durnal, and the table was piled with comestibles on which Blakey was conducting a war of attrition. "My friends are going to be killed if I don't do something."

"You saw the armaments the Contessa has? Tanks with Gauss guns, many soldiers with lasers, a whole army—"

"Yes. I don't think an Abrams or a Challenger, let alone a T80, will be much good against them."

"The level of your Earthly military technology will be of no use. And Altinium is closed, as is Narangon. And, even so, their greatest weapon, the paneco, is useless against the Contessa. I have been with her in her globe of invulnerability when a paneco was fired against us." Then Soloman said: "Is there anything you *can* do?"

"Yes. There are many things I must ask you, talk to you about. You don't know what it means to me to know that you, too, believe in Jim. . . ."

"Believe in him! If he catches me—"

"I shall not tell him where you are—I don't even know!"

"This is Loughrode, a strange Dimension of few portals and those difficult. I found it by chance and managed to have my private alcove in the tower located around one portal. This place is a haven, a heaven, and precious to me and one I do not deserve—"

"I'll ask you all the questions when I get back. Until the sun was gone, the Montevarchi said. So I have little time. Do you know your way around the Dimensions? If I give you a name, can you direct me?"

"It is possible. I have traveled the Dimensions extensively and when I discovered Loughrode I built up a computer memory here which may contain the parallel you seek."

Durnal broke in to say: "The women keeps screaming. What shall we do with her? The man is near death."

His wife, the sweet-faced Danli, said instantly: "Kill her."

"No!" Blakey jumped up. He wasn't sure quite what he was doing, and the screaming need to press on obsessed him. "No—just confine her, she may be useful. You never know."

"You cannot afford to be squeamish with Valcini—" Soloman put a hand to his neck where the white ruff, torn away, revealed a pitted skin and ancient scars. "But, you are probably right.

Those two, La Rocca and Pistoni, are the Contessa's favorite torturers. When I saw them I gave myself up for lost."

"We shall see they do not escape. The man may not live," said Durnal.

"Now," and Blakey spoke heavily. "Soloman. Can you map me a route through to Calverly?"

Soloman, in the act of biting into a slice of orange, halted, and the juice ran over his fingers. He looked up sharply.

"Calverly? That is not in this grouping."

"It's on the axis of Demaid and Vundersharm, I think—"

"Judged by distance through the Dimensions, a concept you have to use to retain perspective, even though all the Dimensions are contiguous, you're talking of parallels a long way away."

"Is there a quick route through?"

"If Durnal will carry me, we can go to the terminal and I will attempt to find out." His old eyes searched Blakey's face. "I see it is important. For your sake, then, I hope we will find a rapid route through the parallels."

The computer terminal, located in a cool whitewashed room, bulked with a prodigious display of flashing lights and impressive control equipment. "Slikitter," said Soloman when Blakey asked. He sat down out of Durnal's arms and began to hit the keyboard with his right forefinger, one key after the other with a slowness agonizing to Blakey. But, presently, the terminal hiccupped and accepted the questions and ran through the appropriate program and so displayed its mass of figures.

Soloman had to translate them into Arabic numerals for the Earthman, and Blakey jotted down what he wanted to know on a scratch pad furnished by Danno. The pad contained crayon drawings of monsters and flying beasts and ships, and Danno said he wanted it back when Blakey had finished with it.

Outside the house on the cobbled street in the shade of pale-leaved trees waited riding animals that were not horses.

People gathered. They wore white tunics and dresses with brilliantly colored scarves and sashes and wide-brimmed straw hats. They all looked happy to see Soloman. The small village showed a weird mixture of an ancient easygoing culture mingled with artifacts of a high-technology culture. These had been porteured in by Soloman with discretion over the years.

Among the clustering people come to bid the friend of Soloman Bon voyage stood many extremely handsome youths and pretty girls. Indeed, Blakey hesitated a moment as he prepared to mount up at sight of the girls, so intoxicatingly lovely were they.



"This is a friendly place, Harry Blakey. You will be more than welcome whenever you visit this part of Loughrode."

Looking at the bevy of beauties, Blakey promised: "I'll be back."

They gave him a sack containing food and drink, and a rifle of whose manufacture he knew nothing but of whose operation he was very familiar. Then he trotted off along the street to the shouts of farewell and a profusion of waved scarves, heading for the first portal in this jaunt through the Dimensions.

A large compass hung on a chain around his neck. This map was not merely a list of co-ordinates. It was a series of bearings and distances, so that when he went through a portal he checked direction and headed for the portal on the bearing indicated. The first gate located just off the main street beside an inn and a cobblers presented a major problem. It was thin. He summoned up his powers and trajected the animal that was not a horse and himself through, to come out into a world of velvet violet twilight. The next gate shone in an arch of splendor two hundred meters off, and he trotted across. The next Dimension was cold, inhospitable, and he was shivering by the time he reached the casement and trajected into a jungle world full of slithering green shadows, and brilliant blood-red eyes. He was happy to get out of that and face a ride across a dusty prairie to a portal two miles away. He followed the bearings and ignored three other gates along the way.

The animal that was not a horse proved a comfortable mount, with padded feet and eight spindly legs that moved in their own intricate rhythm. His head with a wide chomping mouth and bright intelligent eyes lifted on a chubby neck, and Blakey went easy on the reins. There was no bit, and the animal, whom Soloman called Loper, could have thrown the reins off had he a mind to. But he trotted on easily, and Blakey felt secure.

Three Dimensions later, in a world of gullies and eroded rocks, he had to dig his spurless heels in and let Loper gallop in a rickety lickety-split fashion as a pack of wolflike creatures broke howling from a ravine. It was touch and go before they reached the casement shining atop a crumbling cliffedge. Blakey did not unsling the rifle. He felt that Loper had the situation under control.

Control of the Inter-Dimensional Travel department was Blakey's responsibility. He caught the impression of water and grass and then Loper went at top speed into the casement. Blakey didn't even bother to wonder what those wolflike howlers thought of their quarry abruptly disappearing before their noses.

Clouds covered the sky and a thin wind ruffled sere grasses. The water lay in stagnant pools, green and slimy. A distant range of mountains sawtoothed the eastern horizon. Blakey patted the golden-yellow hide of Loper's neck. "Well done, Loper. Good lad." The animal that was not a horse let rip a sound like bathwater running down the plughole, which Blakey took to be amused tolerance of his rider's concern.

He checked the map, lined up the compass, made a face. The bearing led off to the north, and no glimmering arch of lights beckoned in the wasteland. He set off, trotting gently, knowing he had a five mile or more ride. The odd thing was, and it continued to astound him, he was really just riding north in New York. All around him now, unseen, unfelt, unheard, sprawled a great metropolis, existed worlds of ice and sand, worlds of jungle, worlds of strange configurations unknown to terrestrial science. The casement came into view past the edge of a wood whose trees looked as though they could be cut only to furnish broomsticks for witches.

In the next Dimension he would have to be quick, for Soloman's computer had flashed up a warning sign by its co-ordinates.

"Aerial predators," Soloman had warned him. "If you see any, you must get into cover, away from them, instantly."

Spinehawks, they were, and when he trajected into the Dimension which they plundered and saw the jagged shape of the mountains that were their eyries, he swallowed down and thumped in his heels. He had a mile to the casement.

The Spinehawks spotted him when he was just halfway there.

On black wings, stiffly extended, jaws agape, they swooped. He unslung the rifle and letting Loper gallop on as fast as he could, he set himself, leaned back, and took aim on the first aerial predator as it stooped.

Loper's eight legs blurred and hurled him on at an amazing speed. Thumped up and down and swung from side to side, for despite the essential smoothness of Loper's gait the speed of his progress jolted, Blakey aimed and let fly. His first shot missed, which although not surprising him still annoyed him. He put the second slug smack into the diving bird and instantly lined up on the next astern. Loper fled over that wild and inhospitable land.

The alien rifle held eight rounds in the magazine, and with the full load shot off, Blakey accounted for five predators. He ripped out a fresh clip and then swore as he realized the stupid rifle loaded only via the magazine instead of being charger loaded. By the time he had the mag out and loaded and slapped back the



leading bird's claws raked over his head in a giant rushing of air and a horrid screeching. He swung the muzzle up and fired. The bird fell off on a wing and the next bored in and Blakey put a round directly into that black and shining mat of breast feathers. He had the special trajecting thought held in his mind like a coiled trap ready to release when the trigger was touched and he felt the impact and he almost put a bullet up into the fellow in yellow flying kit hovering from a hang glider.

Blakey released the pressure on the trigger. A sandy beach, yachts, the shrieks of bathers, white buildings that must be hotels and restaurants, and hang gliders weaving out and in over the cliffs. . . . This was a holiday area of this parallel and Blakey and Loper scurried along the beach and vanished from that world before the carefree holidaymakers realized they had been visited from a world of which they knew nothing.

Five Dimensions and a few more miles later Blakey came out into a bright world where a mammoth airship floated above his head. He let out a long sigh that came up from his boots.

He patted Loper's golden-yellow hide. "Good lad, Loper."

He left the animal that was not a horse to test the delicacy of the grass in the garden and went straight up. He rang the bell in the simple conviction that she would not be on duty. She wasn't. The door opened and Lashiel Vrin-Dux said: "Harry!"

"Hullo, Lashiel."

She was just about to take a shower and Blakey, with memories of Lashiel's shower, felt regret that he would interrupt her. He said: "Can't stop, Lashiel. I'll be back to tell you all about it later. Right now I want to borrow Todd's armor."

"Borrow . . . ? Oh, the militia wouldn't allow that!"

"I'm not asking them. I'm asking you." He did not tell her that if she refused he'd regretfully have to take Todd's militia armor anyway over her protests.

She pulled her bath wrap tighter. Her dark hair hung in a loose mass. She looked delicious. "But, Harry . . . !"

"Look, Lashiel. This is an emergency. I am not playing games and I have no time to waste. I need that armor. The lives of men and women depend on me—"

"What are you doing?" For he had pushed into the lobby and was pulling her to him and kissing her. She felt warm and wonderful and Blakey wondered what in all the Dimensions he was doing trying to get back into what might be a hopeless last fight instead of romping here. After a few moments he released her. Her face bloomed. But she still shook her head.

"All right. I do understand. I must borrow the armor. I'll bring it back if I don't get my head blown off." He went across to the cupboard and trundled the armor out. "There's a marvelous riding animal called Loper chewing up your garden. Take care of him until I get back." He started to don the battle armor. She put a hand to her lips, and fluttered a little, and then sighed and sagged back and so, tacitly, agreed.

The crystal displays indicated the energy sources as at top capacity, the energy banks full, the various integral weapons systems operational. Blakey picked up a nice selection of Todd's portable weapons from the cupboard and slung them about the armor; weight was no problem, the PBA capable of transporting far more weight than its own structure, the man—or woman—within it and a massive array of weaponry. The flamboyant handgun that had so startled him when he'd first seen the armor was thrust down into a holster. He knew what the different weapons would do, and their names, and their functions for, being a professional, he's asked Lashiel, who knew not only because Todd was her brother but because her position as an apporter demanded intelligence and information in line with the typical emergency she might one day face. Blakey would not, without major surgery on himself or major structural alterations of the PBA, fit into Lashiel's armor.

As he had felt before so he felt now. It felt good to be in the armor. He could hardly be said to be wearing it, rather, he was cradled, cocooned, carried within the harness as a crew would be carried within an AFV, a tank.

The outside pickups brought Lashiel's voice to him.

"Harry! You only made up to me to get the armor—"

"No, Lashiel. This emergency just blew up—it's going on right now! Look after Loper. I'll be back—if Todd's armor is as good as you say it is."

"Oh, it is, it is! That's not the point—"

"Goodbye, Lashiel. I'll be back."

And Harry Blakey in his own personal tank went trundling off across the Dimensions to charge into the last battle.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

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The City of Diamonds glittered under the sun of Irunium.

He trajected through a threshold out onto the sea of grass five miles from the city and what he saw appalled him.

The Contessa's legions, not content with merely defending the city and holding the ramparts, swarmed out across the sea of grass. They hunted the attackers. Scattered over the plain the dots of wildly running men, of over-revved trucks, showed where Yancy and Redfern had stalled, broken and run. The poor old M48, minus its turret—that lay three hundred yards off, upside down—looked as though something large and hairy had trodden squash upon it.

Bright trceries of light arched up from the fighting machines. When they hit a truck the truck exploded. As Blakey watched the ratio of men to trucks altered drastically.

How could he, a lone man even in a marvelous equipment like the PBA from Calverly, hope to stem that conquering tide?

He switched in the head-up, coupled in a weapon Lashiel had dubbed "The Vindicatorer" and sighted on one of the Contessa's alien fighting machines.

He pressed the stud on the panel on the left side of the belly of the PBA. The stud was large and soft and depressed as though in an oil bath. The orifice of the Vindicatorer set in the left side of his helmet emitted a pale straw-yellow glow. The liquid crystal displays flickered. And the alien fighting machine Ceased To Exist.

"Hum," said Blakey to himself, mightily impressed, "and that wasn't even the C.T.E. weapon!" That was located on the right side of the PBA helmet.

He decided to be methodical. He stalked forward at a good round speed, not kangaroo-leaping but striding out, and picked off the enemy tanks one by one. He tried different weapons in the armor's pack, and each one, although acting differently and producing varying effects, had the same final answer. Alien fighting machines either vanished, brewed-up, or were blown to pieces. He watched his power levels carefully, and strode on to

make a circuit of the walls, leaving a wake of destruction as he passed.

The running men out on the sea of grass halted, turned, began to believe they might yet live a little longer. Thin cheers reached Blakey through the outside pickups, which as caution dictated, he had turned right down and baffled.

The Contessa's people fought back. When a blinding bolt struck Todd's PBA, Blakey felt nothing and filters cut down the glare. The armor hardly appeared to notice. A pinkly glowing spiral of radiance hurtled toward him—and the PBA reacted. The displays flickered and energy drew off at a rate that, but for the energy sources, would have been alarming.

The pink spiral was fired from a squat, olive-green, ten-wheeled vehicle of radically different appearance from the other AFV's Blakey was so enthusiastically brewing up. He happened to be shooting one of Todd's portable weapons at the time which dispensed a blob of white light that clung to the target and devoured it, much as a cupful of water dissolves a sugar cube. The squat olive-green AFV shrugged off the blob of white voraciousness.

"Hum," said Blakey to himself. "I bet that nasty comes from Altinum!" And he gave it a dose of the Vindicatorer. The armored car shimmered, struggled to fight the death that clung to it, and then sloughed into slag.

"Tough!"

To concentrate on these particular vehicles seemed sensible, and he used the C.T.E. on them. When that ravening coal-black finger touched them they Ceased To Exist—phut.

Blakey was very conscious that there were people in the machines he destroyed. But, then—were they people? Were persons who tortured, who whipped, who chained, to be regarded as people? It was a philosophical conundrum he was not about to embroil himself in in the midst of battle.

A Safari Rover skidded over the sea of grass and Yancey leaped out, waving. He looked excited.

"It's me, Cy!" yelled Blakey. "Harry Blakey!"

"They sent a message—" Yancey was hardened to wonders among the Dimensions by now. "They'll kill off the prisoners—our people—if we don't stop the attack."

"Then I'll just have to go in and stop them."

Without another word he set off directly for the city ramparts.

The truth was, whether or not the attack was halted, the Montevarchi would kill Macklin's people. Some attempt must be made to prevent the woman from carrying out her threat.



The Safari Rover whirled up alongside, although in only moments the long leaping PBA would outdistance the vehicle.

"Alec—!" yelled Yancey.

Blakey's magnified voice cut him off.

"Here, Cy—these might help. I'll look out for Alec."

He dropped all Todd's portable weaponry, keeping only the holstered flamboyant pistol. Then he speeded up and in enormous kangaroo hops pelted for the gateway to the City of Diamonds.

That gate lofted a hundred feet under the masonry arch, bound in iron, studded, paneled in sheets of bronze. Its thickness he did not know; but common engineering sense told him it must be thick enough to afford stiffness to the leaves of the gate—say two to four feet thick. The gates were closed. No doubt there were iron or steel bars slotted across at the back.

Harry Blakey riding his one-man personal tank simply hurled himself full at the gate. The leaves parted in a smother of chips and sundered iron, with a shriek as metal tore, and he bulleted through without any appreciable check to his momentum.

From the murdering holes fire poured down. Telltales lit up to explain to him that the outside temperature was hot enough to crisp flesh and blood black. Blakey was nice and comfortable in the armor, snug. Ordinary rifle bullets were not even noticed. The open space beyond the gate had held a tank force; now the tanks were either blown up or Ceased To Be, the footsloggers came in. After a single sleeting discharge which swept away whole squads, platoons, companies, battalions of Shroths, Smefts, Honshi, Valcini, Blakey just stopped shooting at the soldiers. He was after more important game than them and, anyway, he shared a normal person's distaste for shedding blood—particularly if that blood happened to be his own.

Secure old non-risk-taking Harry Blakey began to get the hang of the armor. He might have jumped the wall. He wasn't sure just how high this PBA could leap, the lack of a tail to balance the kangaroo act was compensated for by interlocking gyros; but he doubted his own skill. Control was coming along nicely; but he'd stick with the simple evolutions for a bit. He strode on, each movement of his legs faithfully reproduced by the legs of the PBA, his own legs safety-buoyed against fracture and blood-compression by servos and the ability in really rapid running—which the jumping obviated—of retraction into the cradle. Then the PBA's legs got on with the running on their own. If you tried to run at two hundred miles an hour even using a longer stride

your legs would end up like black pudding, and your pelvis dissolve into grease.

He enjoyed the jumping. It was like bouncing along on a huge rubber ball, soft and jouncy and buoyant, and not the slightest chance of even spraining an ankle.

Fire laced ahead and green sparks blinded up from the armor. At the same time a different set of optics switched in and he could see just as clearly, green sparks or no green sparks. He let the building from which the fire came have a spot of the old Vindicatorer, and the building—what was left of it—fell into the basement.

During his time with the Norvese he'd gathered that the Valcini deity, Siegler, had rather fallen out of favor recently. Its many-pillared temple showed up and Blakey chopped the columns down like a kid breaks up sticks of rock. The pediment collapsed. He passed the Academy of Porteuring Science and left that establishment severely alone. There were poor devils in there through no will of their own, chained up. They'd all be freed after this City of Diamonds had been deloused.

Striding along and blowing up anything that looked nasty, Blakey headed across the city. "Well, Harry my boy," he said to himself. "You wanted a tank—now you have one!"

In his wake followed Yancey and Redfern with the men they had left to them. They fanned out, began the real work, doing the clearing and mopping up operations after Blakey's big grandstand show. He didn't mind. They'd get Alec and the others out. He headed for the dungeons—the correction cells—below the Montevarchi's quarters. Fenwick was there, and some of the others as well. No word had come in of Prestin or his group.

A glass-fronted restaurant harbored a group of Shroths and Valcini who shot at Blakey. He noticed that he brought the place down about their ears with some reluctance. Destruction was unpleasant, and even if you could call this wholesale mayhem and destruction necessary and not wanton, still it left a nasty taste in his mouth. He hurried on—which meant he leaped along the street and hurdled the last buildings as he came out to the entrance to the Montevarchi's inner buildings. Here the fighting would have been protracted for anyone not wearing PBA.

The armor's olfactory sensors were switched off—which was just as well.

He barrelled straight through and into a vast hall and up a curving crystal stairway. This armor of Todd's was a real marvel. And, it was only milishy armor! It wasn't even regular Line equipment, let alone the fantastic kit the Calverly Rangers wore.



A blast of pink spiral energy clocked up the megawatts on his telltales and he swiveled and let fly with the first weapon his finger touched. Orange radiance spurted and the whole upper balcony section crisped and burst into flame. He vaulted the last section of the crystal stairway, crashed through the flames and roared on into the first of a long sequence of halls.

"That," he told himself severely, "was not clever."

The orange weapon—the Volcano Express, Lashiel called it—had not been a good choice. Now the palace was on fire. Smoke rose thickly as the flames bit and spread. He rushed on.

His route down to the correction cells lay via the elevator shafts. He did not intend to bother with a cage.

Somewhere along the confusing maze of halls he lost himself. He could not locate the bank of elevators. His progress must be clearly apparent to anyone monitoring the palace by the TV cameras mounted above every architrave. When he racketed out of a maze of small rooms crammed with secretarial equipment into what was clearly a conference room, he understood very clearly that his progress had been monitored.

She sat in a golden chair of carved and convoluted grandeur splayed on dragon-feet. The chamber was cruelly illuminated by overhead fluorescents, its narrow windows gibbeted by black and gold walls hung in looped drapes of deep crimson. The table so shone with polish as to resemble a searchlight. Blakey blinked.

He halted, aware of the PBA about him. She stared at him down the long shining length of the table, flanked by plain wooden chairs, and he was conscious of the awful power under his hands and of his conviction that he couldn't blast this woman into Eternity, no matter how evil she might be.

"I do not know who you are," she said in her hard voice as diamond bright as the stones glittering from her turquoise clothes. "But you have set my palace alight and have destroyed many of my engines of war." Her hand appeared over the edge of the table clasping the fancy pistol Blakey had seen thrust down the half-holster. "For that I shall have to kill you now."

At her side Curt Moben chingled his chain, and was still.

A glitter diamond-bright appeared at the muzzle of her pistol. Blakey was picked up and hurled a dozen staggering steps backwards. The telltales went crazy. The stink of burning insulation filled his nostrils. The PBA lurched sideways. He felt as though she'd kicked him in the guts.

He struggled to see through the tears in his eyes. She was taking a fresh aim. He realized her weapon could defeat the armor—could kill him. In great haste he punched down on the

nearest stud in the firing panel. The Vindicatorer fired. He watched, fascinated. A rosy glow spread about her and Moben; energy deflected into the shape of a globe surrounded her. She took no notice. The pistol lifted. Desperately Blakey fired the C.T.E. and the sparkles of fire merely limned her like red ink thrown at a goldfish bowl.

Her pistol emitted its diamond glitter and the PBA crashed head over heels backwards, smashing against the wall. Plaster and marble fell in shards about him. He tried to swallow, and his throat hurt, and he could see very little. He saw her stand up and drag Moben along, walking around the table and toward him with the pistol pointed. Her next shot would do for him. He was convinced of that.

His PBA-mounted weapons were useless. There remained only the hand-weapon that had first alarmed him back there in Lashiel's apartment in Calverly. He hauled it out of the holster. It was flamboyant and chunky, a thing of angles and bright faces and complex wiring, its muzzle needle-thin and enclosed in a baffled barrel.

Lashiel had given him its technical descriptive name, and then she'd said: "A kind of Misericorde. But everyone calls that pistol a Stitcher." He pressed the trigger.

His aim was off. The twenty distinct and separate pulses of ruby light spat from the needle-muzzle, struck the Contessa on her right shoulder. The pistol stitched. Her arm fell off.

Weakly, Blakey sagged back and for a hysterical moment he thought: "You should call this pistol the Perforator. Please tear off along the perforations."

The Montevarchi did not scream. She did not fall. For a heartbeat she looked at her arm on the floor. The fist still held her own pistol. No blood spouted from arm or shoulder, the cauterizing heat of the discharge sealed blood-vessel endings. She jerked the chain and, hauling Moben along, ran fleetly back to her great golden dragon-chair. She did not bother to turn around or to sit down; she just leaped into the chair and as it disappeared into the floor Moben tumbled down after. Blakey was alone in the conference chamber.

He wasn't too sure how long after that he managed to extricate himself from Todd's armor. When he stood up he felt as though a sadistic masseur had put each separate muscle and nerve through a bath of hot sulphuric. He groaned. The armor lay untidily on the floor. He shook himself, and groaned again, and tried to imagine himself as being in one piece. If he came



out of this alive he'd have to try to tinker with the armor and repair it enough to give back to Lashiel. She'd be mad clear through.

The armor was dead, fused solid. He limped over to the hole where the golden dragon-chair had vanished. He could see it below him, with a pallid white light glancing off the gold at one side. The other side was bathed in an ominous red glow. Clutching the Stitcher he let himself down, balanced on the chair and then jumped to a stone floor. He went along a corridor toward the red light and carefully checking the door, pushed it open. He could hear nothing save the tinkling of water. He stood in an apartment of great beauty, if of limited taste. Looking only for a way to get down and out into the correction cells below, he went on. The next room stung his eyes with white light, and an iodine-tasting smell on the air spoke of sterile laboratories. He stared.

The equipment set on plinths and podia he did not even attempt to understand. The walls fascinated him. Covering the entire areas of three walls, crystal-fronted cabinets stood in lines and ranks, row after row, stretching from floor to ceiling. The light reflected back like the blast of an alien weapon from some of the cabinets. Into others Blakey could see with distinct clarity. From the contents of those he could see he judged that every single crystal-front cabinet held the naked body of a woman.

An ingenious arrangement of counter-balanced and powered tubes afforded the operator at the central table the facility of bringing instantly to the reach of her fingers any desired body. A twin-hooded black vinyl couch bathed in lambent lemon-tinted light attracted his whole attention. On the left-hand couch the Contessa lay on her back. Her mouth gapped open as though she snored. The dypo-chain control was gone from her left wrist and there was no sign of Curt Moben. The blackness of the oval above her armpit glistened like vulcanized rubber.

Slowly, Blakey walked forward. He looked down on the Montevarchi. The end of the tubular arrangement above the right-hand couch intrigued him. Handling devices like magnetic clamps swung open. A groove appeared between his eyes.

The woman's hair in disarray was dark; but it was not the sheening dark threaded with gems he associated with the Contessa. The gems did not flash from that dull hair. He looked at her and felt pity.

Inexperienced—yes, Harry Blakey knew he was still wet behind the ears, a simpleton among the Dimensions. But he was

not an oaf. He could read spoor. He could observe and deduce. He began to walk around the walls studying the cabinets. The women were uniformly beautiful. Two of the walls held girls of many different appearances. The third wall contained a solid mass of women who looked very much like the Montevarchi. Yes, there were small differences noticeable when like could be matched alongside like. But if you saw any one of those girls dressed as the Montevarchi dressed, flashing the fire of her personality, you would take her for the Contessa. Undoubtedly.

This, then, explained a great deal. Solomon's remark about the Contessa's ability to travel the Dimensions, Solomon's age as against hers and Macklin's, and the hatred she had expressed for the Wizards of Senchuria and their life-prolonging techniques, could all be explained in the context of these stored bodies.

Far from being half over, as a logical person might have believed, the struggle still raged.

He took a fresh grip on the Stitcher and walked through into the next room. Here wardrobes had been torn open, clothes scattered about at random, lacy, filmy things gentle enough to lie against a woman's skin. Racks of clothes to swamp a department store contained hanger after hanger of white dresses—long sheer white dresses, some with a ruffle of feathers at their hems. He did not have to be told that there were sizes and fittings to suit any variation in any body selected. Also an overturned wardrobe disgorged long raincoats and floppy black hats. These meant nothing to Blakey at the time.

Thoroughly lost, he ran on, passing through an armory in which he paused only long enough to look at two empty racks flanking a filled rack. This rack contained an example of the fancy gun the Contessa wore in her half-holster. Hard to come by, then, among the parallels. . . .

He followed stairs and unmoving escalators downwards. He sprinted through a glass-walled corridor from which enormous heat broke, shattering the glass and gouting tongues of flame. The palace burned around him. He delved lower, occasionally seeing fleeing figures, and when he saw not one wore a white dress and dragged a man at the end of a chain, he ignored them. He dived below the flame level as smoke belched high from collapsing walls, and clattered down stone steps. Here the lights glowed dimly.

He could do with a good long drink around now, that was for sure. He almost stumbled over the tumbled body of a man in a corridor, and then saw another and yet more ahead. Some were



Smefs and Shroths, some were *Homo sapiens*, but by far the majority were Honshi. They had not been shot. Blades had despatched them all.

The clangor and rasp of fighting ahead drew him on.

In the erratic orange radiance of a natural cavern that smelled of old socks three Honshi jumped him. They dropped from a ledge above his head and by the time the first "Hoshoo!" hit him, they'd thrown him down on his back, and a sword point pricked his throat.

"Valcini!" The Honshi gobbled his glee, his froglike face alive with venom. "You will die slowly—"

"Get on with it, do, Banded Kite," shouted one of the others. "We have to—"

"We have to take our revenge, Dog Who Sings!"

"Hey!" hollered Harry Blakey. "I'm no Valcini! I'm one of you guys—here, *look!*"

He fumbled his pants down and hauled up his shirt and twisted. Three goggle-eyed faces solemnly inspected the tiny triangular scar above his hip.

"I'm a Hoshen Honshi!"

They were dumbfounded; but Blakey, gabbling and feeling the sweat running down his back, convinced them. "Where's Bright Sword?"

A short time after that Bright Sword, looking like a devil leaping up through a trapdoor, appeared and wrung his hand.

"Harry Blakey! Now all praise to Manelpar!"

The situation was obvious enough; but Blakey was concerned over the fate of Fenwick and Prestin and the others. The Honshi had, as Blakey feared, been abused by the Contessa and the Valcini and, their status reduced because of the presence of Shroths and Smefs, had been put to work in the mines. The Hideki Honshi for all their arrogance trembled on the brink of relegation. Seizing the chance to break out, Bright Sword and his people were cleansing the warrens. He knew the complex. Half-naked, grimed, gripping weapons, and without their tall spiked helmets, they padded on.

"Hoshoo! hissed the Honshi, Hoshoo!

This is your moment true,  
Hoshoo, my brave, Hoshoo,  
Hold still while I pubick you!"

Bright Sword apologized for the absence of Blakey's munificent present. As he said, with some interesting anatomical

descriptives, the Valcini would not allow a mere Honshi slave to own a gun. "The Erinelds who used to be their best miners have left. We worked hard, Harry Blakey."

As for the correction cells, he indicated that they were not attractive locations. The way in which he took Blakey's abrupt reappearance in his life so matter-of-factly, besides amusing Blakey, also shed light on the Honshi philosophy.

They reached a gloomy area and despatched a group of Hideki Honshi who should have known better than to try to stop a party of Hoshen Honshi. Then they could throw open the bars.

Dan Fenwick crawled out, blinking, and Alec Macdonald, and other people and Blakey had to let them adjust to their changed circumstances. "And Dave's in Irunium? In the City of Diamonds?" Alec sounded incredulous. Then he braced up. "If he is, he'll be trying to settle accounts with the Montevarchi!"

Filling them in as best he could with what had been going on, Blakey felt at a loss. He knew what he *ought* to be thinking of doing; it aroused absolutely no enthusiasm in him whatsoever.

Of course the woman was evil. She abducted slaves and beautiful women from the worlds of the Dimensions, she tortured and killed. That must make her evil, surely? Macdonald was weak after his ordeal; but as they made their way through the underground complex, Blakey, supporting Alec, asked the questions.

"Dave? And the Contessa?" Alec leaned heavily on Blakey's shoulder. He had adjusted to the idea of Honshi actually helping; things had changed in Irunium. "She has this latent capacity. She is not a porteur; but she can very often sense in some eerie way if a person is. She came from some Dimension of which she never spoke, and met Dave—you should have seen him when he was young!—and she mesmerized him. She does look like she is, you know. But it couldn't last—it was fire and steel."

"And Mike Macklin?"

Macdonald puffed up the last flight of stairs to bring them out into a burned area of fallen columns and cracked pavings, and the sun shining between ash-crusted rafters.

"Mike? Oh, no, he wasn't their son. When the Montevarchi took off, Dave married again. We have no proof, but we think it sure, that the Contessa had Mike's mother murdered. We don't talk of that to Dave—"

"Quite."

Fenwick said: "They must have put the attack forward for it still to be daylight."



Blakey hadn't thought about that; but it must be true. He'd imagined he had had until nightfall; he'd been wrong. That gave him a turn to contemplate any holdup among the parallels. Then Macdonald took a tremendous sniff of the air and expanded his chest. He smiled and pointed off down the street where buildings burned.

"Fresh air! And there's Bod and Fezius and Offa and a whole crowd of them."

"They backtracked and came in the other way."

"Sarah's as good a porteur as that monkey Soloman—"

Blakey cut him off. "Soloman has broken with the Contessa now, Alec. He's on our side."

That took explanations, and then the two groups joined forces. Yancey and Redfern joined. The streets of the City of Diamonds erupted with the slaves rioting. No doubt some Valcini managed to creep away. Possibly a few Smefs scuttled off, and a few Shroths vanished away to safety. But not many, not many . . .

Blakey spotted Chivers and Carol, and he went over. He smiled when he saw Chivers had possessed himself of one of Todd's portable weapons. Then he killed the smile; for it was probable that the man who'd originally taken it was now dead. Carol yelped: "Harry!"

Poulter took his Uzi under Blakey's nose.

"When a better weapon comes along, then they give me the Uzi! Typical!"

"Aw, wrap it up, Poulter!"

Olan laughed and patted his Thompson SMG. "As long as I have the son of Thomas you may keep your pretty sparklers."

"That," Blakey told Chivers, "is a CPR, and I have to return it. So take care of it—"

"CPR?"

"Charged Particle Rifle." Blakey looked around, and saw a stir in the crowd. Everyone began to run off. Before he followed he said: "Just be lucky you didn't get the dreaded MLL, Chivers."

"MLL? What the hell's that, man?"

"Why," said mean old Harry Blakey. "I'd have thought everyone knew that. That's the Armstrong Muzzle Loading Laser."

"Dave'd cook you and eat you for breakfast for that one, he's gannet enough," howled Chivers, and then they were all pelting along the street with the mob and a single word rose above the hubbub.

"Contessa! Contessa!"

The city had fallen. The City of Diamonds no longer was

ruled by the Diamond Contessa. And, now, the mobs so newly won to freedom had cornered the Montevarchi.

Blakey pounded along in a confusing muddle of people. He found himself running next to a Honshi still wearing armor, his trophies bold fleeing from his helmet spike, his bronze leaf-bladed sword raised bloodily in the air as he screamed abuse and hurled on. Hideki Honshi. Changed sides, fighting for the right and the good against the evil and the wicked? Blakey wished he was not so plagued with doubts. He'd explained that his Stitcher could penetrate through the Contessa's globe of protective force and perforate to destruction. Now he wished he'd kept his mouth shut. He panted on with the mob, jostling to get to the front.

The sun was almost gone, and streaming ruddy light threw shadows like fingers of blood across the shattered wall against which the mobs directed their hatred and vengeance.

She was there.

Shoved and jostled, Blakey wormed his way forward. He saw Prestin talking to a tall and upright fellow clad in green hunting kit and guessed him to be one of the locals, a Dargan, and probably Todor Dalreay of Dargai. Everyone with a grudge against the Montevarchi gathered for the kill.

The blood red light drenched the wall and the woman. Curt Moben on hands and knees at the end of his chain dragged his head up to stare with frightened and appalled eyes at the mobs. The Montevarchi's white dress, rose and rusty in that light, the massed diamonds in her hair, her whole pose of regality, held fascination, undeniable fascination. A scattering of bodies on the fringes of the mobs showed where she had killed; now her fancy pistol was empty. She was trying to reach a portal farther along, one of two set against the wall, and Moben had fallen and was sobbing and half out of his mind, hampering her, dragging her back. She pressed the dypo-control stud and Moben writhed.

What she screamed over the noise of the mobs Blakey could not hear. Moben struggled to get on and she yanked viciously at the chain so that the neck hoop bit. He staggered after her.

"She's going to reach that portal and escape," said Sarah, clinging to Fezius. Offa's great axe slanted over his shoulder. Prestin and Dalreay stood looking on.

"We can't stop her." Prestin held a rifle; that was as useless as a pea shooter against the Contessa's globe of protective force. "She has a powerful model of a Convulsive Fan." The Convulsive Fan emitted a fan-shaped field of force over a short distance that interfered with a person's neural currents. Too much expo-



sure could permanently scramble the brain. "A Confan can strike you stupid at twenty paces," said Prestin. "No, we can't stop her—"

"Can we not seize hold of her?" demanded Fezius. "There are enough of us."

"Someone tried," said Offa in his megaphone voice. The heap of bodies lay a short distance away. The Contessa dragging Moben moved on.

A sense of this scene as an apocalypse took Blakey. He could imagine a person describing the Contessa against the wall and ringed by a frenzied mob as a stag at bay torn by hounds, or a mill girl jeered at by her work-mates for getting pregnant, or a mighty battleship destroyed by torpedoes from small craft. She was the singular evil feared and attacked by the multitude. Yet, over all these possible images, the one that most struck Blakey as apt was that of the schoolchildren tormenting one of their number because she was different from them. A gang of schoolkids bullying the outsider—that was the image he saw here.

He shook himself. He had no need to feel sorry for the Montevarchi. Deliberately, he sensed out to the casement she was attempting to reach, and caught the impression of coolness and shade after the heat of the day, of gentleness and welcome. The other portal which she would have to pass struck at Blakey with a desolate chill, a freezing sense of icy wastes and loneliness.

Sarah stamped her foot. "Bob!" she said to Prestin. "If she reaches that portal everything will be for nothing!"

"I know. But all these mobs, all these weapons—nothing can touch her."

Carol said: "Oh, yes. Oh indeed yes. Something can touch the bitch."

She snatched the Stitcher from Blakey's belt, lifted it, fired.

She struck Moben through the Contessa's globe of protective force. Instead of the weapon's discharge spreading like maggots over a skull the twenty ruby blasts sheered through. Moben flung up his arms and fell. Carol had swept his feet away from his ankles. She screamed incoherently and lifted the Stitcher again.

The Contessa looked across, looked to where those blasts of ruby death had spurted, and in their very existence spelling her destruction. She saw the people there. She saw David Macklin, very tired, his face sagging, a tremble in his limbs. What, Blakey wondered, was each one thinking now?

The Montevarchi's pale face with those vivid violet eyes, that sweetly-red rosebud mouth, scorched into Blakey's consciousness.

What he was going to do was perfectly plain. It had been quite obvious from the very first. Just that he hadn't been able to allow it to enter his own awareness, to live with it, now and for the years to come.

Carol took deliberate aim and no one moved to stop her.

Harry Blakey used his special thought, trajected the Contessa and her porteur through into that world of eternal ice and cold.

The Diamond Contessa vanished.

Turning away, half-hunched, Blakey tried to ignore the mass reaction of the mobs, the screams and curses, the maniacal rush forward in a last disbelieving stampede to exact revenge. Shouts of "Witch!" and "Devil's spawn" and "Magic" left him unmoved; no artificial magic was involved here, only the natural magic of the Multidimensional Universe whose wonders science sought to understand. Through the power of a trajecter's skill the Diamond Contessa was gone from this Dimension.

"There's no Portal there!" said Sarah, a hand to head, bewildered. "What . . .?" She started to walk forward. Fezius took her arm, Offa close at his side.

"It's over, Sarah."

Blakey hoped the banal words were true.

Sarah could not sense that peel-thin casement and he wondered if Solomon could. Of one fact he remained absolutely convinced—Jim would have sensed the threshold.

Perhaps, if Sarah reached close enough, she would sense the Portal onto the iceworld. By then, it wouldn't matter.

"Over," said Bob Prestin. He looked at David Macklin and Alec Macdonald. "It's finished, at last."

Macklin could not speak, supported by Alec.

Now the City of Diamonds could be cleaned up, the freed slaves returned to their home Dimensions, the world return to a normalcy it had not known for years. Blakey wanted none of that. He had done what he had done and for good or ill he did not know. But he was glad he had done it.

A gamble was involved. The Contessa Perdita Francesca Cammachia di Montevarchi would relish that. She was a woman who gambled, who met challenges, who dominated. Let her accept this gamble and dominate her way out of her deathly predicament.

With Moben unable to walk, Blakey did not think the Diamond Contessa had long to live amid the ice. He hoped she would just lie down and sleep and never wake up.

The noise in the City of Diamonds racketed on, the flames bit



and the torches flared, and the Honshi Hymn rose twining with the spark-shot smoke.

As for Harry Blakey. . . .

He felt he could outshine that oaf Lonki and win back Duveen. And Carol—Chivers was a good egg, so good luck to them both. He'd repair Todd's armor and trundle back to Lashiel. That would be nice.

Pleasance? Home? Perhaps, later on. His home now lay among the Dimensions.

He rather fancied he'd traject into Loughrode and talk for hours on end to Soloman and in between times chase the girls. A look sparked into his eyes as he thought of the girls of Loughrode. He would talk to Soloman and find out all he could about Jim, and then. . . .

Yes, that was what he would do.



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