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WHO HOLDS THIS NEBULA CAN
SWAY THE GALACTIC IMPERIUM

THE MAN WITHOUT A PLANET

LIN CARTER



First Book Publication

MISSION TO AN EMBATTLED NEBULA

When Raul Linton, Commander of Space Navy, returned from the bloody Third Imperial War in 3468 A.D., he was a disillusioned hero. Defiantly stripping off his medals and ribands, Raul roamed the Inner Cluster of stars in search of some meaning.

But close on his trail was the Imperium Government spy, Pertinax—known as the Snake—who was out to prove Raul a traitor.

And then Raul Linton met up with Sharl of the Yellow-Eyes, who proposed a daring scheme of intergalactic action which would at once restore the S'arl's exiled Queen Innald to her rightful place on the throne of Valadon—but to join this mission, Raul would have to fight openly against his own government. . . .

Another swashbuckling adventure by the author of *Thongor of Lemuria* and *The Star Magicians*.

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“The Third Imperial War, which began in the Sixteenth year of the Empery of Uxorian and came to a final, triumphal conclusion in the Fifth year of the Empery of Arban Fourth of that Name, was, although a savage, bloody and wasteful conflict, without any particular or lasting result—save for a temporary suppression of the economies of the Mica stars—and bore no influence of any major importance on the stream of future events.”

—HERIAN, Lord Altair: *The Imperium under the House of Tridian*, reel II. Published by Bradis Recordings, Meridian, in Y.E. 1131.

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by

LIN CARTER

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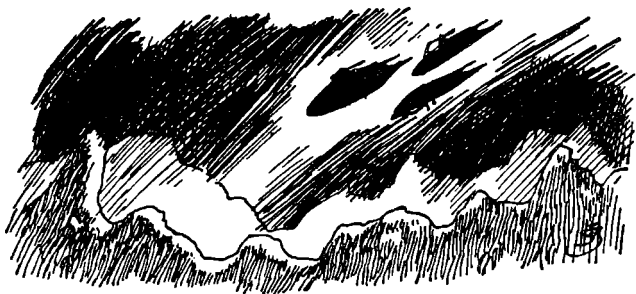
This book is dedicated to

DAVE VAN ARNAM,
in memory of Toad Hall days,
S.L.I.T.N. and A.T.S.I.S.,
Haslam's, *Spectrum*,
and sundry other matters.

TIME TO LIVE

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ONE

RAUL LINTON WENT INTO THE WAR a boy, young, untried, full of patriotism, ambition and ideals, thrilled by bugles and banners and the heart-stirring sight of great ships lifting against the dark their blazing torches. He came out in '68 a man, seasoned and tempered by twelve endless years of war, and miraculously unscarred.

Unscarred, that is, only in a sense. Somehow his strapping six foot four inches of lean-muscle body has escaped maiming in the bloodiest, most savage war ever fought between the stars. But his mind, or soul or character—call it what you will—was seared deeply and forever. Like most other men in the Naval vanguard, exposed to the assault and ravishment of planets, he came to pray for death. Anything to put an end to the madness and ferocity of what historians would neatly label the Third Imperial War—and to that consummation he labored valiantly and single-mindedly. But instead of being fried with his ship, caught in a barrage of planet-mounted lasers, or blasted to incandescent gas by a computer-guided mobile bomb, he went on from year to year unscathed, and earned a reputation for cool-mindedness and courage that embarrassed him.

Instead of the clean, swift death and long, quiet, dream-

less sleep he hungered for, he won medals and promotions. He went from Flight Lieutenant to Wing-Commander in three years. He would have ended as Fleet Admiral, piloting a desk at Naval Headquarters on Trelion V, except that he refused to play the game as others did. Something about him, something in his cold, hard eyes and scornful, mocking laugh, gave him the reputation of a maverick and made them distrust him even while they praised (and rewarded) what they miscalled his "bravery."

Most boys grow up slowly, sheltered in home surroundings, then in a richly-traditioned university, then in the patterned life of career and marriage. Raul Linton grew up on the bridge of scoutship, forward of the assault line, when they "scorched" Darogir. Thirteen nitrogen bombs light quite a bonfire—bright enough and hot enough to do more than just boil off a planet's oceans and turn the crust into one huge black scab of radioactive slag. They can also burn through the crýsalis of conventions, traditions, courtesy, religion, prejudice and second-hand ideas boys are taught to accept as *civilization*.

Several hundred thousand men and women and children died on Darogir in a trifle over eight minutes. And all because the fleet had orders to rendezvous near the Center-worlds in two days, and had no time to lay siege to a recalcitrant planet—nor even, it seems, to give it a chance to surrender.

Orders are orders.

And rebels have no right to exist, anyway.

So Raul Linton, there on the bridge, watching an entire planet in flames, decided if this was *civilization*—it was not for him.

But he was no traitor. He went on fighting, but all he hoped for was a swift, clean end—a death "with honor" as Naval men say. Instead he won *honors*, but no death. What career-men dream of—swift promotions to flag rank—came his way without being sought. He was well on his way to what they call "a brilliant career"—and then they took another look at this long, lean, cold-eyed Herculian—and didn't like what they saw.

Raul had a way of smiling silently at the *absurd*. And he

found the Navy absurd, with its trimmings of bannerets, titles, ranks, courtesies, traditions, all like the sugary frosting on a cake, laid over the raw and ugly realities of cold-blooded "expedient" mass-murder.

And he found the war absurd—tragically so. All the Mica Stars wanted was self-rule. They were hardly the blood-lusting fiends, dripping with gore and slaving for conquest, that Imperial propagandists made them out to be. Of course, they were unwise not to be *humans* . . . although the Vruu Kophe didn't have much to say in the matter, when they evolved from intelligence-prone arachnidae. But "spiders" they were, in a sense, and lots of humans find spiders repulsive. Squirmy things to be stepped on—or "scorched" with a barrage of nitrogen bombs. What matter if the "spiders" have a culture sixteen thousand years old. Schools of incredibly beautiful bardic verse. Musical compositions as complex as to make a Bach fugue look like a nursery rhyme. Tapestries so subtle as to employ thirty-two distinct colors, visible to Vruu Kophe sight, that is, not to "human" eyes.

So Raul found the war absurd.

Perhaps he even found the Imperium absurd.

He didn't say.

But he offended people—the wrong people. So, instead of ending out the war behind a desk on Trelion V, with four platinum crowns on his shoulder-strap and perhaps a Knighthood or even a Baronetcy to his name, he stayed on the front, still fighting. They didn't know this was what he really wanted; perhaps they wouldn't have let him stay on fighting if they had.

And when the Mica Stars were finally crushed and the Third Imperial War came to its eventual, heroic, triumphal end in the fifth year of the Empery of His Magnificence, Arban Fourth, otherwise known as Year 407 of the Imperium, or 3468 A.D., if you go by the old-style dating, Raul Linton found himself at loose ends—and somehow still alive.

He resigned his commission at Petraphar, although they promised him a Fleet-Commandership if he would serve on during the Occupation of the Mica Cluster. But he, who had endured the unendurable and had earned a chest-full of ribands and decorations, including the Order of Arion Imper-

ator (second class), and the Gold Star of Valiance twice, had no stomach for what he knew would be happening during an occupation. He had had a taste of it during the temporary occupation of Nordonn III during his third campaign—and had earned a court martial when he broke up a gang of happy, drunken noncoms, busily engaged in burning Vruu Kophe women alive with flame pistols while “regulating” a native border village.

So, at 31, he found himself drifting, having politely—for him—declined the honor of reenlistment at next-higher-rank. Perhaps the powers-that-be were relieved, after all. They didn’t press him too hard, and were glad to give him a Naval homecoming pass good for six months on any official ship.

But he wasn’t quite ready for home yet.

He drifted.

From Petraphar he bought passage to Narlion IV—*bought* passage, please note, having torn up his six months’ travel pass at the de-enlistment station. His friends thought he was mad not to take advantage of free Naval transport, but he was done with the Space Navy forever. And besides, he had twelve years’ untouched pay banked and secure, in good platinum Imperials.

Narlion IV was a pleasure-world. Endless, continent-long beaches of snowy sand, fringed with pseudo-palms like broken emeralds, laced with glistening foam and washed with clear green waters on which you could boat or aquaski or just laze about on a floater in the warmly golden sunshine, bathing and baking out twelve years’ accumulation of bone-deep exhaustion.

Not to mention the casinos and the thousand games of “chance” so-called, that beckoned to the fat-pursed tourist . . . and women. The Narlionid women are small and sleek with almond eyes and flesh like ripe gold fruit. Beachwear in these days of highly advanced Galactic culture dwindled to a miniscule garment of strictly utilitarian purpose: a pouch to hold locker and hotel keys, generally strapped to the left wrist. Hence, everywhere Raul looked along the white beaches he was confronted with nude breasts and thighs and bottoms. The Narlionid are a friendly, hospitable race, and their wo-

men would have been happy to offer the ultimate in hospitality to a raw-boned, red-headed Herculan of his manly inches—but Raul Linton felt uncomfortable with women and rarely enjoyed their company.

This is not to say he was either an invert or a celibate, but just old-fashioned. Sleek, soft women did not stir him. He came of rugged border stock. His home-world, Barnassa, had been settled two centuries ago in the high days of Mardax and Ralric Second. His forebears had been hardy, pioneering folk, men and women both capable of handling a land-breaker, or dozer-derrick combo, or a laser rifle when the Spring migration came and iophodons swarmed over farmland and field. Women with soft hands and softer heads interested him little: his ideal was a woman who could work, and fight, right alongside her man if need there was.

He despised the merely ornamental woman.

And he drifted on.

After a few months baking mahogany-brown in Narlion's golden sun, he bought passage on a freight packet Rimwards to Argain in the Web Stars. Here the great Galadrus Imperator University reared its white roofs under a blue-white A5 spectrum star, similar to Altair. Here he had once dreamed of an education, among the cool, cloistered walks and gardens, absorbing knowledge in the university the Emperor Galadrus—one of Raul's favorite historical figures—had founded in the third year of his Empery.

Here, for one hundred sixty years or so, the statesmen, scientists, poets and legalists of the Imperium had come to learn . . . and had gone forth to do great things among the stars.

Raul had once hoped to be one of them.

But how could he settle, now, into the quiet grooves of a scholastic life, with blood and flame and thunder within him, marking him?

He drifted on.

For two years he occupied himself with drifting. And at last he came home.

The Hercules Cluster was, in these days, one of the borders of Imperial authority. Beyond it lay the Outworlds, law-

less and troublesome, fomenting treason, stirring with war and constant rumors of war that occasionally boiled over into Imperial territory. It was wild and savage country in this year of 3470, uncomfortable to many, lacking in the luxuries and amenities of "civilization"—a virtual exile to government officials. To Raul, it was home.

The Cluster was considered a full Province, and a Provincial Viceroy, Lord Cheviot, ruled at the Provincial Capital, a planet called Omphale, or Arthenis II. Raul's homeworld, Barnassa, lay only five light-years Rim-wards. So he stopped at Omphale. And here, for several months he stayed.

And for several months he was treated with a certain cool cordiality. Obviously something of his Naval reputation had preceded him, and doubtless exaggerated in the telling and re-telling. No doubt they thought of him as a malcontent, a rebel against authority, a potential troublemaker. But, still, there was some cordiality expressed. It may be that they expected him to apply for a government job. The Lintons had something of a hereditary tradition in Provincial Administration, stretching back two centuries to Colonial days, when an Admiral Marus Linton had been First Colonial Administrator of Barnassa during the great Empery of Mardax, and, after him, of Ralric Second. For something like six or seven generations a Linton had always been in the government, as Regional Coordinator, System Administrator, or Planetary Commissioner. The name was in good odor hereabouts, regardless of how it may or may not have smelled back on Trelion V.

However, he asked for nothing. He looked up old friends and investigated the management of his estate, or of what little was left of it. Family fortunes had been on the decline ever since the days of Arban Second; his father had died when Raul was little and Migal his older brother had inherited most of the property and holdings, and promptly mortgaged them, wasted the money, and died a pauper and a drunkard. There was little enough for Raul to investigate: a few score acres on Barnassa given over to silkweed, a few manufactories on the outskirts of the city. He passed the time aimlessly, unambitiously.

One of the old friends he looked up was Gundorm Varl,

a huge, bluff, thunderous bull of a man who had served Raul's father for twenty years in various capacities, personal friend, servant, confidant, agent, general factotum and jack-of-all-trades. Gundorm had been "too old" to go to war when his young master answered the clarion call of Empire. But the two were lifelong friends from the day when young Raul, a boy of eight, had used his pitifully small belt-knife to cut Gundorm Varl free of a kraken-vine, patiently sawing through the lashing, thorn-edged and leather-tough tendrils, ignoring the fact that his tunic and a large portion of his back were being slashed to ribbons by the whipping fronds. He saved the older man's life, at the expense of spending the next five months in a hospital bed. He had made a friend for life, though, and that was worth any expense.

They had an epic reunion. Scarcely a bar or winehouse in Omphale City that they did not wreck. Enough fiery green *chark* was consumed to float the Viceregal yacht. And then new whispers, slanders and suspicions got started.

Gundorm Varl had been against the war from the very beginning. Fine sort of war that would carry off his young master—scarce more than a boy—and leave *him* behind, unwanted, "too old." He had never ceased to pooh-pooh Glorious Imperial Service, Heroic Naval Tradition, Our Brave Boys In Imperial Scarlet, and all the other worn-out rags and tags of verbal garbage dumped freely about in wartime. He was "*a suspicious person of unwholesome political opinions. A consorter with known malcontents. A derider and mocker of Imperial Naval Policy. . .*"

Gundorm and Raul came under semi-official scrutiny. It became known that they were seen in all sorts of Unsuitable Company—border farmers, wandering bards, Cluster natives, and even members of various fringe religio-political reform groups only an inch or two away from *revolutionary*.

Official eyebrows were lifted. A Linton was expected to consort with his own kind, the Old Colonial Landed Aristocracy. Yes, even a Linton whose holdings had been wasted and sold by a drunkard elder brother. Officially, it was not understood why a Linton with a brilliant Naval history behind him should visit *native places*—discussing religion with a naked, filthy Shaman of the Iote Brotherhood,

guesting with an Upland chieftain. This was ultra-conservatism, needlessly suspicious, even downright *nosy*, but the Galactic Empire had just spent twelve weary years of bloody, savage, unnecessary war, and government agents were super-sensitive about such matters, especially here on the touchy, troublesome borders of the Imperium.

Of course a Linton could not for one moment be suspected of *revolutionary sentiments*: but a dozen-year interstellar blood-bath can bring about even stranger things than an Old Family Herculan turned seditious rebel.

Raul Linton was aware of these whispers, and at first they amused him. Far from being a rebel, he was heartsick with all politics of every hue. He simply found hardy native company more pleasurable and less artificial and hypocritical than the Landed Gentry, their provincialism of thought and outlook, their mindless adherence to tradition, custom and third-hand ideas.

He still had that chill, mocking smile, and those hard, clear, measuring eyes. And now, impatient of Public Opinion and Official Eyebrows Being Lifted, he began almost to flaunt his unbelief in "accepted" modes of speech, behavior and thought. Officialdom held its hand, and continued scrutiny, pondering his strange, unwholesome actions.

He *did* keep strange company. Of course, young Linton had always been a great friend of the Herculan natives—those dusky but humanoid, deliberately backwards and untechnological inhabitants whose rude culture seemed hardly to have been disturbed or even ruffled by the coming of Imperial Expeditionary Forces two hundred years ago. As a boy he had striven and rode and hunted with the younger sons of native princelings on Barnassa and Omphale; as a man, however, such conduct was unbecoming to a former officer of flag rank in His Magnificence's Imperial Space Navy.

Ubiquitous government spies, ever sensitive to reflect the currents and eddies of Official thought, wasted no time once it was seen that Linton was mixing with decidedly unwholesome company. Simply because he and Gundorm Varl frequented native winehouses of this or that political persuasion, he became reported through devious bypaths as a secret member of almost each and every one of the Cluster's

ten thousand and one different secret (and seditious) political cults and religiously revolutionary societies. Of course, it was too much for even the low mentality of a Provincial Administrator, to swallow his simultaneous adherence to thirty-six totally different and furiously partisan political persuasions: but they did begin to read his mail and monitor his communicator. His luggage, even, was searched while he was out of his public-house on an all-night binge with Gundorm Varl and a few old school friends of his boyhood. No evidence of an incriminatory nature was discovered (of course), but it was noticed—and noted—that he had disposed of (probably sacriligiously *sold*) his ribands and medals and all the Imperial honors he had won during Naval service. Official jaws tightened at this information.

Then the crowning discovery.

He had been seen by a government spy in the company of Sharl the Yellow-Eyed, a known major agent for the exiled and rebellious Kahani of Valadon, who was herself known to be intriguing with the most powerful and treacherous of all petty monarchs among the Outworlds beyond the Imperial border, the Arthon of Pelaire.

Steps *must* be taken.

Thus, and without further delay, Raul Linton, late of the Imperial Naval Service but now of no visible means of support and known to be mixing with dubious company, was Sent For by the Border Administrator.

In the ancient tradition of governments, they had done exactly the wrong thing. The worst possible thing. And, although hardly anyone in the Hercules Cluster could have been expected to know it, at this early juncture, the history of a thousand stars was forever changed because of this act.

TWO

SO RAUL WENT TO SEE the Border Administrator, Dykon Mather, who sat him down and proffered cigarels and Vegan brandy, and chatted with him in a friendly but vague manner before suddenly unleashing a barrage of pointed, weighted questions.

Raul sat, quietly, with cold but hooded eyes, as his inquisitor explored his actions, point by point, question by question. Why did he snub and ignore invitations from His Own Kind? Why was he mingling with all sorts of dubious people—servitors, shamans, native princelings, rabble-rousers, expositors of this or that curious and undoubtedly seditious cult, philosophy, religion, or political persuasion? Was he aware he had been seen in very questionable and probably treasonable company? What were his plans? Did he intend to resume his Naval career? Or return to Barnassa, to the life of a gentleman farmer? Or would he follow the Linton tradition, and request a government job? If so, why did he delay?

All of this Raul endured with a quiet half-smile, and when the Administrator had run out of questions at last, he replied. In a twenty minute monolog, he poured out all the wrath and indignation, sarcasm and bitterness, that had been storing up in his heart from that unforgotten day there on the bridge of the scoutship when he had watched Darogir burn to death in eight terrible minutes.

His phrases were well-chosen stinging commentaries on prying, spying Officialdom, withering retorts and sarcasms aimed at stuffy, tradition-blinded policies. His remarks savored of treason, but hovered just short of it. Oddly, although bitter, his tirade was *impersonal*. There was no malice in his words, but a world-weary disillusionment and disappointment. The polite conventions of "civilization" had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. He was a man from whom the blindfolds had been stripped—a man who saw clearly the obscenities usually masked behind genteel fictions.

In brief, he tore the Administrator's self-esteem to tatters, punctured beyond repair his ego, slapped his fat face with stinging, merciless criticism, and littered the office with toppled, shattered idols all too obviously clay-footed. Dykon Mather gaped, his face crimsoning.

"In Arion's Name, Commander, are you a revolutionary?"

"Don't be more of an idiot than you can help," Raul said coldly. "Do you think I've won the freedom of my own mind, only to hand it over to mouth the catch-phrases

of some blind *ism* or *osophy*? I think for myself—and speak for my own thoughts, no one else's."

"But such words are plainly treasonable! Don't you owe your allegiance to the Imperator—"

"I owe allegiance to myself. Freedom of ideas is the first obligation of a man."

Dykon Mather waved this aside impatiently.

"You talk *republicanism*!"

"I said don't be an idiot. Republicanism went out with the United Systems. I talk *common sense*. I'm no more of a republican than I am an anarchist or a theocrat—"

Mather pounced on that.

"But you are reported to have talked theocracy with—"

"Oh, kak on that! I've discussed stabilism with a war-bard from Dorrhea and plenum mechanics with a neospace-drive technic from Aldebaran and Vuudhistic philosophy with the younger son of a Kahan from Argastral And that doesn't prove I'm going to become a stabilist *or* a mathematical theorist *or* a convert to Vuudhana. Of which of these loathsome criminalities am I accused?"

Mather puffed. "We accuse you of nothing. We're just inquiring—"

"Inquire ahead. But let me ask *you* something. Do you—really and truly—think war ever accomplishes anything? Do you think the last war accomplished anything—besides the deliberate murder of sixteen billion poor Vruu Kophe spider-men, *and* several hundred thousand humans on Darogir who wished to remain neutral out of sympathy with the Vruu Kophe cause—and were vaporized with a nitrogen bomb barrage for all their neutrality?"

"Well, I'm not—"

"And something else. Do you know what intelligent government is? Have you ever seen it in operation? Do you really think the government in this Cluster is *intelligent*?" Raul took a long drink of the cold brandy while Dykon Mather stammered and huffed.

"If you feel this way," the Administrator said, trying a different tack, "then don't you feel a man of your experience and background and training owes it to his Cluster to enter the government and bring some intelligence to it?"

Raul set down his goblet with a clack on the polished wood of the Administrator's desk.

"How—by seeking to become Commissioner of my home-world, and having my hands tied on every improvement I want to make by Imperial Policy, or Provincial Regulations, or Viceregal Instructions? Perhaps I should join your group of yes-sir-you-certainly-are-right-sir robots and spend my life initialing acts and decrees I know to be blind, stubborn idiocy."

The Administrator went white to the lips. And now he showed a glint of steel behind the good old velvet glove.

"You're aware, Linton, that I can order your deportation."

"Space! I almost wish you would. You see, man, I'm spoiling for a fight. I've had my eyes stripped naked and seen the Galaxy for what it really is. I'm loafing around and soaking up wine because I don't know which *Bad Thing* to strike out at. But, by Arion, if you try deporting me, you give me something to attack. I'll truly be grateful, Mather. Why, man, I'll make you famous. If you deport me for thinking my own thoughts, and for not being afraid to speak them either, then your kaking misgoverned misgovernment becomes a personal cause, a personal enemy. By Space, I think that's a great idea! You deport me, and I'll hold you up as the *Living Example of Imperial Idiotic Provincial Confusion*. My drunk of an older brother left me enough monetary units to live on, and a little over. I'll spend every last munit on *The Cause*, Mather! Yes—a great idea! I'll hold you up to contempt, derision, mockery and laughter on every last kaking planet in the whole filthy backwards Cluster. I'll lampoon you, besmirch you, slander and libel you every time you open your fat mouth—and expose your fat brains, or lack of them. I'll make speeches in the Planetary Parliament, to which I have a hereditary chair; I'll publish articles about you in every newsfax circuit and magazine that wants to build circulation with some good old-fashioned controversy. I'll hire artists to caricature you, put you up on posters from one end of the Cluster to the other, buy Parliament members to move to depose you, tie you up with law suits and counter-suits and counter-counter-suits until you

don't know which end is up. Yes, let's do it, Mather! Come on—deport me, and you'll die a famous man!"

Mather wilted before the blast, shrank back into his expensive pneumo.

"I am merely . . . cautioning you."

"*Kak* on your warnings, then!"

The Administrator winced fastidiously.

"Please . . . must you be obscene? Can't we discuss this matter like intelligent gentlemen?"

"No. Because you're neither intelligent *nor* a gentleman. You're a bureaucrat. And I say *kak* on bureaucracy—and let's have done, Mather, once and for all, with cautioning and warning. If a lowly drive technic or impecunious shopkeeper was guilty of all the treasonable and suspiciously seditious practices you accuse me of, you'd slap him in Correction or deport him from Omphale faster than fast. But I'm a *Linton*, aren't I, one of the Cluster's Own, the Fine Old Families, and laws are different for such as I am, eh? Call that intelligent government, Mather? No. I won't play. You've had spies on me, trailed me from winehouse to winehouse, searched my room, pawed through my luggage, tapped my communicator, fax'd my mail, opened a dossier under my name, and slandered me to my face. If you had one tiny kaking wisp of evidence—one rag or tatter of proof that I *am* any of the things you think I am—you'd have deported my corpus without a moment's hesitation. But you haven't. So I know you don't."

"Enough! You've been warned." Administrator Mather got up, subtle intimation that the interview was over. But Linton remained seated, sprawled with calculated insolence, long legs thrust out before him. After a few moments of standing, Mather flushed, feeling foolish.

"Sit down, Mather; the interview isn't over until I say it is," Raul Linton drawled coolly. Mather sat—collapsed, rather—back into his chair. Such behavior was *unthinkable!*

"So let's have done with warnings," Linton continued. "I'm sick to death of them."

He reached over and selected a fine cigarel from the burnished, satin-finished harpwood box that had been proffered at the beginning of the "interview."

"I warn you Mather, be careful. Handle me gently. I'm on the brink. Right now I'm completely disgusted—another word for neutral. But push me the slightest, shove me just a wee bit, and I go over the edge. Right now I don't give a kak how you govern Hercules—keep the natives ignorant, the border planets technologically backwards, the government blind and stupid. Go to hell at twenty parsecs a minute—I just don't care. *But*—mess with me, push me about, deport me, and I'm one hundred percent dead set against you and your rotten Provincial Viceroy. Do you understand, Mather?"

He pulled his booted legs beneath him and came to his feet. Then he leaned over and spoke straight into the Administrator's tight, white-lipped face.

"Leave. Me. *Alone.*"

The interview was over. Raul stalked out grandly, leaving Mather to stare blankly at the opposite wall. He sat and stared and thought for several minutes. Then he touched a stud on the under-surface of his desk.

"Yes, Administrator?" A female voice spoke from empty air.

"Get me P-5," he snapped.

"P-5, sir. Connecting. Go ahead."

"Ragul? Mather. Just spoke to Linton. You know the case? Fine. Get Pertinax—I don't care what he's working on at the moment. Put him on Linton's tail. He's the shrewdest spy in the Cluster, and I want him to watch Linton—the man's a time-bomb, set to go off at a jiggle. Tell him to watch. I want to know everyone Linton speaks to, everything he does, everywhere he goes, every minute of the day and night. I *want* Linton, understand? He's a traitor, and I want evidence—unshakable, documentary evidence. Photographs, tapes, video—the works. Tell Pertinax to be careful—to use long-range stuff, pinhead mikes, audio search-beams, the spyray, anything he needs. *But get that man for me!*"

No tapes were taken of this interview, but all Omphale was filled with ears—eyes—and noses. Someone overheard, or deduced, or was told—and soon many quiet men in little rooms knew. And one of these was a tall, rangy Border-worlder called Sharl of the Yellow Eyes. It was *not* true, as had

earlier been reported, that Raul Linton and Sharl of the Yellow Eyes had been seen together in private conversation before this fateful interview. They had, perhaps, both been in the same cafe or wineshop at the same time. But now he of the Yellow Eyes determined they would, indeed, meet—and soon.

The Queen Dagundha Bazaar is the place of places on Omphale for local color, native exotica, and such-like. Night and day—especially during the Month of Harvest—it teems with the fruits and artistries of half the Cluster worlds. A great, staggered parallelogram floored with mosaic tiles and walled with cool arcades of shops and booths, one may buy virtually anything—with enough platinum Imperials. (The typical native distrusts paper munits, prefers something weighty, that jingles.)

After his exciting, and, although he could not know it, history-making interview with the Border Administrator, Raul Linton headed for the bazaar, stopping off briefly for an indigestible lunch. He caught an air cab crosstown to the Queen Dagundha Bazaar in the native quarter for two reasons: first, he knew he could find Gundorm Varl there, haggling over livestock; second, he wanted a good long cold drink of that native-brewed liquid lightning called *chark*. He paid off his cab, tipped the driver handsomely, and strolled into the seething maelstrom of color, sound and stench that was the great bazaar.

At the booths and stands along the arcade-walls was exhibited the produce of a thousand worlds. Vegetables, wine-fruit, pargolac and iogma, loaves of fresh-baked *iskth* bread, temple cakes and offering-meats, garments hand-loomed of iophodon-wool, fine suede cloaks from Dorrhea, leather jerkins fetched from Croma or Valthoom, basket-hilted swords with gemmed hilts, tasseled daggers in snakeskin sheaths, flowers, wine, ale, beer, fresh meat, spices, herbs, incense, perfumes, rugs and shawls and capes and sashes, jewels by the cask, keg or quart, the amulets, sigils, talismans and charms of half ten thousand religions, cults, magical sciences or occult persuasions.

Women. Firm-fleshed Mountain girls from Vaela. Dusky,

raven-haired charmers from the Desert Worlds. Great stupid mammoth-breasted milky females from the Port o' Worlds.

Or boys. Men. Animals. Drugs. Stimulators—why ruin one's digestion, or risk a venereal disease, when one could slip on a mesh helmet and have the pleasure-centers of the brain throb with ecstasy beyond the limits flesh could bear, with a tickle of electricity?

Raul loved the bazaar. The bustle and jostle, the shapes and colors. Even the smells. *Especially* the smells. He lingered by a straw-floored stall to watch a leggy Nomad Prince from the Veil haggling over the purchase of a fine horn-stallion. Paused to watch the antics of a troupe of jugglers and clowns, whose Gypsy ancestry went back ages further than the history of Galactic civilization.

Here went a chieftain from Arkonna, his pointed beard dyed indigo, jewels dangling from his stiffly-waxed mustachios. And there strutted a mercenary swordsman from the Orion Stars, if his green-gold cloak and wheat-blond hair were any sign. There a cowed, crimson-robed Star Scientist paced with shaven skull, thumb holding his place in a leather-bound Ephemeris, the constellations of his nativity tattooed in blue ink on his naked brow. There, to the left, ivory baton raised warningly, crowd melting away from before him, went a Herald in full canonicals, bearing the *ukase* of some Planet-Prince on a small silken cushion. Further beyond him, a Cat-man from Kermnus prowled sleekly, a high-caste Holy Chief from the patterns dyed in his smooth-napped fur.

The out-pourings, dregs and spewed-up froth of a hundred planets jostled around him in all the colors of twenty rainbows. Soldiers. Thieves. Whores. Tradesmen. Nobles. Technicians. Priests. High-born Ladies. Painted boys. Mercenaries. Wrestlers. Spies. Wizards. Assassins. Farmers. Naval officers. Fortune-tellers. Policemen. Officials of this bureau or that subdivision. Tourists. Slumming society fops. Minstrels. Pickpockets. Expensive courtesans. Poets.

Raul Linton loved it, all of it.

It was real. Honest. It stunk, of course, but at least it was alive and sweating. He grinned at the jugglers, tossed coins to beggars, bought a stoup of sour beer at a booth, a flower from a barefoot, grimy boy, laughed at clowns, watched

a professional strongman from the heavy-gravity planet, Strontame, crush a gold ingot into glittering pulp. He began to enjoy himself, the stuffy, dusty vapors of Officialdom clearing from his head. Many turned to watch him pass, this alarmingly tall, eagle-eyed, deeply-tanned terrestrial with shabby gray space-fatigues tucked into high, scuffed, dusty boots, a great boat-cloak slung around his rangy shoulders, his shaggy thatch of fire-red hair tossed to the noonward sun. Some were "professional" women who measured his lean-muscled height with an admiring eye, and his shallow purse with a glance at the condition of his clothes.

But others watched also. One was a tall, thin, sour-faced and dark-skinned man in unobtrusive green, a black cap pulled over his eyes, an extraordinary number of "rings" on his hard long fingers.

Colonel Nijel Pertinax. Spy.

Another was a tall, bearded man with sternly uncompromising mien, wrapped in a heavy Border cloak of brown stuff, the crested tarboosh of a Rilké warrior-chieftain on his head. Thoughtful, clever eyes in a tanned, bony, leathery face—eyes of startling canary yellow.

Sharl ka-Nabon Tahukam. Spy—perhaps. Or—patriot?

Pertinax did not bother keeping out of Linton's sight. He knew well enough Raul had never seen him. P-5 agents did not mix socially with Old Family Aristocrats—or even with Naval officers. Except, once in a while, in their professional capacity. As, for, example, now. He brushed by Raul casually, one lean bony hand just touching the hem of Linton's huge, billowing boat-cloak. A miniscule bead of dark gray ceramic flew from his hand to adhere to the lining of the cloak. He smiled sourly, smugly, and stalked on. None had seen the encounter.

Or had they?

From the deep, purple shadows of the arcade, a pair of keen yellow-eyes flashed with a sudden smile. Colonel Nijel Pertinax was no stranger to Sharl of the Rilké Warriors. They had met, socially, even professionally, many times before.

Keeping within the velvet shadows of the arcade, Sharl paced Raul Linton, keeping at his stride. Shrewd, cool canary

eyes measured—weighed—appraised, slowly, without hurry, without hope, and without error.

Raul stopped short.

So short that a fat, perspiring Diikan pottling along behind him jammed into him, cursed briefly and pungently, glanced up at the towering Herculian, taking in the raw-boned and red-thatched height of him, and meekly scuttled around and off.

Raul did not take his eyes off the Sword.

It lay, alone, on a space-black cushion of virgin sable fur. Five lean, long, narrow feet of glittering mirror-bright ion-steel. Long and thin and needle-pointed as a fencing épée . . . but center-ribbed and keenly strong and sharp-edged enough for a saber. Superb. A princely, no, a kingly weapon. The hilt, a spiral of narwhal-horn, would grip the hand like a silk glove. The crossbar was also ion-steel, welded with purest gold. A great glowing drop of emerald fire throbbed at the knobbed ends, and a greater orb of grass-green crystal weighted the hilt.

It was love at first sight. Besides the gold-hilted long-sword, the booth was cluttered and crammed with *mursks*, scimitars, straight-blades and hook-swords, jag-edged saw-swords—the blades of a score of native worlds.

He had eyes only for the one.

They had measured him well. The tradition of the Landed Gentry had raised him, sword in hand. Half his childhood had been given over to the 35th Century equivalent of a *salle d'armes*.

Without thought his hand went out.

"I would purchase that blade."

THREE

"KAZAR, BUT THE SWORD IS NOT FOR SALE," the proprietor said in smooth Rilké, spreading fat jeweled hands helplessly.

"I would buy it. There is naught that hath not price, sayeth the Singer," Raul replied. His command of richly col-

loquial Rilke lifted the painted eyebrows of the sword-seller, admiringly.

"Ah, the *kazar* speaks the Tongue with agility. It does honor to my People. But, I deprecate, I deplore—the golden sword is for display only. It hath no price, but, for gentility, the *kazar* may try its heft and balance, if he wills."

Raul took it up gently. The hilt gripped his hand, fitting it as it had been tailored to the breadth of his fingers, finely carved to the width of his individual palm.

He held his breath, blood singing.

He was wrong: the blade *was* faintly curved, so slightly it took a seasoned eye to note it. A fine, slim, tapering curve, like a lily's stem or a girl's long throat. And the razored edge, with the shallow curve, made it technically a saber, he supposed. And yet the point was deadly. Fierce as a rapier, nor was the curve deep enough to keep its master from employing it for thrust and counter as an *épée*.

The weight was perfect.

The balance was unearthly, magical, sheer perfection beyond a swordsman's dream of perfection.

He extended it in full, measuring along the glittering edge with a gloating, loving eye, feeling shoulder-muscles pull taut to hold the balance, feeling the fierce needle-point float feather-light, swift and agile to strike at a nerve's flick, like a cobra.

He felt love heady in his veins, like wine.

The floating, singing balance was poetry and music and fire and the ache of purest beauty deep in the throat, touching on the verge of tears. Yet she had weight and drive enough to shear off an arm, cutting through meat and bone effortlessly.

Were the sword his, he would name her *Asloth*, "Golden-Girl."

He returned her to the counter. But it hurt to give her back.

Against the background of his thoughts, he became aware that someone was speaking.

"It is a *sharbaré*, yes? A blade of beauty. The *kazar* knows good steel, I can tell from the way he handled her."

"Yes . . . a fine weapon. A blade of beauty, as you say."

Kashambar, himself, never knew a better," he replied vaguely.

"Ah! Kashambar of the sagas! The *kazar* knows the epics of my people. He does honor to know them thus." It was not the fat proprietor who spoke, but a taller, leaner figure, hard to make out in the deep shadows of the arcade. Clever how the fur pillow bearing the golden sword had been set out just far enough from the overhanging arch to catch the sun.

To catch the eye

"Aye, I know your tales, and love them well. But I would buy the sword. Name the price. I haggle not over that which is living perfection breathed by Mnardus the Gods' Smith into steel of beauty."

"*Kazar*, it is all the same, eh? With men—true men—and swords—true, blooded swords, *sharbaré*. We are all one, with fine clean steel in our hands, the sun ablaze above us, women to watch—to applaud us—to be borne off by the victor, eh? Then we are men, steel against steel, sinew to sinew, and blood to blood. We have lived, striven to the utmost of flesh, the clean wind about us, the strong earth under our feet to bear us up, then we truly live . . . truly men sprung from the God-Race, eh? Of whatever world or hue of skin."

"Aye," Raul said, "the blood roaring through the heart and salt tears burning at the eye, and bright gaudy banners straining stiff against the wind. Wind of your Omphale—or my Barnassa—wind is wind. Steel is steel. Men are men, wherever met."

"Ah, the *kazar* is Barnassa-born, then. Almost a brother, for gentility. My mother was Rilké of Barnassa."

Linton blinked against the fierce sun. Gods, it was hot!

"Of what Clan, to do honor?"

"Arglinassam, the Red Hawk Banner; her sire, the Chieftain Erngal Thrice-Wise."

"I have shared wine and water with Erngal Thrice-Wise, and, when a boy, wrestled with his nine sons, and rode with them to hunt and Clan-feast. Aye, and fought with them, steel to steel, in war-season. They are pure-sprung from the Gods'-Race, fine men and fine women."

The flash of white teeth against purple shadows.

"You do honor, *kazar*, much honor to my mother's Clan, to my People, and, for honor, I would thou share my wine and water—for gentility."

Raul Linton smiled warmly, and touched the back of his right hand to his brow in the Salute.

"Thou wouldst share wine and water with me; I wouldst that thou should share my meat and bread," he said, in the High Rilké with the formula of Prince-to-Prince (a rare and noble mode of speech; a very high honor).

The tall man bowed, returning the Salute, and pulled aside the flap masking the entrance to the rear tent of the stall, a frame supporting finely-woven carpets. Raul entered.

Across the bazaar, his "rings" carrying to him every word picked up by the minute transceiver he had affixed to the lining of Linton's cloak, Colonel Nijel Pertinax smiled a thin-lipped and gloating smile, and pressed the "record" stud on a special brooch. All was going splendidly, splendidly. *Surely* Commander Linton *knew* he was speaking with Sharl the Yellow-Eyed, notorious spy and revolutionary agent of the Kahani of Valadon, exiled and outlawed queen of a key Border planet—all this ceremonial kak was obviously a recognition-code.

He bent to listen.

The transition from dazzling sun to deep shadowy twilight was blinding. Raul blinked and knuckled his eyes, peering about him. The rear of the stall, gorgeously carpeted floor, ceiling and walls, was strewn with nests of cushions, multi-colored, pumpkin, cream, wine-green, checkered black-and-scarlet, soft gold, harsh crimson, palest blue. A wrought-silver *sargala* stood three-legged in the far corner, leaking perfumed threads of blue smoke through a hundred piercings. A small, fat bird with green-and-snowy plumage regarded him with a basilisk-eye of furious orange, from a swinging perch of amber beads. Against the farthest corner, on a hooded stand of milk-wood, seven figures stood, finely wrought with very ancient workmanship from jade, lava-stone, brass, white granite, red gold, *kohn*-wood, and iron. Raul Linton made the exactly-proper eight-motion Obeisance, indicating honor and gentility, respect and awe, as expressed by an off-world

non-believer sympathetic to Custom and Belief, but not-sharing.

Sharl watched him, a spark of admiration flashing in his canary eyes.

"Be welcome to what is mine; use all as all were thine." He invited Raul in the time-honored phrase, legs scissoring and he seated himself Rilké-fashion on cushions of white, blue and black. Raul made the proper, polite response and seated himself adroitly—it is hard for a terrestrial to adopt the curious kneeling position of the Rilké, but Linton did it with familiar grace and ease, and again Sharl watched, and saw, and noted.

Now the fat sword-seller appeared, hands together in servility, painted eyebrows lifted in silent but eloquent inquiry.

Sharl clicked his fingers together.

"*Chark*. Stone-Bottle."

"Of gentility," Linton requested with one hand lifted, "I have a friend, a very large and big man with snow-blond hair and beard and deep-tanned face. He will be wearing Cirsassian violet, with flare-boots, and broiling about the bazaar, I doubt not, near the livestock-pens. Summon him thither, of gentility, to me."

"The *kazar* wishes, and it is done."

He vanished through the hanging rugs.

"With permission," Raul murmured, drawing a packet of cigarels from his tunic and proffering the packet to his host, who nodded, withdrew one, and sat back.

They smoked in silence until the wine came, as was Custom. Then, over the smoking cups of green wine, poured from a rare, almost legendary vintage (for honor)—Raul knew very well the value, and implied compliment, of Stone-Bottle *chark*—he said: "Let us now talk swords."

And talk swords they did, with much confusion to poor Colonel Pertinax sweating and smoldering in the fiery afternoon sun-blaze. Between alternate cups of *chark* and of water, which is how you drink *chark*, the Rilké suddenly said:

"*Kazar*, with permission, sword-talk is a wide gate through-out which much else may enter. Why are you being 'listened' to?"

"Am I being listened to by aught else than you? If so, I did not know it."

"*Kazar*, with permission—" The crested Chieftain bent and, with one strong brown hand, laid open slowly a fold of Linton's cloak, exposing a grain of darker substance.

Puzzled, Raul said: "And what is that? Looks like a splatter of road-muck."

Sharl laughed. "Road-muck—with ears, *kazar!*" He pulled at it, and Raul's eyes widened, then narrowed, as he saw how the ceramic bead adhered electrostatically to the fabric.

"By the Nine Hells, a pinhead mikel!"

"Precisely, *kazar*."

An eagle-glance shot suddenly into clear canary imperturbable eyes.

"*How did you know it was there?*"

"*Kazar*—of gentility—I saw it placed."

"Placed? By what man?"

Imperturbably. "A thin, sallow stick of a man in bottle-green, with a sour mouth and many rings, a black cap shadowing his eyes. He followed the *kazar* and brushed a hand against the cloak—thus—and it adhered."

"Do you know this man?"

"Of honor, *kazar*, I do."

Raul took a cup of *chark*, then a cup of clear water.

"Name him—of gentility!"

"Name: *Pertinax*. A spy of the government—of P-5. A man who prowls amid reputations, sour-mouthed, smiling only when he feels pleasure, and feeling pleasure only when his hints and lies and whispers hurt a better man than himself, of which he has hurt many, bragging he hath spoiled 'more little games than any man in Hercules.' A filth of a man. A '*Col-o-nel*.'"

"*Pertinax* . . ."

Slowly, savoringly (feeling his blood begin to boil with rage and frustration), Linton rolled the name on his tongue, tasting it, a sour, dour quince of a name, bitter as lemon, stinging like salt.

He started to rise, fists balling—but Sharl halted him with a lifted palm.

"Not to be necessary, *kazar*, with honor—he will be here, presently."

"How do you know this?"

A smile, warmly generous behind fine bristling whiskers.

A brown hand produced a small crystal rod, beaded with-
in by glinting points of sparkling filament.

"A dampener!"

"Aye. I have scrambled his circuits. He will be aching to know what 'treasonous' talk we are having here behind thin carpet-walls. Soon he will come snuffling and rooting around beside the tent, to try his naked ears, seeing if they do better than his tiny bead-microphone transceivers."

Raul looked straight and level into the clear, candid canary-yellow eyes.

"Who are you—and what do you want?"

"*Kazar*, of honor, a man who is offering you—a job."

The yellow eyes did not waver or flinch from his cold, hard stare.

"What kind of 'job'?"

"Honorable employment. Not like the work of *Pertinax*."

Raul snorted with disgust. "He is a sneaking swine!"

"Aye, *kazar*. And any minute now he will come rooting and snuffling about the tent, like a lank-thin red-eyed swine nosing about for some fine dirty mud to wallow in—*ah!*"

Beyond the tent-wall of carpeting they heard a thump—a grunt—a squeal of rage and terror.

Sharl's lifted hand held the Herculian motionless, listening.

"Hah! A knife, is it? Well, you sniveling sneak-thief, try this on!" A hoarse, deep-chested voice came to them.

"My friend and servant, Gundorm Varl," Raul explained in a low voice, answering an inquiring lift of Sharl's brows.

A muffled thumping, thrashing sound followed, sharply punctuated with shrill squeaks and squeals, piercingly sharp, filled with outrage and pain.

Raul smiled faintly.

"Gunder always carries a riding-whip," he said. Sharl grinned, a flash of strong white teeth.

For a while they listened comfortably to thumping, thrashing sounds. The squeals died to muffled sobbings.

"There! That sh'd teach you not to sneak and sniff outside closed doors—as it were." (A thump, as of a boot-toe firmly planted to a *gluteus maximus*.) "Now be off with y' and mind your manners hence, y' sneakin' little snake!"

The two men exchanged a cool, amused, gratified glance.

"Commander—are y' there?" A bush-bearded blond head pushed in between the carpet flaps.

"Now, if I'm interruptin' anything—"

"Not at all—I think. Come in."

The burly, bearded, blond Barnassian clumped in, leathery tanned face gleaming with highlights of sweat. He cocked a thumb rearwards.

"A fat little Rilke met me yonder, saying y' were here, and what do I find skulkin' about the tent-flaps but a thin long fella in green suit listening at the rear wall. Naturally, I taught him better manners. I figured anything y' were saying, Commander, to y' friend here was in the nature of private, personal-type business, so I just up and showed him what courtesy was. I—uh—hope I did right by y', sir?" Gundorm Varl said, a sudden expression of anxiety crossing his face.

"Was he 'a thin, sallow stick of a man in bottle-green, with a sour mouth and many rings, a black cap shadowing his eyes?" Raul asked, repeating word-for-word the description Sharl Yellow-Eyes had given him a moment or two earlier.

"He was, sir."

"Then you did right, Gundorm, very right indeed." Raul broke off, and changing from Neoanglic to High Rilke, addressed his host:

"Of honor, pray pardon my friend, who knoweth not the Custom nor the Tongue (over-well), but who is a good man and true, and does not mean dishonor. I go surety for him, of gentility."

Sharl bowed and silently gestured Gundorm Varl to a nest of cushions, into which the great man sank with a weary sigh and a muttered, mispronounced phrase of thanks.

"Well, sir, and how did the interview go?"

Raul smiled lazily.

"Well enough, I suppose. I lost my head, and, instead of just keeping quiet and letting the Border Administrator

do all the talking, I blew my mouth and said many things. Bad things. What with my loose mouth and your whip-hand there, I doubt not there's a Monitor Squad looking for me within the hour, with a warrant for my deportation back to Barnassa—or even further."

Gundorm Varl blew out his cheeks in a long, slow whistle.

"Is it true now, sir? And you a Linton of Barnassa, and of a line of government people, and with a chest-full of bright ribands in their stinkin' wars, and all! But what does my 'whip-hand' have to do with it all, sir?"

Raul quirked a humorous eyebrow.

"The man you thrashed was a P-5 spy, set on my tail by Mather, the Administrator, who all but accused me to my face of being a traitor to the Empire, a seditious revolutionary, and an advocate of assassinating Arban IV Imperator himself."

"Aw, for the love of Space! And I had to lash the beggar's buttocks to jelly with my great whip! Forgive me, commander, I'd no notion in my head he was aught more than a low, sneaking, skulking snake of a thief!"

"You did all right, Gunder, for that's just what he is."

A woman's face appeared at the flap, not young but finely boned, wearing an *ashkar* of seed-pearls. She whispered something to Sharl, whose eyes flashed dangerously. And then she vanished.

"What is it?" Raul asked as he of the Yellow Eyes rose lithely to his feet.

"Of gentility, *kazar*, I know not where the fault doth lie—either *here*"—indicating his crystal "dampener"—"or there"—indicating Gundorm Varl's riding-whip—"but my servant sayeth a squadron of Monitors have entered the Bazaar of Queen Dagundha, led by that very Pertinax the Snake so well and neatly chastised by thy servant there. I doubt not they come for thee!"

Raul was on his feet in a bound.

"Right. Well, let's be off, Gunder. You, sir, are not in guilt of this thing. It is me they seek, and my friend, here, so tell them—"

"With permission, *kazar*, but, of honor, I cannot. No. I am, truly, of guilt in this, for knowingly I permitted the

Snake to come near and sat by while your great blond bear of a servant whipped him without lifting a hand. Nay—you must let me aid you in this thing.”

He bent and plucked away carpeting from the floor. Then, from a waist-pouch, withdrew a slender steel rod which he inserted into a tiny hole, scarce-visible it was so small. Raul knew at a glance what it was—an electronic key, the lock attuned precisely to the molecular alignment of the steel needle.

A *click*—and a black hole widened before their feet.

“Go quickly with me now—there is a ladder, and a tunnel which we can follow to safety. I will give you hiding from these searchers the Snake has so swiftly brought upon us—”

Raul faced him squarely.

“Nay. Of honor, I cannot permit that you do this thing. For I have not accepted your ‘job’ and am not willing, save that I hear more—much more—to enter your employ.”

Sharl’s yellow gaze flashed dangerously and his hand closed on the handle of a knife thrust through his girdle. His lips tightened to a thin white line, and Raul knew he was very close to death in that moment.

The moment passed.

The strong brown hand fell away from the knife-hilt, and white, tight lips relaxed. But the face was still stern.

“It is, with permission, not a time nor place to speak of ‘employ.’ It is of *kazara*, of honor. You have shared my water and wine. I am thy host, and you have made the Salute and the Obeisance. Now come—come quickly, with thy servant. Oh, do not be a great *vokarthu* fool” he said, impatiently, meaning by *vokarthu* “foreigner,” that is an all-inclusive term for anyone not Rilké, variously renderable as Imperial, terrestrial, or “distant-born unclanly.” “Think you not they will seize me too, *kazar*? Guest-honor of the People precludes that we should have introduced ourselves before the sharing of water and wine. But I am the *kazar* Sharl ka-Nabon Tahukam, Chieftain and Heir of the Horvatham, the Fire Bird Clan, and agent-in-principle to her *kazara*, Innald, exiled Kahani of Valadon. I am a well-known spy and seditious trouble-causer, and yonder sour-mouthed Snake with aching

buttocks will be hunting me, too, unless we be gone—of gentility, *kazar!*”

A Border-worlder knows when to shut up.

“Lead on, then,” Raul said tersely.

“A moment—”

While the two stood on the edge of the trapdoor, Sharl plunged with unchieftainly haste back through the flap into the front of the shop.

He reappeared just as swiftly, two seconds later, with the fat sword-seller in tow and a long bundle wrapped in carpeting thrust under his arm. He gestured wildly.

“Of swiftness, now! They are nearly across the bazaar—into the black hole, and trust me!” He blew a kiss from clean brown fingertips to the small, pert green-and-white bird who cocked an anxious eye at him from its bead-amber perch.

“Farewell, *ylarna*—farewell, my sweet! Fear not, I shall send for thee, when all is well! Now—down—” He thrust them into the blackness. Raul’s booted feet poked down into emptiness—swung—found a ladder-rung, and he went down into pitch-blackness surefooted as a mountain *charb*.

Gundorm Varl followed, and behind him came the wheezing, fat sword-seller and, lastly, Sharl Yellow-Eyes.

The trap slid sleekly shut behind them, and, although they could not see or know, so cleverly was it draped, the thrust-up floor-carpeting folded down to hide their exit-place completely, perfectly—just as the heavy boots of a squad of beefy Monitors came tromping and clumping into the tent they had just vacated.

Utter blackness about them, above, below, to all sides. Then a flare—a soft welling-forth of pale, cold blue-white light, from something in the sword-seller’s hand.

They reached the bottom of the ladder. By the soft, clear light, Raul could see they stood in a chamber hewn from solid gray stone. But from one side of the chamber a black well showed—a tunnel branching out into the unknown. Raul felt the blood tingling through his veins from head to foot. The breath sang in and out of his lungs, heady as clear, cold mountain air. This was *living!* He did not know where he was going, nor why, nor what it was all

really about, but surely, somewhere in it all, there were a few heads to break, and good comrades about him, and—somewhere, somewhere, a good fight—the Good Fight to join, a Cause to battle for, and thus to make an end to all this stifling inaction, this batting-at-shadows, this wasting and rusting of oneself!

Sharl caught his arm, pushing the carpet-wrapped long bundle into his hands.

"Here—she is thine—whether or not, *kazar*, you 'enter my employ'—she belongs to thee!"

Heart thumping, joy like honey on the back of his tongue, Raul tore away the carpeting, unsheathed her and lifted her straight up into the light—

"Asloth!"

"Go forward, of honor!"

They thrust ahead of him into the black mouth of the tunnel, and, the golden sword clasped naked in his hands and joy singing in his heart, he went forward with them—into the black unknown.

FOUR

BRICE HALLEN, as Provincial Administrator, was Border Administrator Mather's superior. As a senior government career officer—and as a genuine man—he very much disliked Dykon Mather. And, what's more important, he loathed Nijel Pertinax, and everything about him, and hated having to work with the entire P-5 section—"the snoopers," he called them, without affection.

The problem of Commander Linton and Sharl of the Yellow Eyes was too big, too potentially dangerous, to leave in the bumbling hands of Border Administrator Mather. When it came to his attention, he called a meeting of the full Staff—and let Pertinax have his say while he sat back, puffing on an old big-bellied Shamash-ware aquapipe, and peering up at the Colonel from time to time, piercing glances from under shaggy, heavy brows.

"So, what it filters down to, is that Linton tried to buy himself a sword," he commented, after a while. "Dangerous

things, swords. Sharp edges. Make fine weapons. I suppose you estimate Linton bought the sword so he could assassinate Lord Cheviot, eh, Pertinax?"

The lean, sour-faced agent flushed darkly.

"Arion! You're the most suspicious man I've ever seen, Pertinax. And one of the most ingenious. Ingenious, that is, at seeing imaginary motives in the most casual and ordinary of acts. Buying a sword, indeed!"

Pertinax kept his expression wooden; inwardly he was seething, but smug.

"I have my job to do, Administrator, and it's not an easy one. But it is, if I may say so, vital. I don't ask for compliments. And, if I may say so, don't the facts speak for the truth? You've heard the tapes—"

Staff meetings were held informally. Members strolled in as they were talking and took their seats around the large, low table of fine-grained harp-wood. Most of them, rather surprisingly, were younger men, relaxed, sober of mien, thoughtful, with shrewd tanned faces.

"Yes, yes—and they sound innocuous enough to me." Brice Hallen grumbled peevishly. "Great Space, a man buys a sword—what of it? I bought one myself last month, on Pendalar. Damn good thing *you* weren't there, Pertinax: you'd have deduced it as a treasonable act."

"But, Administrator, what about the recognition-code I taped, between Linton and the Kahani's agent?"

Wilm Bardry, one of the younger men present, spoke up unbidden at this.

"What about the 'recognition-code'—as you call it, Colonel? Don't you know what it is?"

Pertinax flushed even darker.

Hallen quirked an eyebrow, inquiringly. "What is it, Wilm?"

Bardry shrugged, and laughed. "Nothing! Just the ordinary Rilké politeness-formula, as used between two strangers of different Clans."

(General laughter.)

Dykon Mather, unhappily present, thought things were getting out of hand. He spoke up, sharply:

"But this Sharl of the Yellow Eyes is generally known to

be an agent of the ex-Kahani of Valadon! There's no doubt about that. *And* it is also fact that Pertinax's pinhead transceiver went off as soon as Linton entered the tent with the Rilké."

Bardry shrugged, and exchanged glances with the other members who lounged casually about in the huge, curved chairs, smoking or doodling on pads.

"Well, I don't know, Mather—half the natives on Omphale are acting for this or that Prince, Kahan or Chief. Financial agents, investment brokers, procurers, spies, assassins, Temple delegates, heralds, oracle-consulters, machinery purchasing agents, shipping—"

"Does that mean you *condone*—"

Mather fumed, breaking off as Administrator Hallen rapped the table loudly with the bowl of his aquapipe.

"All right, boys, calm down. Let's hear the rest of what Colonel Pertinax has to report, before we get in a boil. Out with it, Pertinax."

Clasping his hands behind his back, and wringing them furiously, the Colonel twisted his wry mouth in a sour smirk.

"I didn't come here to report *opinions* and *interpretations*—but *facts*. It's a fact that Linton has an unsavory and untrustworthy Navy reputation—"

"The Order of Arion Imperator (second class), the Gold Star of Valiance (with cluster), the Silver Comet for Extraordinary Heroism in Battle, three campaign Citations—" Wilm Bardry muttered, *sotto voce*, ticking them off on his fingers one by one.

Pertinax raised his voice.

"It's also a fact that since returning to the Hercules Stars, he's been reported in very questionable and seditious company on several occasions—" he continued.

"—Such as Border Administrator Dykon Mather's—" Wilm added, chuckling.

"He has been officially questioned and cautioned, for his own good—"

"For which uninvited and uncalled-for snooping into his private business, he got very properly mad, lost his head, and gave some unflattering opinions air!" Bardry finished.

Pertinax seethed. "Administrator, if I am to be constantly interrupted and made mock of—"

"All right, all right, stop it, Wilm. Now, Pertinax, is that the sum and whole of it?" Hallen demanded.

"In skeletal outline, yes, sir. Poor Naval record, consorting with seditious and dubious natives, insulting to official inquiry, ignoring warnings issued by a government official, and deliberate and brutal maltreatment of an official police investigator in the course of his duties—"

Wilm Bardry broke in:

"I haven't heard about that one—who was the unlucky Monitor who got maltreated?"

Hallen snorted into his pipe, and choked down a cough that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. He waved a heavy hand toward Pertinax.

"Linton's servant caught the Colonel, here, snooping and sniffing about outside the tent and grabbed him; Pertinax pulled out a knife, so the Barnassian promptly cut him up with a riding-whip."

Wilm began laughing and couldn't stop, even when Brice Hallen *harrumphed* and glared.

Pertinax exchanged a gimlet glance with red-faced Dykon Mather, who bubbled impotently, writhing in his chair.

"I—" Pertinax raised his voice above Bardry's hilarity. "I am *convinced* ex-Commander Linton is up to some little game or other. And under the proviso of the Sedition-Prevention Clause in Common Law 114, sub-section D, the government has the right to seize his person and hold him for further question on a warrant issued by the Provincial Administrator, acting for the Viceroy. I demand such a warrant be issued!"

Brice Hallen's glare was freezing.

"You demand—!"

Mather bobbed up. "I second—"

"Shut up. Sit down. You too, Pertinax," Hallen snapped icily. Then he settled back into his chair and chewed thoughtfully on his pipe for a few moments, during which no one dared speak or even move.

"Who knows this Linton? Anybody?"

"He's all right. Good family, good background. A bit of an idealist, I guess."

Wilm Bardry shrugged. "Most of us went through that phase. Suddenly discovering the Galaxy is not all pretty pink and white, as it's painted in school. Finding out that politics is a dirty game, or war is not always run by gentlemen. Lots of my best men came out of the same phase—I did, myself."

"Just a minute," Pertinax snapped savagely. "I've been wondering who this—young person—is. I don't recognize him as a Staff member, and wondered what right he had to be here."

Wilm Bardry grinned, as Administrator Hallen introduced him casually, with the effect of suddenly producing a time-bomb into the company.

"Let me introduce Senior Inquiry Specialist Wilmon L. Bardry, Chief of the Imperial Investigation Section, here on leave from Meridian to help us out with the Border troubles. Wilm holds eleven Personal Commendations from His Magnificence, and the rank of Captain-General in the Imperial Police Corps. He's the ace troubleshooter that broke up the computer mutiny on Hardain III two years ago, and also busted up the revolt on Gamma Syron out in the Arch. He's a good man, with plenty of Border experience. Wilm, you'll help us out with this Linton problem, won't you?"

"I sure will," Bardry said, soberly.

"Then I think that's all for now, Colonel Pertinax. And thank you," Brice Hallen said calmly.

"But what about the *warrant*? The *arrest*?"

"Not enough factual evidence to make it worthwhile. Nothing but hearsay and interpretation. Thank you—my secretary will show you out. You too, Mather. Out."

The two left silently, and the Administrator relaxed with a great sigh.

"Relief to have *that* over. I hate that sneaking spy—what do they call him? 'Snake.' Very apt. Hey, Toller, get out a few bottles, will you? All that Mather/Pertinax stuff leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Ah . . . that's better. Help yourself, boys. Go ahead, Wilm."

The Emperor's ace investigator accepted a hissing glass of *chark* and a pitcher of water gratefully.

"Fill me in, Brice. What's the problem about this Kahani of Valadon?"

"Simple enough. She's a native Princess with a first-class head on her shoulders. Smart. Hard. Intelligent. Well educated in Imperial schools. It was a love-match between herself and the late Kahan of Valadon. Valadon, you know, is a very crucial planet on the Border. It's on *our* side of Thunderhawk Nebula, and the Arthon of Pelaire lies across the Nebula, among the Outworlds."

"I'm following you. Continue."

"Right. Now. The Arthon is a great fat pig. He ascended to the Dais of Pelaire by poisoning his half-brother. He's exhausted half the planetary treasury on his collection of gladiators—he loves to watch blood being spilled, just so long as it belongs in somebody else's veins. Now he's pretty shaky on the Dais, with lots of minor nobles raising a stink over his habits and pleasures. To get the aristocracy solidly behind him, he's contemplating war—a major raid over into Imperial territory. I understand he's promised his troops the loot of Omphale, itself."

"What does he think the Navy'll be doing, all this while?"

"He's smart enough to know the Empire is very big and that Naval units are spread out very thinly. He also has intelligence that one-half of the Border Patrol was called into service five years ago for the Vruu Kophe war, and hasn't been released as yet. Trelion is holding on to them for occupation patrol duty."

"Right. So where do Linton and the Kahani come into all of this?"

"If the Arthon raises enough troops for his war, he'll hit Valadon first. The quickest way through the Nebula is via the 'Rift' and Valadon lies smack in the 'throat' of this clear channel. Now Valadon is completely in our pouch, as of right now. When the young Kahan died three years ago, we set aside his will, which named his young wife to the Dais, and put up his younger brother, who is a first-rate weakling tied up on *viathol*—and we control his supply of *viathol*, so we know we control *him*."

Wilm Bardry gave a long, slow whistle. *Viathol*, the rare and deadly nerve-drug distilled only on Thoth in the Ring

Stars, gave fantastic, gorgeous dreams but killed as surely as any poison in the pharmacopia.

"Sounds like pretty dirty politics to me, Brice. Why'd you set aside the Kahani?"

Hallen spread despairing hands.

"Sure, it's dirty—politics is a dirty game. Look. I've got two hundred thirty-three inhabited planets to police in this Cluster—about ninety percent of them are native worlds, with the majority of the population Rilké, Chahuna or Faf-tol Clansmen; every mother's son of them are fiercely devoted to this or that native Princeling. Half of them are at the others' throats two-thirds of the time, that is, when they're not being prodded into one or another Holy War by any one of sixty competing religious sects dominated by power-hungry fanatics. I've got substantial Naval garrisons on *precisely* eleven planets. Count them, boy. Eleven. And by 'substantial' I mean an average of five sub-cruisers. Plus this staggeringly huge Naval force—fifty-five small ships to keep order in two hundred thirty-three worlds—I've got a Border Patrol of thirty-nine sub-cruisers, eight destroyers, and one *Arion*-class battleship. That's not much, when you consider the Border is thirty parsecs long. Do you begin to see my problems, boy? Sure, we play dirty politics out here on the edge of the Empire—man, *we have to*."

"I see. Go ahead, Brice, give it all to me. I might as well know what I'm up against."

The Administrator washed down his *chark* with cold fresh water, cleared his throat noisily, and continued.

"Now. Valadon, as I've said, is a trouble-spot. It's the main place any Outworlders looking for loot will come through. Unless they want to take the 'long way' around the Nebula—thank *Arion* we've been able to keep the Outworlds on anything better than a proton-drive interplanetary ship. They *have* to use the Rift—or spend eighteen months detouring around the whole Nebula. If they ever grabbed a few neospace-drive starships they could cruise right through Thunderhawk and be on our rooftops before we know it. But that's another headache. Back to Valadon. We've got it tight in our pouch, tied down with a good Patrol garrison,

and we keep it quiet and happy because we can keep a close rein on the Kahan.

"But the last Kahan was a Modernist. He, just like his Kahani, had a first-rate Imperial education—and the two of them set out to clean up the planet. They built schools, roads, bridges, established libraries, hospitals, clinics. They were out to cut down the disease rate, up literacy and build native industry—all of these, of course, very praiseworthy and admirable practices which the Provincial Administration is—officially—highly in favor of doing. *Officially*. But, between you and me and the stereo-portrait of Arban Fourth yonder, we had to stop the business—and fast. The last blessed thing we want is for Valadon to become a modern state."

"Sure. Keep the natives pregnant—ignorant—dirty—diseased—and illiterate—and long live the glorious Imperium!" Wilm said softly. Administrator Hallen flushed.

"I *said* politics out here were dirty, damn it, and I'm not denying it," he said doggedly.

"So what happened?"

"Well, Wilm, just about the time we had all chewed our fingernails halfway up to the elbows, and were thinking of all putting in for a transfer to the Hub stars, the young Kahan died. A local fever—stop looking at me like that—assassination is one thing I've never stooped to yet, and never will, Arion with me! Anyway, the Kahani set out to carry on with the Good Work, so we eased her out, nullified her husband's will which named her as his successor, and set up this narcotic-sodden younger brother on the Dais."

"What happened to the lady?"

"We had it all set to give her a lifetime pension 'for services to the Province' and had plans afoot to give her a lush suite in the Kerrisam Palace here in Omphale, a sort of jeweled prison where we can tuck away unwelcome royal exiles, pretenders and the like, and forget about 'em—but she made a jump."

"Where?"

"Arion knows. Somewhere on the Border. You see, unlike most of these natives Princes—who are in the business for the tax-money, or the power, or the collection of women they

can buy—she's a real idealist, a genuinely good ruler, deeply and sincerely interested in the welfare of her people."

"So, of course, she has to go," Wilm said, sardonically.

Brice Hallen flushed again. "Damn it, Wilm, you know how it is. Of course she has to go. If she'd been venal and power-lusty as most of her royal cousins in this Cluster, we'd have been delighted to give her a life pension and let her lie around the palace, intriguing and counterplotting to her heart's content. But now she's out somewhere, holed up on one or another of the uninhabited Border worlds most likely, and planning to overthrow her brother-in-law and raise all of Valadon behind her banners."

"How is she coming along?"

"That's just it. We don't know. But when she made her jump, she took along an excellently-trained Kahanal Guard, a well-disciplined and deeply devoted nucleus around which she undoubtedly plans to build a personal army. She's in touch with half the Border princes who have a grievance against the government. *And* she's negotiating—reportedly—with that old warlord of an Arthon. He'll lend her support if she'll promise to line Valadon behind his invasion. She'll accept his aid and promises and Valadonese will not impede his advance through the Rift, providing he promises not to loot or ravage Valadon. As far as she's concerned (naturally!) the rest of the Cluster can go to hell at twenty parsecs per second, so long as her world remains untouched."

"Do you really think this Sharl fellow is her man?"

"Absolutely. He was a councilman when her husband was alive. And he's a shrewd, hard, clear-headed man, just as devoted to Valadon as she is."

"Then you think he really *was* sent here to contact Raul Linton?" Wilm asked.

"Who knows? Possibly. Possibly not."

"But why Linton? He's not really a traitor, is he?"

Hallen shrugged, wearily.

"I don't think so. He's just—mixed up. He saw some ugly things during the recent unpleasantness, and he's heart-sick having discovered politicians are not always statesmen, nor military commanders invariably high-minded servants of humanity."

Wilm grinned.

"I'm relieved to hear you say that. Fact is, Brice, I *knew Linton* during the war—I was on the *Harel Palldon* with him when they 'scorched' Darogir!"

Brice was astounded—and showed it.

"You—?"

He nodded. "Right. Incognito, of course. I was investigating some reports that Vice-Admiral Carrington was running the fleet like a private little kingdom all his own. And he was—pity that Linton doesn't know the man who ordered the butchery of Darogir was court-martialed and broken out of Naval service three weeks ago—on my testimony. It might change his mind about misgovernment."

"Great Cosmos, man, if you—"

He nodded again. "Right. But now I've got to find him before Sharl and his crew ship him off-planet and he falls into the Kahani's clutches. . . . Why does she want him, anyway?"

"Oldest story in the world. The Rilké Warriors are a proud, stubborn, patriarchal people. They love her and will obey her—but they will not follow a woman into battle. She needs a man—a Shakar, a war-leader, for them to follow. What better man than the late-Commander Raul Linton?"

"You're right. I'd better get jumping."

"Do. Once she gets ahold of him, he's lost to us, that I know. She's smart as smart. Got a man's head on her shoulders. And she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen—and I've seen plenty. Linton would have to be blind, or dead stupid, to keep from falling into her trap, once he lays eyes on her."

He looked up—but Wilm Bardry was already working, and had gone out of the meeting-room like a shot.

Hallen sighed, and poured down the last of the *chark*.

"Let's get back to work, boys. I've got fifty-nine memos to initial, and thirty people to talk to. I hope to Arion Wilm gets ahold of Linton before they jump him off-planet. We're all finished if that happens!"

FIVE

THE BLACK TUNNEL stretched endlessly on, branching off into a fantastic network of side-tunnels every fifty yards or so. At first, Raul tried to keep track of their route: *left, then left, then left, then right, then left, and left, and left and then—left? or right?*—he gave up after fifteen or twenty minutes. With Sharl and the Rilké sword-seller leading the way, and bearing the light, and Raul and Gundorm Varl stumbling along behind, they passed through an incredible, seemingly endless series of labyrinthine tunnels beneath Omphale City, whose existence no one had ever suspected.

During a rest-pause, Sharl came back to Raul.

"These are the remnants of the *Old City*, that was abandoned and covered up and nearly forgotten a century ago, long after your ancestors, the *vokarthu* starmen came, to build their New City far above where we are standing now. But some did not forget—it is a secret of the Rilké."

"And I shall honor it as such . . . but how much further are we going?" Linton asked, fighting to catch his breath.

The canary-yellow eyes flashed with sly humor.

"Only a few steps further, *kazar*. But we must make speed. With permission, then—if you and your servant are rested—?"

"I'm set—if you are, sir," Gundorm Varl wheezed, his face beet-red. "But I don't like these damn sewer-tunnels. And I'd give thanks for a mouthful of somethin' cold and wet—that I would, sir!"

"There will be refreshments, and rest. But come—only a few steps more," the Chieftain said soothingly. They rose and continued on through the rabbit-warren of cross-connecting age-old catacombs.

The "few steps more" turned out to number in the several thousands, but eventually—and suddenly—their journey did reach its goal.

Without warning, they turned into a lighted chamber whose walls of gray rock, rough-hewn and damp with moisture, were lined with hanging carpets, intricately worked in

rich colors with the geometrical Clan-totem designs of the Rilké artisans. The floor, too, was thickly carpeted and strewn with nests of fat cushions, and here and there, scattered about the cavern chamber, stood low tables and taborets of dark, smooth wood inlaid with designs of *ashmar*-ivory, garnet, sardonx and yellow jade from the Khorva Hills. They bore covered copperwear platters and closed beakers with cups hollowed from huge green crystals. Lights flared from old iron open-work brackets—not torches or candelabra, as might have been expected from the greasy smoke-stains on the roof, but good modern illuminants, both tube and globe forms.

Sharl threw off his snuff-brown robe, stretched, and sat luxuriously on a nest of bright, parrot-green cushions.

"Here we may rest for awhile. Please yourselves with food and drink."

They sat, gratefully sinking into cushioned softness, and Gundorm Varl busied himself poking about the covered dishes.

"Well, now, sir, for fugitives from justice we got a fine feed laid out for us! Here's loaves of *iskth* bread, a bit stale but tasty enough after all that walkin' up an appetite. An' sliced iophodon-steak with mint jelly. Here's a platter of spiced pargolac, and some of those little Hill Country cakes with darrogay seeds—and Vegan brandy, by all the Gods of Space! Let me serve y', sir. Fresh wine-fruit, too, over here. Well, now . . . we can hole up here for quite a spell o' time without sufferin' much from hunger, anyways."

Raul and Gundorm Varl fell to with hearty appetites, but the Rilké Chieftain only picked fastidiously at the mixed platter the sword-seller silently prepared for him. When they were through, and relaxing each with a cigarel and crystal cup of brandy, Raul said:

"Tell me why this chamber was all set up, furnished with fresh food and drink, as if we were expected?"

The brown face smiled imperturbably.

"You were not expected, of gentility. But I was. *Kazar*, I have been here on *Omphale* for three days. Naturally, the Monitors came to know of my presence here—I am considered by the *vokarthu* government somewhat of a nuisance—be-

cause I insist on serving my lady the Kahani, even though she be exile and outlaw, too, instead of betraying her and bending-the-knee to that vapid fool, her husband's brother. Twice a day those who also serve she whom I serve come to this place and set down clean food, should I be needful of it, and in hiding."

"Who is this lady whom you serve?"

Sharl's eyes flashed proudly. "A *great* lady, of the blood of many Kings—the true Gods'-Race—sprung truly from the lions of Cazim and Ambalhu and Iokhar, and the other High Kings of ancient time! She served Rilké on her realm of Valadon truly, and well, with many great works: places-of-books where all who knew the craft couldst read and learn—places-of-teaching, where those who knew not the craft, couldst learn it. All these she and my lord the Kahan (may the Seven give him bliss!) wrought and raised, for the bettering of the People. And, too, of much honor, places-of-healing, where those in pain or of illness, with broken limbs and eyes that are clouded, or troubled-in-the-mind, might come and be healed by wondrous *dok-i-tars* of much craft, from beyond the stars. And other things as well that I do not understand, being a simple man and without learning, save of war and sword-craft."

"And what happened to your lady?"

"Her the *vokarthu* pushed from the Dais, unrightfully and withouten honor, setting aside as void and unlawful the screed of commands my lord the Kahan left behind, naming her husband's younger brother Kahan and not herself, as her husband willed should be done! Her they would have brought here—with unlawful force—here, to Omphale, to a Palace-Prison they keep for those they wish to keep from view but not to kill. But my lady took herself and all loyal to her, good warriors and wise elders, far from Valadon in secret and at night when there were none to see. To a tiny and very-barren world in the Rift—a world called Ophmar, beyond the reach of Imperial law; and there she gathers about her good men and true, for the winning-back of the Dais of a Thousand Kings, rightfully and lawfully hers by blood-right and screed. And half the Princes of the Border worlds—aye, and Outworlds, too—cleave to her bright ban-

ners, day by day . . . for if blood-right and Kahan's screed and sacred law of inheritance are of naught and may be set aside by whim or word of *vokarthu* lords, what law protects us? What can we believe in?"

His words were sincere, deeply earnest—deeply moving. Warm and secure in this underground haven, his belly filled with good Rilké fare and blood stirring with sharp wine, Raul listened sleepily to the Chieftain's words. He was thinking of Jeanne d'Arc, and Boadicea of the Britons, who held out against the iron legions of Rome with a pitiful handful of wicker-work chariots and a band of loyal men, and also of Elizabeth Tudor who balanced her woman's wit and empty purse against the world-shaking weight of Imperial Spain, with all the wealth of the Indies behind it.

Dreamily, he said, ". . . Should you be telling me all this? Of her hiding-place, and her plans, I mean?"

White teeth flashed in a frank smile.

"But why not, of honor! Since you are to join us, and be the Lord Shakar of all her force!"

"The war-leader . . . ?" Linton was jarred awake at the casual phrase. "So *that's* the job you were going to offer me, eh? Well, I'll need to do some thinkin' about that, ere ever I accept. . . ."

A small red light flashed beside the door, and Sharl, who had been tensely awaiting it, relaxed.

"Think all you wish or need, *kazar*, but—of gentility—let us be gone from this place. The ship is waiting."

"Ship? What ship?"

"The Kahani's private space-yacht, *kazar*. To take us hence to Ophmar in the Rift."

Linton came to his feet, swearing. "Now wait a minute, Sharl—I'm not jumping into anything with my eyes closed! I don't know that I am at all interested in this lady's fight—in fact, I am in the middle of a fight right now, to save my own name and honor, and can't very well take on somebody's else's troubles, till I've cleared the board of my own—"

"But precisely, *kazar*! By now, Pertinax the Snake will have a warrant for your arrest and they will be searching the whole of Omphale City for you and your servant, and

for myself as well, who aided in your escape. By now they have put two and three together—and made five of it. I am an agent of the Kahani. I aided you to escape. You are malcontent and insulter-of-officials and whipper-of-government-spies, and everything else the venomous imagination of Pertinax-Snake can think of—of *course* you are a traitor, and to be seized—or shot! Where can you go? What can you do—outlaw, exile, traitor? Where should you go, of honor, save to the planet of outlaws, and exiles, and traitors!”

“Aye, he’s got a point there, Commander,” Gundorm Varl muttered. “That sour-faced fella in green, the one I whipped, he won’t give y’ a chance to explain. Maybe we better jump while we got a ship waiting!”

“Yes . . . and the man behind him, that incompetent toad, Mather, won’t listen to an argument either,” Linton mused, fingering Asloth’s golden hilt grimly. “All right, Sharl. I’ll go with you. You offer me a haven, and I have naught else to do but accept.”

“Of honor, *kazar*, you will not regret it!”

“I’d better not,” Linton rasped, with all the insolent arrogance of a man pushed into a corner beyond human endurance, and aching to lash out at an enemy. “But I want one thing very clearly understood, between us two. *I am not accepting the Kahani’s offer to become her Shakar and to lead her horde up against Valadon!* There’s an Imperial Patrol garrison on Valadon, and I may be a traitor in name and repute, but I will not lead armed men against my own comrades. That’s definite.”

“It is understood, *kazar!* And agreed!”

“Understand this, then, as well, Chieftain. I will go with you to Ophmar, then, because I must go somewhere and have no other haven. *But*. If I decide *not* to join the Kahani—and I may very well decide not to—then I want it clearly understood that I will be granted safe and swift passage from the Rift to a planet of the Cluster that I will name later. This must be guaranteed me. In return, I vow on my honor never to reveal the planet upon which your Kahani is concealed from official search—not even if she wages war against my own people will I speak of her hiding-place.”

“*Kazar*, it is guaranteed. Even as you have stated it. Upon

my name and the honor of my Clan—I vow it!” Sharl stood up and faced Linton eye to eye. And his voice rang with candor and frankness.

But something moved just below the surface of Raul’s mind—an intuition, perhaps, or merely an impulse. He slid Asloth from her scabbard and proffered her.

“Swear it upon this sword!”

Fire blazed in the yellow eyes—swiftly seen and just as swiftly concealed. He darted a keen, piercing look inquiringly at Linton. Then . . . a quiet smile.

“Kazar, of love, I swear. Upon thy sword!”

Gently he took the long blade from the terrestrial, kissed her gleaming steel just beyond the hilt where an old, worn sigil was graven in the clean cold metal—kissed Asloth reverently as if she were a Holy Relic—and returned her in salute-position. Raul slid the blade back into her scabbard.

“Then let’s get going.”

The ship had come down in a deep gully a few miles beyond the outskirts of the city. Raul was astounded, when he got a good look at the craft. He had expected—he knew not what, exactly, an old battered space-tramp, a converted freighter, something like that. But no.

She was a dream of a ship. Small, very compact, but sleek and trim and expensive. Easily worth 200,000 munits, if a single copper. Technically a Falcon-class speedster, Raul could see at a glance that she had been completely overhauled, with the addition of at least one set of dual drive-compensators, and fully equipped with the latest anti-detection gadgets from neutrino-leakage baffles to full 360° radar shields. She was a beauty. Until he spotted the shield-nodules along the sleek hull, Raul was puzzled how such a ship could land so close to the capital without being picked up on the scanners and raising an alarm; but the expensive, custom antiradar equipment answered his question. With such shielding, she could fly anywhere without being discovered.

Their pilot was a young, grinning Rilké boy who had seen cadet service with the Border Patrol. He wore a supple suede cloak, Border-fashion, over familiar gray space fatigues. He

was an intelligent youth, Raul could see, and obviously in love with the Kahani's delicious little yacht.

They entered swiftly and took their places in the tiny but beautifully-appointed little salon. It was paneled in rare incense-wood, with screens of native carving in the intricate and traditional geometrical patterns beloved by Ril-ké artisans. Everywhere Raul noted the sigil of the House of Valadon, a seven-pointed scarlet star with wavy rays: picked out in chip rubies on the center panel, and inset in stained glass in the epergne that stood as an ornamental centerpiece on the small dining taboret.

The imprint and token of the Kahani was all about them, as if her spirit hovered invisibly near. Like certain rare forceful men and women of extraordinary character, the essence of her personality seemed to permeate everything she touched . . . it was in the air, in the faint, lingering trace of candlewood perfume which Raul intuitively guessed was her favorite scent . . . and in the furnishings, for he noted traces of a woman's eye in the red-leather upholstery which contrasted boldly with the hues of the subtle lighting.

It became apparent they were delaying lift-off for some reason. The reason arrived a few minutes later: the serving-woman who had warned Sharl of the Monitors entering the bazaar hours ago. She came swiftly in, carrying a bundle, with the small green-and-white bird riding on her shoulder. Once she was in, the young pilot sealed the space doors and activated the gravitron.

Weightless, the ship flashed up out of Omphale's atmospheric envelope. Planetary drive cut in, and they rode for a time on the proton-jets until the craft was out of the system's plane of the ecliptic. Then the proton-drive was cut off, and they converted to star drive, with all the familiar tingle of weird vibration down through every particle of the body, and the brief but never-pleasant surge of momentary vertigo.

Soon they were hurtling at the equivalent of a dozen light-velocities through the equivocal moving patterns of eye-wrenching color that made up neospace, Vision-screens cut off, blinding them to the sanity-jarring kaleidoscope of

wild hues, and Raul settled back cozily into the leather sofa to do some thinking.

He slept, instead.

When he awoke some hours had passed, and they were approaching their destination. They had already converted to normal space, and the huge, curved forward vision-screens were filled with the wild, seething glory of Thunderhawk Nebula, a parsec-long cup-shaped cloud of free hydrogen, shot through with radiant splendor from the rays of the great nova, IGC 41189, that blazed deep within it.

Raul stretched stiffly (noting that someone had thrown a cloak over him as he slept), rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and went forward to stand silently with Sharl beside the pilot-chair. Ahead, like a black thread winding through the vast, incandescent fury of the nebula, he could see the Rift. Before long it swelled before them into a vast ebon tunnel, a channel of safe passage through the blazing chaos of the great spacecloud. They reached Ophmar a few minutes later.

Swinging in close orbit about its primary, a small, dim red star with an F5 spectrum like Algol C, lonely little Ophmar was the only planet for all the long passage of the Rift. Raul felt an absurd pang of melancholy: sad, dark little world huddled here all alone amid the fantastic splendor of the vast nebula . . . yet it, too, like greater worlds in the more populous regions of the Galaxy, had its role in unfolding history

They swung in close orbit about the small planet, while the pilot exchanged recognition-code and obtained planetfall instructions. Then they spun down in a narrowing spiral, slowing speed, towards their landing-place. Raul got a good look at the planetary surface: a shattered wilderness of naked rock, riven and cleft into deep gorges, stupendous fanged peaks, sheer cliffs, desolate, grim, foreboding. The predominant hues of the rocks were ochre and dark vermilion. The air was thin, but breathable. The temperature was biting and bitterly chill.

They drifted down feather-softly on the gravitron into a deep cleft in the rock that widened, deeper down, into a monstrous gorge. Halfway down the stark cliff a wide low

cavern mouth opened in the wall: the young pilot dexterously halted their descent and floated the ship into the cavern on special chemical rockets, a small spurt of semiliquid fuel at a time.

Then they got out and stood looking about curiously. The enormous cavern arched above them like the inside of a vast bell. Flat banks of illuminants were set at intervals along the roof above them, shedding a soft, even light. And scurrying, hawk-faced Rilké went to and fro, helping the pilot to moor his ship in a small cradle of wooden logs, drawing a tarpaulin over the slim craft.

"Eh, *kazar!* Welcome to Ophmar," Sharl smiled. Raul grinned faintly, feeling uncomfortable and somehow out-of-place. He felt that in some way he had been nudged and maneuvered into coming here, and he subconsciously resented it.

Sharl exchanged a few low words with a small sleek, obsequious little man: not a Rilké but a Chahuna, from his crest of red feathers and liquid sloe-black eyes; the first non-Rilké Linton had seen in league with the Kahani.

Following Linton's gaze to the lip of the cavern, where the chasm fell sheer, the Chieftain said: "Here, tunneled into the wall of the cliff, we are secure and beyond any eye looking down from above. But come, of gentility, my friend!" He propelled the smaller Chahuna forward with a brown, lean hand on his shoulder. "This is Imeon Bar-Kusac, who will do your bidding during your stay with us, *kazar*, be it long or be it short, Gods' willing! He informs me that our arrival is already made known to my lady, and that she will give you audience at the ninth hour—four *isata* from now."

Raul acknowledged the meeting, and Bar-Kusac bowed and said: "Of permission, if the *kazar* and his servant will come with me I will conduct them to their suite. There they may rest, and refresh themselves with wine and food, and don new raiment."

They bade temporary farewell to Sharl, and followed the little Chahuna into a network of cross-connecting passages cut through the ochre rock. Obviously the stone-work was very ancient: here and there traces of an ancient script,

pictoglyphic in nature and unfamiliar to Raul, could be seen. Raul made a mental note to inquire of Sharl, when next he encountered the Chieftain, of the origin of these caverns.

Old enough, yet they were clean and dry and kept in good repair, well-lit and well-ventilated. All about them, he saw and noted signs of industrious and well-ordered preparation: men in squads going to and fro in good order, busy-ing themselves on various errands. They passed a smithy, where a huge sweaty bull of a man bent over smoldering coals, hammering sword-blades into shape with ringing blows that raised scintillant fireworks. And a brace of storerooms well-stocked with steel weapons, preserved foods, modern radiation guns—both pistol, rifle and semi-portable models, as well as explosives.

The Kahani meant war—and she meant business!

The Chahuna left them at the entrance to their suite, a large and roomy series of chambers, hung with rich carpets and set about with scattered low tables and piles of cushions.

"Here I leave the *kazar*, of gentility. Rest yourselves in good time. I will return just short of the ninth hour, to guide you thither to the Presence."

Raul answered his salute, and entered their rooms. He wanted a good hot bath and a half-hour's nap. He wanted to be at his best, and well rested, with a clear head, when he finally came face to face with this Cleopatra of the Border worlds he had heard so much about.

It was a meeting he was looking forward to with great eagerness. . . .

SIX

SHORTLY BEFORE the ninth hour, the Chahuna came to fetch him to the audience-hall of the Kahani. Raul had bathed and rested, awakening to find a suit of Rilke garments awaiting him, which Gundorm Varl said had been brought by a servant during his sleep. As his own fatigues were unsuited to a royal audience, and somewhat travel-

stained, he gritted his teeth and donned them, feeling vaguely ridiculous in such exotic finery.

There were tight trousers of forest-green, which tucked smoothly into calf-high boots of tan suede. Then there was a loose, sleeveless blouse of fine silk, darker green, and a wide plain girdle of brown leather, set with heavy cubes of dull silver. This was topped off with a large, swirling cape of the same supple suede as his boots, but lined with green, silver-shot silk, with a great flopping collar. Thick wristlets of beaten silver went on each arm, and his hair was bound back with a narrow suede strap whose loose ends hung down to his left shoulder. About the edges of the cloak and on the two ends of the brow-band were affixed small copper bells which made faint clashing music when he moved.

He assumed the clothing of a Rilké War-Chief without protest, adding one thing only of his own: he hooked the scabbard of the golden sword onto the rings set in the leathern girdle. Regarding himself in the mirror when finished, he thought he looked absurd. Utterly. But, *when in Rome* . . . whatever "Rome" was!

"I do wish y'd let me come with y', sir," Gundorm Varl grumbled as he set to leave. But the invitation was clearly only for Raul alone, so he sternly bade Gundorm to stay in their suite and out of mischief—and left.

The Chahuna guided him through a maze of corridors up to a great, double-leaved door of heavy black *chingti* wood, bound with copper and set with flat studs of copper as huge as a galley-tray. Before this imposing portal stood a guard: a Faftol, black as oiled ebony, thewed like a titan, a head taller even than Raul's six-foot-four, and naked except for a red cloth about his loins. He held across his thighs a mighty hammer, as he stood spread-legged before the door: a terrible, blunt ugly weapon—a huge thing of solid iron that must have weighed thirty or forty pounds, and could smash a man aside as easily as one swats a fly. From the amazing ropes of muscle that stood out on his naked arms, and writhed like serpents of living jet across the width of his chest and shoulders, it looked as if the Faftol could use it with ease.

"The *Shakar* Lin-ton, at the bidding of the Kahani," his guide announced.

"So this is he, eh? A real man at last! Salute, *kazar!*" the giant Faftol rumbled in a deep-chested voice, grinning with a flash of white teeth.

Raul returned the greeting, eying the nude giant with respect, from his shaven black skull and the enormous rubies that flashed in his earlobes, he seemed to be a privileged member of the Royal Suite.

"You may go in: *she* is expecting you."

Linton noted the peculiar emphasis on the personal pronoun; he filed it for later reference. He was to discover that those closest to the Kahani worshiped her with a degree of love and awe usually reserved for a deity.

He started to pass, and stopped as if he had run into a wall of stone. The giant Faftol had blocked his way with an outstretched arm.

"The sword, *Shakar*. None pass *Zambar* with a weapon. I will hold it safe for thee!"

Raul flushed, and felt his face tighten. Since *Sharl* had given him *Asloth*, the golden sword had not left his thigh. He did not intend to part with it now.

He considered the black giant with cold, flaring eyes. In the mood he had been in ever since his "interview" with *Dykon Mather* yesterday, the least hint of restraint or control over his thoughts or actions infuriated him like a whiplash.

"Very well."

He turned on his heel, and spoke briefly to the *Chahuna*.

"*Bar-Kusac*, you may tell the Kahani for me that if she wishes to speak to me, she must come to *my* quarters. I keep my sword by me."

He started to stride back down the corridor along the way he had come. The *Chahuna* came pattering after him.

"*Kazar! Kazar!* What do you do—where do you go? The lady has *commanded* your presence!"

"I am neither the Kahani's subject, nor her servant, nor her slave. If she desires to meet with me, it shall be on my terms—or not at all. I am her guest, and on my world a host trusts his guests and allows them to retain their weapons, if so they desire. Tell that to the Kahani!"

"It shall not be necessary."

A cold fluting, silvery voice. They both turned with surprise to see the mighty valves of *chingti* now lay open, and a slim, small figure wrapped in scarlet and green silks closely molding her figure, stood within the entrance.

"Are you—the Kahani?" Linton blurted.

The girl smiled.

"I am the least of *her* servants. But you may retain your beautiful sword, Commander Linton. *Zambar*, O naughty one! This is a great lord, a Shakar from beyond the stars. You must not annoy him! Come, Commander—"

Zambar stepped aside to let them pass. And he grinned widely as Linton strode through the mighty door.

"See? What did I say—did I say the *vokarthu* Shakar was a *real* man!" he chuckled, to no one in particular.

The valves closed ponderously behind Linton, and he looked around. All was dim light and gauzy veils of silken stuff and eddying clouds of sweet, heavy incense . . . he felt rather dazed and awkwardly out of place. Turning, he was surprised to find himself alone: the servant-girl had vanished somewhere, and his Chahuna guide had apparently remained outside in the corridor with the black giant. He looked about, irritably, and saw a black opening behind half-drawn silk draperies. He headed for it.

It led him to a long hall, nearly two hundred paces in length and unlit, save that he could see a brilliantly illuminated chamber at the other end. He followed the dark hallway, dimly sensing the scrutiny of hidden eyes following his lean, raw-boned height. *Female* eyes, he suspected. Almost as he could hear the smothered whisper of womanish giggles; self-consciously he straightened his shoulders, face burning, and wished he did not feel so very much a fool.

The unlit hall opened into a room of such immensity and of such stunning magnificence that he paused, dazzled. The walls were crusted with very ancient mosaic designs in many-colored glass squares. A veil of sheerest, peach-yellow gauze stretched across the room before him, and standing at wide intervals about the mosaic wall and along the partition of gauze were massive candlesticks of pure silver, standing as high as his hip and as large around as small barrels. Towering

out of these were truly gigantic candles taller than a man and thicker around than his thigh, of creamy, whitest wax, casting a brilliant and flattering illumination that glowed and sparkled from the gray-and-yellow, highly polished marble tiles upon the floor, and flashed from the glassy, intricate mosaics as if they had been fashioned entirely of precious gems. Here and there about the floor were rugs of cream-white snowcat fur, each worth a year's salary at the pay-rate of his Naval career.

It was a scene of sumptuous, barbaric splendor, fantastic to his rude, back-country Border eyes: an opium dream . . . a vision of forgotten opulence, Byzantine in its richness and intensity, almost savoring of Salammbo's Carthage or Haroun's Baghdad.

"Commander . . ."

A woman appeared, from behind the peach-hued gauze curtain. Another girl, different from the one who had met him at the door. This one was gowned in black-and-gold brocade which hugged her slim body. The girl at the door had been very attractive: this one was breathtakingly lovely. She gestured—

The gauze draperies opened and slid aside. Facing him across the huge room, a young girl sat on a throne of jet black marble, veined with iridescence like a peacock's hues, fiery opal, green, blue and rust.

When he saw her face, he forgot the rest of the room.

Raul Linton knew very little about women. But he knew genuine beauty for the very rare thing it is when he saw it. He saw it now. . . .

She was young—very young. She looked seventeen or eighteen. (He knew she must be at least in her early twenties.) Her face was a calm, pure oval deliciously colored, like her bare arms, a superb creamy-brown, tawny, without flaw. She had a small, round, stubborn chin. And eyes large, clear, wide-spaced beneath level, winging brows . . . eyes that tilted ever so slightly at their corners . . . eyes of the blackest black imaginable. Intense. Magnetic. Compelling—almost hypnotic. Her nose was small and straight; her cheeks flushed faintly with natural, healthy rose. Her brow was broad and high, denoting intellect. She held her small,

dainty head high, proudly, queenly. Queenly, too, were her straight, exquisite shoulders, and the delicate, soft, sweetly-arched bow of her warm red lips. She wore no cosmetics whatever.

In violent contrast with the opulence of her chamber, and the intricate, expensive garments of her women, she wore a simple, severely plain white gown closely drawn about her small, breathlessly slim figure. She sat perfectly still, just watching him for a long, long moment, and in that interval he took in every detail of her dress and appearance.

She wore no jewelry—not even a ring to mar the pure beauty of her small, capable brown hands. Nor so much as an armlet to break the gracious symmetry of her bare arms. Her dark, straight hair—it was as black, and glistening, and full of highlights as a raven's wing—flowed smoothly over her shoulders and down her back. Her only concession to feminine ornament was a small cap, an *ashkar*, atop her head. It was of small, flawless ice-blue diamonds woven together with stiff threads of gold wire. Still she did not move or change her expression.

Stiffly, feeling his face burn, Linton made a small, jerky bow: inadequate obeisance to a Planetary Prince, he knew, but he did it on impulse, not intention.

He took his eyes off her, and looked about him, self-consciously, seeing the three-step dais upon which she sat enthroned in her black marble chair, and the rich crimson and purple carpet that was laid on the steps. He was conscious of a delicious, hauntingly familiar perfume . . . ah, yes! . . . the scent of candlewood he had noticed in the salon of her space yacht.

It suited her well: dry, musky, clean, resinous, yet sweet and heady. The scent of wild, wind-blown high places, open to the sky and torn with great winds.

Then he looked back again and caught her eyes regarding him, thoughtfully, and saw the beginnings of a slow, warm, friendly smile.

" . . . So *you* are the Raul Linton of which I have heard so very much," she said in a clear, warm voice. "I welcome you to Ophmar, where neither of us belongs. I am the Kah-ani of Valadon."

"I know," Raul said stiffly, even rudely. He felt a vast and bewildered resentment stirring within him: resentment at her amazing youth, at her astonishing beauty, and (perhaps above all else) at her ease, poise, and air of self-reliance, which contrasted with his own lack of same—of which he was acutely conscious.

"I've heard of you," he said suddenly—inanely. She laughed.

"I'm glad! Soon the whole Cluster will hear of me—Gods'-willing!" Her laughter was like her smile—unforced, not artificial, springing from within.

Raul was surprised that she spoke Imperial Neoanglic so very well—with only the slightest hesitation over polysyllables (a delightful music, her hesitating slight accent gave to his common, workaday name!) and a mere touch of foreignness to certain vowels. He felt alert, as if he were all over a mass of eyes, ears and nerve-endings. Both of them (he felt) were very keen and watchful during these first few minutes of their meeting: trigger-sharp to catch intimations, hints, subtleties. He tried to force himself to relax, to stand easier—there was no other chair visible in the room, save for the one in which she sat—and to speak without awkwardness. It was a lost battle, he knew; cursing himself for a blushing schoolboy, he felt as uncomfortable as a youth at his first liaison! And there was nothing he could do about it!

In the next moment he thought perhaps she was a telepath: for mischief flashed in her huge eyes, and she said softly—

"You seem uncomfortable standing. Shall I have my women fetch you a chair?"

"Uh—no. I prefer to—stand," he said.

In the next instant—she changed totally, taking him unawares with a sudden, direct question in High Rilké.

"Of gentility, *kazar*—what shouldst thou do, were thou suddenly bereft of that which was legally thine, by blood-right, law of inheritance, and *kahanal* screed? If, without notice or warning, or so much politeness as might be contained in a mere 'if-thou-wilt'—thou wast forced from thy office, from thy rank, from thy home, thy servants, and all of thine possessions?"

Instantly, without a moment's hesitation or thought, he

answered straight and from the heart: "I would fight to have it back."

"*Aha!* Thou wouldst fight—even though it was to break the law?"

"Yes—of honor."

She leaned forward, staring intently into his eyes.

"Then—of honor—thou wouldst *kill*, to have back that which wast thine, and which others seized from thee? How many wouldst thou kill? A ten? A hundred? More? How many more wouldst thou kill?"

Dazedly: "I don't know. If there were no other way to force the thief to give up my property, I would kill—yes. How many, I cannot say. But I would fight in every way of which I might think."

"Even though thou be namedst 'outlaw' and 'criminal'?"

"Why—yes, I guess so. I think a man has the right to fight for his property, as he would defend his woman or his possessions from seizure." He laughed a little, but neither bitterly nor with any real humor. "Some are very swift to attach such names to others!"

She nodded, and the diamond *ashkar* tinkled like tiny crystal balls.

"I know that thy government has given such names to thee, Lin-ton. Such names have they also fastened to me—for that I seek to have back that which is mine, as the Dais of Valadon is mine by blood, law and marriage, and which they took from me by force, and with lies, treacherously and without lawfulness."

"So have I heard, Kahani."

"Then thou wilt understand my plight, and be on my side?" she asked.

"Not—exactly—" he hedged (be careful of committing yourself now; this woman is swift and keen and has a mind like lightning!). "I understand—I sympathize—but as for being on your side—"

Suddenly, she switched again—this time to relaxed, colloquial Rilké.

"I had heard, *kazar*, that your government has cast you out—named you traitor—set their spies to watching you and searching through your belongings. I had heard they watched

your every step, listened to and copied down your words. I had heard, too, that you revolted against these unwarranted suspicions and untrue accusations. Now, answer me this? Are you, of gentility, a rebel against authority? Are you a revolutionary—a traitor—a criminal?"

Stoutly, he set his jaw.

"No, I am not. My government is full of fools and small-minded, suspicious men, fearful of their position. All I did was to have honest doubts about certain policies, to seek to make up my mind on certain matters, and to speak out my doubts!"

"And for nothing more than this, they chased you out—set the police after you—named you traitor and criminal?"

"Yes!"

"But I have done even less!" she cried, fiercely. "I hold a treaty with the Provincial Government of the Hercules Stars, dating from the Empery of Kermian Imperator, father of the present Arban Fourth and of his late brother and predecessor, Uxorian—swearing peace and mutual recognition, each of the other's custom and law! I did not even speak of any doubts as to policy—nor flout any authority—but, and only this, upon the death of my husband, the Kahan, I sought to ascend the Dais that was mine by his own, legal decree—and mine by law of inheritance! As, among the Rilké, the wife takes possession of those things which belonged to her husband, even unto land-title and hereditary honors! Yet they have seized from me all that was mine by right and law, and forced me into outlawry. Since your condition, *kazar*, is so very close to mine—why will you not agree that you are on my side?"

He regarded her for a moment, thoughtfully.

"Lady, because I doubt not you intend to raise arms against Valadon and do battle for it—which will be an act of genuine treason against my government, and an act of violence against the peace of these stars. I, who am *named* 'traitor'—am not one. Though I am *accused* of criminal acts, I am not, in truth, guilty of them. I will not make myself a criminal in the eyes of my own people!"

She sank back into her chair, regarding him wistfully.

"*Ai!*" she sighed. "I wish I were a man. But I am only

a woman! I have none to press suit for me against those who have done me wrong. None to revenge my grievances. I must, therefore, either revenge them myself—with such help as I can raise about my banner—or be content to sit here on this dead ball of rock until I die of old age, wronged, innocent—helpless. Am I so very wrong—of gentility!—to seek redress of my ills, even at cost of ‘an act of violence against the peace of these stars?’”

“The right and wrong of this are beyond my telling, lady. Perhaps you are in the right. Perhaps there were well and good reasons behind the action the government took—I do not say there were, I say ‘perhaps.’ Almost all governments, I think, are filled by incompetents and fools . . . some mistakes, some injustices are bound to occur. . . .”

She smiled. “This you, yourself, know, eh? Are not you, too, *kazar*, a fugitive from *injustice*?”

Before he could muster his wits to compose a suitable answer—she raised one small hand.

The lovely serving-girl in black-and-gold brocade appeared magically beside him. (And how cold and unstimulating her beauty appeared, now, beside the warmth and vitality of the slim girl in white on the great black marble chair!)

“Enough!” the Kahani said, softly. “You are my guest—I weary you, perhaps, with my talk. . . . You will be my guest at dinner, and sit beside me, and meet the Chieftains of my host? You will do this much—at least?”

He bowed.

“Kahani . . . it will be a great honor.”

“Then go, for now, Lin-ton. . . .”

The girl led him out of the great, high-arched chamber. And as he passed between the thin gauze curtains, he stole a swift glance backwards.

She was sitting still, and looked very small and pitifully young, there in the great black chair. And her small, proud head was bowed a little, as if very, very weary. . . .

SEVEN

DINNER WAS HELD in yet a different chamber of this astounding, and seemingly infinite labyrinth of subterranean corridors and halls. This time, it was Sharl the Yellow-Eyed who came to fetch him, with a friendly smile and an urbane salute.

"Where did the *kazar* get that clothing?" he asked, with a depreciating glance at the forest-green and suede attire. Linton shrugged irritably.

"A servant brought it this morning—why? I wore it at my interview with the Kahani, and no one objected."

"That was this morning, and—of honor—at a private audience. But this is a dinner, before all the lords and chieflings of the host. You must look more—ah—"

Raul grinned cynically.

"*Impressive*, Sharl? Like a real Shakar?"

"Well,—yes!"

"But I have not, nor do I intend to accept the Kahani's invitation to become—"

"Never mind all that," Sharl waved the talk aside impatiently. "You must look decent, or you shame your royal hostess. Here—"

He summoned scurrying servants and there was a brief, terse exchange, which sent them all off, sandals slapping the floor, in different directions. In no time they came back, bearing a variegated selection of glittering stuffs in which they hurriedly redressed Linton. Sharl brushed aside, ignored or overrode his half-hearted objections, and in no time—looking (he thought) like a video player cast for a historical pageant.

There was a helm of burnished bronze, the wavy-star sigil of Valadon set in pure rubies on the brow-piece; a great swashbuckling cloak of crimson velvet trimmed with snow-white fur and edged with a gold fringe; red leather boots with golden buckles, polished till they glittered; and a crimson jacket and tights, hung all over with jewels and decorations and amulets, a leathern girdle bristling like an angry porcupine with dag and dirk.

He felt like an utter fool.

The hall of feasting was low-ceilinged, lit with tall candelabra of solid gold, the walls hung with priceless, soft-colored and very ancient tapestries illustrating scenes of the hunt, of war, and of mythological loves.

The Kahani, in a simple white gown again, but literally covered with ice-blue diamonds that glittered on her arms and wrists and fingers, flashed at throat, breast and hips, and must have been worth the annual revenue of half a system, sat at a wide, low couch covered with brocade velvet, eating from bright dishes off a low taboret. She gestured him to a place beside her, and he ascended the dais to her side, removing his ridiculous helm. Rilké custom precluded conversation while at table, so there was silence, save for the sound of feasting.

Below them, in a wide semicircle, and seated on nests of cushions, sat twelve or fifteen men, all Planetary Princes, Clan Chieftains, or independent Warlords. Raul seized the opportunity to look them over piercingly . . . just as they were covertly examining him.

Most them were Rilké: Clan Chieftains, according to the heraldic totems blazoned on cloak or corselet, and hailing from Pendalar and Dorrhea in the Veil. Several were aged patriarchs with silver hair, but most were men of middle-age with gray-shot, grizzled beards, or fortune hunting youngsters with swagger and dash. They were garbed in extremes of jeweled and fantastic luxury that made his own absurd raiment look almost workaday.

One Nomad Prince, a Dorrhean from his purple plumes, caught Linton's eye: a tall, sturdy, bronzed warrior in subdued black velvet with decorations of silver-painted leather and polished iron. He had a short, sharp, black beard and keen intense eyes. He looked like a good fighting man, a real leader of intelligence, forcefulness, and strong will. Raul liked him at a glance.

Among the others were two Planetary Princes, one from Arkonna with stiff, pointed beard dyed indigo and gems hung from his waxed mustachios; the other from one of the Desert Worlds, or so he assumed, seeing the cream-yellow

silken robes worn loose over coats of bronze ringmail. The others were Warlords from Vaela, one also from Arkonna, and a lone Faftol kinglet from Shome.

Raul paid literally no attention to the food; he ate mechanically whatever was placed before him by silent slaves, and after the meal was done could not have described a single dish or even named the wines, save that they were iced and deliciously spiced.

When the meal was done, servants removed the dish-cluttered taborets and brought huge silver bowls of sweetmeats, jellied fruits, curious little dry cakes of something that looked like grated coconut and tasted like marzipan, which Linton had never seen before. And musicians entered the room, quiet, cowed and bearded men in dull, earthen-colored robes, and squatted, making wild, erratic music. One beat the *tambang*, another drew weird chords from the strings of his *tittibuk*, a third blew upon a *zootibar*, while nude girls with masked faces danced for the entertainment of the chieftains.

While the men nibbled sweetmeats and drank wine and watched the dancers, Linton scrutinized them narrowly, seeing the avarice in the thin, pinched lips of this lord, the fanaticism in that chieftain's burning eye, the cruelty that etched deep grooves around another's hard mouth.

Beside him, the Kahani whispered mischievously: "What think you of my council?"

Guardedly, he replied in a low tone: "I do not know what to say. They seem good men . . ."

She laughed lightly.

"Thou great fool, hast thou not learned yet to speak thy mind freely before me? Surely, thou canst see that Lord Albazar, he yonder in the byrnie of gilt steel, joins me only for the gold and the joy of looting—a glance at his fat, greedy lips shouldst tell thee that much! And Prince Narzang Hu, the old man beyond him with the paunch and snowy beard nigh to falling into his wine, he careth for this war only that it may give him new domains to present his two sons on either side of him—the chinless one with the felt cloak, who likes boys, and the other with bulging eyes and mouth sagging open, who is addicted to the death-

lotus. And Yorgala of Ailm, the Warlord in scale-armor with the diamonded baton in his waistband, he seeks to spread the cult of Harza, Lord of Battles, into the Inner Worlds, and to overthrow the Temple of the 'old' Gods on Omphale."

Linton digested this information in silence. Then:

"I like the looks of the Nomad yonder, the Dorrhean in black velvet and iron," he said. She smiled impishly, dimpling.

"Aye, Zarkandu is the only *man* amongst them all. He desires to marry me."

Linton started. "To marry *you!*" he ejaculated, quite involuntarily.

"And why not? Some men have found me . . . appealing . . . despite my youth," she flashed.

"I . . . you are beautiful, Kahani, but," he stumbled over his tongue, "but a . . . you were married!" he finished, lamely.

"Do not the *vokarthu* women sometimes remarry after their husband's death?" she asked curiously. "With Rilke, it is not the custom to remain in widowhood forever. No, Lin-ton, and besides, the Lord Zarkandu is the third son of a Planet-Prince from the Veil-Dorrhea, as you guessed. As third son, of course, he will inherit nothing—the Dais and title go to his eldest brother, and the family palace and lands to his second brother. The only empire he shall ever gain is that which he carves out for himself with his sword—or that he marries. He has pressed his suit, gently, of course. But, tell me, *kazar*, I would like your opinion—as a traveled, sophisticated man, do you not think him manly, attractive?"

Was she teasing him, Linton wondered?

"I think he looks like a . . . a fine person," he said.

"Why do you sound so grim?" she smiled—and her smile broadened at his burning flush of color that turned his face almost as red as his hair.

Before he could think of something to say, her mood changed abruptly, and she was thoughtful, serious.

"Zarkandu of Dorrhea is one I can count upon for true and faithful service," she said. "And the tall man with the feather-kilt, the Prince Kasht of Argastra: a brilliant war-

leader, who will bring to my cause a well-trained and loyal army and a small fleet of excellent fighting ships. And I think the old Shann of Kartoy, too, will be of good service, for he was devoted friend to my father, and to my husband, as well. He is the grave old gray-beard yonder, in green and black, with the scarred brow."

For some obscure reason, which Linton would not even admit to himself, he was troubled about the Nomad Prince.

"Kahani, do you intend accepting Lord Zarkandu?" he asked, knowing it to be a breach of good manners, but not caring. Her answer was curiously important to his peace of mind. She crossed her legs, and leaned forward thoughtfully, chin resting in cupped hand, elbow on knee.

"I do not know. I have not yet made up my mind," she said after a little time.

"But your husband . . . ?"

"You will hear my marriage described as a true love-match, if you listen to the wrong people, but it was not. We were married before we met—I was daughter to the Prince of the *Shykondhanna*, the Clan of the White Dragon banner. I was not in love with Chandalar, but I loved his ideas. He was a good man, with a good heart, and we worked beautifully together for our people. We built together—planned together—dreamed our dreams together. It was our common desire to see Valadon become a modern state: and we were united in this purpose and never fell from it. Bridges, roads, schools, hospitals. Oh, we had brave and gallant dreams! Valadon is a fair and hospitable world—green hills and fertile fields and rich forests. The mountains are wealthy in nickel and zinc, cinnabar and copper. The people are healthy and numerous; life is easy. With literacy, with an industrial technology, with a good trading fleet it could be made into one of the most important worlds of the Cluster. Our city, Ashmir, was fair and strong, and well situated. As the hub of an industrial and mercantile civilization, it would grow swiftly—become rich and powerful—send out colonies—become the center of something great, something larger than just Valadon. Something perhaps, like Meridian," she mused, naming the capital planet of the Galactic Imperium, as one of an earlier age might have named "Rome."

Raul listened carefully to her words. She spoke to him without using sex as a weapon or a persuader, and he admired her for that. He had expected her to flaunt herself at him, to dangle her body and her beauty as a bauble before him, in an attempt to purchase his loyalty and service. This she did not do. Perhaps she respected him for an intelligent man, mature enough to beware of such enticement.

And as he listened to the warmth, the sincerity, the ring of conviction and note of communicable enthusiasm and devotion to an ideal that rang through her words like fierce music, a wave of unexpected emotion swept over him. For he was a Romantic at heart, although he did not suspect it, and thought of himself as a clear-sighted man stripped bare of all illusions; and he was more than half a poet (though he would have laughed and scoffed at you if you had named him one), and something of the poetry and romance in him awoke and responded fully to words like hers, winged with zeal, and the absurd concept that something fine and strong and worthy can be built by far-seeing men and women devoted to something larger than just themselves.

He felt almost dizzy, seized by an aura of personal magnetism such as might have beaten brightly about the person of Alexander, or Caesar, Napoleon or Gandhi, Fuller or Saul Everest, or even Arion the Eternal, who founded the great Imperium upon a dream no less flimsy and romantic than hers. The surge of enthusiasm within him opened doors long closed—pulled him out of habits familiar, and into strange regions where beliefs are shaken, no matter how strongly adhered to, and where golden, glittering impossibilities seemed to hover at the brink of the Possible.

"What happened then?"

She smiled a small, tight, ironic smile.

"What happens to all dreams, at the end, I guess. Your government, you see, wants Valadon ignorant, diseased, dirty, illiterate, and superstitious. Our taxes were raised—too high. The *vokarthu* experts, professors, teachers, doctors, engineers we had hired among the star-worlds—were impeded in coming to take up new duties with us. Their visas were canceled—they were pressed into service during your war—they were suddenly hired away at higher salaries."

"And—then?"

Dull-eyed: "He died. He was very young. *Shageen*, a kind of fever. But I know he died of a rarer, more painful disease, called death-of-dreams. Or broken-heart, if you prefer the truism. And then they set me aside, and put the besotted idiot on the Dais. I would not—truly!—have minded, had his successor chosen to carry on the struggle, to continue the work we had begun. But *Hastril* is just—a nonentity. All he asks of life is to whip a slave to death now and then, or buy a woman or two more, and always, of course, to have enough *viathol* about to drug his dull mind into seas of blazing ecstasy. Ah—the waste, the pity, the shame of it all!"

Her voice broke upon the last word, almost with a sob, and he looked away.

"What will you do now?" he asked.

"*Fight!* These chiefs and lords have promised men and ships, pledged to my banner, to retake Valadon in my name. I await the coming of Yaklar, the Arthon of Pelaire in the outworlds beyond the Nebula—he comes tomorrow to complete negotiations—then I shall strike for what is mine, falsely taken from me."

Raul frowned a little. He had heard of this Arthon before; no one raised in the Border worlds could have failed to hear of him. A troublesome, warlike Outworlder, known to have long coveted the wealth of the Inner Worlds, and to have conspired before this to their looting. But he also knew the Pelairi to be treacherous—who would use the Kahani of Valadon and cast her aside, once her usefulness was done. He felt an uncomfortable chill of apprehension.

"Why do you need the help of Pelaire?"

"Because I need a man to lead my warriors!" she burst out. "They will never follow a woman, no matter how they love me. Oh, my own Clan, of whom I am now sole Chieftainess for my father (may the Seven give him bliss!) is dead now, they will follow me eagerly enough—beyond the farthest star, and past the gates of the Ninth Hell, if such be my wish! As will certain of the other Clans, the Arglinassam, truly, and the Tahukamnar, in full strength, for Sharl is their Chieftain and sworn to my service. But no

others. I need a man to lead them, as my war-leader, my Shakar—and I care little whether it be Lord Zarkandu—or this fat-gutted Arthon—but I had hoped it would be *you*.”

“But I—”

She gestured to the hall below.

“All of them are here because they have heard that a great Shakar from the star-worlds of the Imperium was come to lead them! They are all watching you, although politeness decrees they should not do so openly. They have heard you were a great leader in the Mica Cluster wars, a mighty hero of valor, who have joined my cause. Does this not thrill you—to lead so many warriors into battle? You are here, a fugitive from injustice, as am I—will you not strike a blow for a truly just cause? I do not tempt you with titles or wealth or fame—I know you are man enough not to be bought by them—I tempt you with rarer prizes. To fight against corruption, betrayal, infamy—with *truth* for your banner, *justice* for your sword!”

Dumbly, unable to counter arguments that were so closely in tune with his own inward convictions, he struggled to speak.

“I appreciate . . . I sympathize—”

“Do not accept or refuse—now. Think about it, Lin-ton. There is time. Promise me that you will at least consider my proposal! Do not just decline it without thought. Promise?”

“Very well, I promise that I will think it over.”

Eagerly: “Good! And think, too, of this, Lin-ton: you are cast out from your people, named traitor and outlaw. What will you do—where will you go—how will you spend your days, hence forward? Join me—not as a servant, for I know you resent commands—but as a leader in a noble cause. How better to protest and avenge the injustice that your government has done you, than to battle unselfishly in revenge of the injustice your government has wreaked upon me?”

“I will think of . . . all these things,” Linton promised slowly.

She smiled, and he noted (bemused) how her smile lit up her lovely face.

“Now go, go in honor, Lin-ton. For I have matters to

discuss with these, my chieftains. Tomorrow, when the Arthon comes, perhaps we shall speak of these things again. Go—and consider deeply, as you have sworn to me you would!”

He left the dais, nodding briefly to Sharl, and strode out of the feasting-hall, the great scarlet cloak swinging and bellling from his shoulders, and the golden sword slapping at his thigh.

From the dais, she watched him leave. And the silent chiefs also watched, with admiring and appraising eyes.

And that night he was too full of thoughts and unsettled questions to even think of sleep.

EIGHT

THE NEXT DAY, shortly after “dawn”—for there was no true difference between day and night on a planet whose skies were eternally filled with the clouded glory of Thunderhawk Nebula, only an artificial and arbitrary hour of clock-time—the long-awaited arrival of the Arthon and his party came.

Raul and Gundorm Varl were in the cavern-mouth to watch as the Outworld monarch came down by atmospheric skimmer from his warship orbiting above. There were, in fact, two skimmers, for the Warlord never traveled without his astrologer, his priest, a magician or two, a full squad of his personal guard, and, of course, the various officers and lords of his royal court.

The notorious Arthon turned out to be a tall, fat-bellied and beardless man with a cold smile on his thin lips, a chilling air of condescension, wrapped from head to foot in a magnificent cloak of saffron velvet. He exchanged greetings with the Kahani and her lords that were almost mawkishly effusive and loaded with flowery compliments.

Raul noticed that the Arthon’s guards, of whom there was a surprisingly large number, were great strapping brutes with narrow eyes and sneering lips, profusely armed as if to take a garrison. From the way they stole swift, all-encompassing glances around the landing area, noting the number and allotment of guards and defenses, and from

their arrogant, swaggering deportment, Linton thought they resembled hired thugs and bravos more than military officers.

Raul had remained unobtrusively in the background during the greeting ceremonies, and wandered off when the crowd moved into the corridors bound for the council chambers and the very important negotiations upon which so much hung. He felt at loose ends, irritable, uncomfortable, out-of-place. Not knowing just what to do with himself, he wandered out of the cavern mouth to a small ledge overhanging the terrible sheer drop of the gorge, and sat down to smoke and to chew over his thoughts.

It was like an illustration from Dante's *Inferno*. Overhead, the wild splendor of the fantastic nebula flung out across the sky stupendous streamers and coils of radiance, like the blast-torn firecloud of some cosmic explosion, frozen by a camera forever in an endless moment of furious expansion. And all about him, to either side and stretching beneath his feet into the impossible depths of the gorge, was a seared and shattered wilderness of tortured, cloven rock, like the debris of the explosion.

Ophmar had an atmosphere, of course, but little water and what moisture there was remained confined deep within the planet's core, tapped only by deep wells. Hence, no erosion save that of the shrieking wind, had weathered or smoothed these jagged fangs and towering pinnacles of ochre and dark vermilion naked rock into rounded pectorals of hill and mountain, as could be seen on more temperate and more fortunate planets. Ophmar remained forever as she had been in that primordial age, geological epochs ago, when the lava fountains and torn masses of liquescent rock, lifted up in the violence of her thunderous creation, had first hardened and cooled.

Far above, dim-seen against the nebula's incandescent veil of medusa-locks, the tiny red spark of her primary, from whose bosom she had been cataclysmically torn, burned feebly.

The scene was very fitting to his mood.

For a long while he brooded and smoked, fiery thatch of hair tossed by the howling winds, wrapped in a suede cloak against the biting chill of Ophmar's thin air.

His thoughts were many, and dark.

Eventually he rose, still caught in the mental vertigo of indecision. Hunger claimed him, and warmth: he descended from his lonely, Promethean perch, reentered the vast echoing cavern, and made his way to the quarters he shared with Gundorm Varl.

He found there a visitor waiting for him.

"Someone to speak with y', sir. He said he'd wait, so I let him squat," Gunder said. Raul nodded briefly, and inspected his uninvited guest with curious eyes.

He was a Rilké warrior—Rilké of the planet Argastra, from the characteristic accouterments he wore. Tall, lean, hawk-faced, dark-skinned—one of the many landless, loot-seeking vagabonds who had been attracted to the Kahani's cause by the promise of riches lying open for the ruthless taker. His suede cloak was begrimed and tattered—and none-too-expertly patched. His garments were shabby, carelessly thrown together, and the man himself was unobtrusive, proud but yet servile—completely unprepossessing.

However, Raul greeted him politely, however abstracted and busy with his own painful decisions.

"Be welcome to what is mine—will you share wine and food?" he asked absently.

"Of honor, no, *kazar*. I have eaten." The Rilké spoke a particularly barbarous and colloquial back-country variant of the Tongue, with a slight stammer caused by a speech-impediment, perhaps. Then Linton saw he had an old scar that stretched glassily from the corner of one eye down to snag and lift a corner of his mouth.

And he was villainously dirty.

And he smelled.

Raul invited him to a more comfortable seat on a nest of bright cushions, and knelt himself, Rilké-fashion.

"I thank the *kazar*, of gentility!"

"All right. Will you smoke, then?" he said, offering a packet of cigarels (his last, as it happened).

The uninvited guest would, indeed, accept a cigarel—and from the width of his gap-toothed smile and the slight tremor of his long and unclean fingers, his impecuniousness

was such that he had probably not tasted smokeweed in months.

For a while they smoked in silence. Custom was that one refrains from questioning a guest, but Linton still had too much thinking left undone to hew too closely to good manners.

"My friend says you have requested speech with me. May one inquire, without dishonor, the nature of your request?" he said, finally.

The hawk-face smiled.

"Thought you might like to chat with an old comrade from the wars—*Raul!*" he said—in Imperial Neoanglic.

Linton stared at him.

"Who the devil *are* you?"

"Name's Wilm Bardry, though you knew me as Packer Sexton—we served together on the *Harel Palldon*, back in '61—remember?"

"Yes . . . yes, I do. But *who* are you, really? What are you doing here?"

"Spying, I guess. I was spying on the Admiral when we were ship-comrades. I'm still at it."

Raul half-rose, growling: "Spying on *me*, are you? One of Pertinax's friends—"

The note of command rang in Wilm's voice, an unexpected ring of steel. "Sit down. Shut up. Compare me to that crawling serpent, and I'll give you a mouthful of broken teeth!"

Raul sat back, and Bardry continued.

"Nobody's spying on you. Why should they—you think we think you're a renegade or something? Space, you're the luckiest man in the Cluster right now!"

Confused, Raul burst in: "Luck—what are you talking about, Packer? And, of course—*don't* you think I'm a renegade?"

"Wilm, not Packer."

"Wilm, then, for Arion! What is all this about—"

"Shut up and I'll tell you. Nobody ever thought you were a traitor, except that slimy sneak, Pertinax, and his fat fool of a boss, Mather. You're just a poor, confused idealist, like we've all been, one time or another. Mather's boss, Brice Hallen, officially dismissed charges against you in full Staff

meeting, and bounced the two of them out of the room after making them both look like the sponge-brained incompetents they are. Don't worry about—and don't waste my time with—all this ancient history. Tell me what's happening here."

"But, I . . . well, all right—but how did you know where I was? And how did you get here?"

"Came in with a boatload of recruits for the Kahani's little war, of course; why do you think I'm prettied up like a Rilke? As for knowing where you were, I didn't. But since you took off with Sharl, and he serves *her*, and she's here—credit me with enough wits to put one and one together, and not get three, Linton!"

Head whirling, Linton answered Bardry's grin.

"All set? Boards all green and ready for lift-off? Now: what's the news at your end?"

"She's offered to make me Shakar of her whole force. If I turn it down, she gives the baton either to a Nomad named Zarkandu or to the Arthon who arrived an hour ago."

"Excellent! Didn't I say you were the luckiest man in the whole kaking Cluster? When are you planning to attack Valadon?"

Linton stared at him blankly.

"Great Arion, you don't think I was traitor enough to *accept*, do you?"

Bardry gave a little bark of a laugh.

"I didn't think you were fool enough to pass it up. So you told her 'no'—eh?"

Linton nodded, angrily. "If you think I'm going to lead the Arthon's loot-hungry pirates into the Inner Worlds—"

Wilm grabbed his head with both hands, and groaned.

"Oooh! I knew you were a hardheaded Barnassian, but I didn't know you were a complete idiot! You turned her down! You, an empty-pouched, landless, wandering outlaw—offered the command of the finest host on the Border—*give me patience!*

"Let me tell you the situation, Linton: I'll spell it out to you in simple terms. Ready? Now listen carefully. Every Rilke in the Cluster knows the stupid government played a dirty trick on the Kahani. Half the Border is ready to rise

when she lifts her banner. Every last native world among the near stars is spoiling for a good Holy War against us *vokarthu*—not a one of them isn't eager for independent rule—and watching like hawks to see if she gets it for Valadon. Now.

"On the other other side of Thunderhawk Nebula, sits the Arthon on a new Dais that's rocking like a skimmer in a wind-storm. Half his nobles are after his head—either for his murder of his brother, or his outrageous taxes, or libertine habits. He probably hasn't half the brains of a *karf* in rutting-season, but he knows the only thing that can squelch the griping before it starts getting bloody, and line up his unruly chiefs behind *him*, is a nice little war with slathers of loot and glory for all, and especially some for him.

"Still tuned in? Right. Now right there across the nebula from Pelaire is a parsec-full of ripe, rich, underguarded Border worlds. He knows the Empire is exhausted after twelve years of war—and not likely to scream too loudly or be too quick to avenge what is, after all, a minor Border raid. *And* he knows the Border Patrol is undermanned, underarmed, and lacking in ships. It's perfect!—he'd be more of a fool than he already is, if he didn't lead a fleet through the Rift for a quick in-and-out-again raid, to scrape off some of the wealth of Omphale and the richer Inner Worlds."

"I understand all of this," Linton said. Wilm nodded affably.

"Try a bit more, then. Now, it's all set up for him. Nothing can stop him . . . except, just possibly, Valadon, which lies smack in the 'throat' of the Rift and has a nice little Patrol garrison with a battery of planet-mounted lasers. It would be sweet as Nomad love, if he could arrange to have all of Valadon rise and overthrow the garrison right about the time his fleet comes streaking through. And what does he find, perched here on tiny Ophmar halfway through the Rift, but the outlawed and exiled Kahani of Valadon, gathering together a little army of her own and scheming to smash the Valadon garrison and take her place on the Dais once again. It's perfect. As if the Fate-God had set the whole thing up for him. All he has to do is persuade the Kahani to lend him her aid—he can promise her anything, it doesn't

matter—nor is she in any sort of a position strong enough to turn down his offer. Have I still got you in my beam?”

“Steady on,” Linton grinned, savagely. There was a wild, boyish enthusiasm about Bardry he found infectious.

“Right. Toss another smoke over here, and I’ll—good! Now, then. And here, right in the middle of everything, sit you, eating at your conscience and feeling noble as Arion that you turned down the most glorious, grand and golden opportunity any man ever had offered to him on the bended knees of Destiny! Still don’t read me? Why, great stars of space, man, what’s to keep you from buying the Kahani’s offer, taking command of her army, whipping it together, and ramming it right straight down the Arthon’s fat throat! You get him bottled up—he can’t get his fleet past Ophmar without your permission—even a handful of ships could hold the Rift at this narrow spot against half the Universe till the end o’ time!”

“But—”

“But—hell! You break the Arthon’s advance, and you not only save the Kahani from starting a serious war and making a very bad mistake (right now, Hallen’s government has nothing more on her than they do on you)—but you also preserve the peace and security of Hercules, and save the Inner Worlds from being invaded, smashed wide open and looted bare by this pack of howling savages!

“Know a better way to recover your ‘lost’ reputation, than this one—to single-handedly beat off an invading army and save the whole damned Cluster all by yourself? Arion! Dykon Mather’s blood will boil when he hears it was *‘known seditious troublemaker Raul Linton’* who preserved the Provincial Capital from attack. Think either he or that slimy sneak, Pertinax, will have any career left, when, after hounding you out of the Hercules stars and yapping ‘traitor! traitor!’ at your heels, you turn out to be the heroic savior of the Imperial Border? Why, the government will laugh the two of them from here to Meridian, and they’ll be lucky to get jobs as fourth-sub-assistant postal clerks after everything’s done!

“And what about the Kahani? She has a very legitimate gripe, eh? Hallen did her dirty, right? So—once you’re the

big man in these stars, don't you think the Viceroy could be persuaded to hand out a few amnesties here and there, and maybe restore her to her Dais, if *you* ask it?"

"I think—"

"Think—kak! *I know*. What ever you'll want will be yours for the asking; don't even bother thinking about it. Why, I wouldn't put it past Hallen to make you Border Commissioner in Mather's place, and let it get out you were acting as an undercover agent for his department all the while!"

The prospect revolved slowly in Linton's mind. He felt his pulse begin to hammer and a half-grin formed on his face. Bardry was watching him closely, almost holding his breath.

"But I'd have to—lie to her. Pretend to accept in good faith—pledge my sword to her cause—" he faltered, half to himself.

"Lie? Man, it would not be *lying*! You'd be doing her the biggest favor possible. You'd be giving her 'cause' the best possible boost. You know she doesn't have a chance in ten of seizing power in Valadon if the government doesn't want her there. And if she causes a breach in the peace—attacks under arms—that's all the excuse they need to slap her away in some moth-eaten back country palace for *life*. And she's too fine a person for that. Too promising and intelligent a ruler, to be wasted that way. And too damn beautiful a woman!

"All you'd be doing would be taking charge of her affairs as she has asked you to. Of course, you'd be doing the exact opposite of what she wants, but, hell, she's only a girl anyway. Right now she's on the brink of making the biggest mistake in her whole life, and the best favor anyone could do would be to jog her out of it. *Why the hell do you think that canny old canary-eyed scoundrel picked YOU for the job?*"

Raul blinked. Things were coming on too hot and heavy for him to cope with all of these new ideas.

"Sharl—you mean he—?"

"You bet your last munit! He's *her* man, of course, to the last drop of blood in his veins. But he knows she's heading for the wrong move. He picked you because he knew

you'd get caught up in her affairs and take a hand—and, being a loyal, patriotic *vokarthu*, the last thing you'd do would be to lead an army against your own people, no matter how shabbily they'd treated you, or however righteously mad you were at the whole rotten, stinking crew of government bureaucrats! He picked you because he knew you'd jump the right way—only a sub-cretin could fail to get the idea of turning the Kahani's army against the Arthon's invasion!"

"If I could be *sure* . ." Raul muttered.

"Sure? What else? When Omphale and the Border are crawling with thousands of deserters, honestly rotten traitors, turncoats, cashiered and angry ex-Navy men, criminals, cut-throats, outlaws, exiles, incendiaries, revolutionists. God Arion, man, he could have taken his pick without turning around—any one of 'em would jump at the chance to get back at the Government, or the Empire, or Society, or whatever name they like to use to cover up their own failures and mistakes. But—*he picked you*, a Linton of Barnassa, with loyalty and service to the Province bred into your blood, and brain, and bone, for six solid generations back!"

There was a long minute of silence, while Wilm's excited words echoed in Raul's mind. Then he got up slowly. His face was burning, his eyes flashed, the blood was thundering through him, and everything was settled within him.

"I'm sold, Wilm. I'm your man."

"Good boy!" Wilm sprang up and seized his hand.

"I knew it! I knew you were the right man—that I hadn't misjudged you, Linton! Now go to it—bust into that council chamber as acknowledged Shakar and give the Arthon seventy kinds of hell. Accuse him of treachery, of betraying his own pact, of conspiring against the Kahani—"

"Wait a minute, Wilm! What are you talking about? I couldn't make them swallow a wild charge like that, and it would tip our hand and give the whole game away!"

"Before you can count to twenty, the game'll be shot if you don't!" Wilm rapped back. "Because the Arthon means real war. Either he gets a pact with the Kahani, or he takes Ophmar by storm. He's got half his fleet hovering

back there in the Rift, waiting for word to attack us here and now!"

"How do you know this?"

"I got close enough to him in the crush to use this—" One lean, brown hand disappeared into Wilm's dirty cloak, and emerged holding a marvelously compact little "scanner." "I suspected he'd try a trick like this—it's just his style. And sure enough, he was wearing a harness strapped to his chest, under those robes: a commo set large and powerful enough to contact the fleet. He thought he could get away with it, because he knew none of the Rilké would recognize a planet-to-ship tightbeam communicator rig even if they saw him with it!"

"But are you *sure*? Maybe it's his means of communicating with the ship he has in orbit around Ophmar!"

"No. For that, he'd use the commo set in the skiff which brought him down there—it's moored in the cavern-mouth for his use. But I double-checked to see if all my boards were green: I used an electronic scrambler and picked the lock on the Kahani's yacht, and took a look at her mass-detector panel. Sure as seeing—there's enough ion-steel floating up there at about fifty million miles further back up the Rift to make seventeen ships of the class he owns. Oh, it's straight fact, Linton. He's all ready to knock over the Kahani's headquarters here, if need be. But he'd rather get it all peacefully, by having her sign the articles of her own free will!"

"Now what you can do is this: storm in and get him slapped in a dungeon-cell good and tight. Then we'll lift the Kahani's little fleet up and take 'em against his force. There's a better-than-even chance we can pull it off? What do you say?"

Linton wasted no time with idle words. He was on fire with an exultant, unholy joy—the fight was joined! He seized up the great crimson ceremonial cloak and was off in a swirl of color, Asloth sliding from her scabbard.

"Gundorm! Let's go—"

With a beaming Gundorm Varl on his heels and the naked sword in his hands, Linton was off striding down the hallway, the cloak belling out behind him. His head was high and his heart sang happily: *action—at last!*

Before the portal to the council chamber, he confronted a startled guard who stared at the naked sword and then at Linton's blazing eyes.

"Announce the Shakar Linton—and let me pass!"

Something in the ringing crack of command in his voice caused the guard to snap to full salute. With a thunderous crash the portals were flung wide, causing the council to turn startled faces towards them as they stood in the doorway.

"*Way for the Shakar Lin-ton!*" the guard cried.

It was begun!

NINE

AS HE STOOD THERE in the great doorway, his eye flashed over the turning faces to meet her startled stare. No words passed between them; no signal was exchanged. But none was needed. One look at Linton's blazing, imperious eyes—one glance at the lean, erect fighting stance of him—and she knew beyond need of slow words.

He had come to life! Doubt, confusion, frustration and indecision were ended. Gone was his dull, knotted brow, and stumbling, awkward speech—the slouched, tense posture of one struggling within himself. The time for thought had passed—the moment for action was at hand.

She saw—she knew—and her sudden, breathless smile of delight was like dawn's silent, swift explosion over a drab, dreary wilderness.

"My lords," she said, rising from the tall, throned dais before which was spread the half-circle of lords and chieftains, squatting on cushions with small black taborets before them on the rich carpeting, "may I present unto you the lord Lin-ton Shakar, of whom you have heard so much."

Her rising forced them to rise, all of them, even the Arthon. Linton bowed, briefly.

"The Shakar has agreed to lead my host, and thus has a place in this council . . . to which he comes regretably late—ah—due to pressing duties among my troops. My lord, come and sit you here with us—and your servant, as well."

With Gundorm Varl at his heel, Linton entered the ring and sat down near the dais while the Barnassian squatted behind him. The chieftains reseated themselves. Across the half-circle, Sharl caught Linton's eye and elevated his eyebrows eloquently. Linton half-nodded, and permitted himself a slight wink. The tall Rilké smiled warmly in reply—and welcome.

"The Shakar has led great fleets in the Imperial wars against the Mica stars ere now," the Kahani concluded, "and he has valiantly joined us in our mutual cause, pledging his sword for the love of justice and right."

The Arthon cleared his throat impatiently.

She shot a cool glance at him.

"And now that the lord Shakar has joined the council, of gentility, *kazara*, shall we not return to our discussion?"

A mutter of agreement ran about the ring.

"Then: the lord Arthon of Pelaire was stating the terms and conditions to which we must agree, if he is to join his fleet to our troops. My Lord?"

The tyrant of Pelaire bowed slightly, and began in a smooth yet irritating voice:

"To reiterate, my lady, ten thousand fighting men armed and ready, and forty ships—these all are mine to command and I offer them to your service, if so you choose. Fifteen of these vessels are of the kind the accursed *vokarthu* name 'containers-of-men,' " he said, and Linton presumed he meant a literal translation of personnel-carriers.

"And in these ships thou shalt find room enough for all thy force. But here ariseth the first problem: Valadon hath little armament to halt us, save for a battery of lasers, mounted at the Naval fortress. The batteries of this garrison *must* be seized and silenced ere I can command my fleets to draw within range! This, Kahani, we shall leave to those warriors loyal to you upon the planet. Word must be carried to these faithful, by some means, with instructions to rise up and storm the garrison. This must be timed precisely with foreknowledge of the time of our fleet's arrival, to be fully effective."

"All of this can doubtless be arranged," the Kahani said

gravely. "I am in touch, through spies, with many Rilké of Valadon still loyal to my cause."

"First, then, the seizing of Valadon," he continued, ticking the points off, his scented and curled beard tossing up and down with each arrogant toss of his head.

Behind Raul, Gundorm Varl whispered hoarsely: "Wouldn't y' give a year's wages, sir, to grab that oily Outworlder's beard and give it a good pull, now? Gods of Space, how the fella does talk!"

"Quiet, Gunder!" Raul snapped—and yet could not refrain from smiling at the idea.

Catching the smile, and perhaps overhearing a bit of this interchange, the Arthon paused deliberately, one finger raised, for all the world like one who tests the direction of the wind.

He coughed, a little bark of annoyance, and the expression of his face—glaring eyes and deeply disapproving pursed lips—caused Gundorm Varl to emit a chuckle, hastily choked back as eyes turned his way.

Linton struggled to control his face, and regain the rigid composure suitable to one of his new, exalted rank, but his exuberant spirits were too powerful.

The Arthon glared poisonously.

"Pray pardon me," he grated, nastily, with a peremptory glance at the Kahani, "but have I spoken a jest, or perhaps said something to amuse you, my lord Shakar, for I see you smile when men talk plans of war. . . ."

"No. Please continue," Linton said, bluntly. A faint flush stained the Arthon's sallow cheeks. He glanced away from Linton and continued ticking off points.

"Second, the looting of the garrison's armory for weapons and equipment. If any of the Border Patrol ships are captured intact on Valadon, they shall be added to our forces. Naturally, a levy shall be made on the local treasury—"

The Kahani's head went up at that. "No looting!" she said. The Arthon smiled, insinuatingly, yet arrogantly—a combination Linton had never seen before, and one at which he marveled.

"Of course my lady does not think I can call upon my

men to fight and risk their lives to retake Valadon, without monetary recompense? I shall not, assuredly, touch one *nizan* of Valadon's wealth, but shall levy a suitable sum from the accursed *vokarthu* government's treasury—"

"All of which was taken in unjustly severe taxes from my people of Valadon," the Kahani noted. He regarded her with chilly eyes, and the beard lifted arrogantly.

"The Kahani is aware she is asking for the help of my loyal troops—the protection of my fleet—the—"

"Oh, very well, take what you must—but the amount shall be agreed upon beforehand, and it must only be a portion."

He smirked.

"Of surety—a portion, a fair, just portion!"

Say one hundred percent, Linton thought.

"Thirdly, once the Kahani's officers have taken command of key positions on the planet, and all is securely within her power and *our* aid is no longer required, we shall depart in force for our central objectives, Omphale, Diika, and the Inner Worlds. Now,"—he coughed delicately—"we come to a minor but not unimportant point, one over which I think discussion will not be needed." He gazed deliberately around the low, circular table from lord to lord, including Linton, and back to the Kahani.

"And what is that, of gentility?" she inquired.

"The battery of 177-micron surface-to-space laser cannon," he said silkily. "These shall, of course, be in loyalist hands at the beginning of the taking of Valadon. There is a certain risk involved here: when we return out of the Inner Worlds and cruise past Valadon to reenter the Rift, we shall be directly in line-of-fire of this battery. Purely as a safety precaution, to make certain the battery is in friendly hands, I wish to leave a company of my troops behind to mount guard over these weapons—"

Her eyes flashed, then were veiled behind a fringe of sooty lashes.

"Of honor, I feel certain my lord the Arthon does not suggest he cannot trust my warriors in such an occasion?" she purred silkily, as the chieftains muttered and grumbled—

Raul caught a flash of outrage in Zarkandu's dark eyes, and near him, he noted Sharl of the Yellow-Eyes stiffen.

The Arthon was all a fluttering of deprecating hands and soothing mouth-sounds.

"Such prospects do not enter my mind," he said warmly. "But is it not just within possibility that Imperials or local malcontents might, in the confusion and stir of events, break loose of restraint and seize control of this key battery? Such occurrences are not unknown, particularly are they not improbable considering the planet only new-taken and all disloyal elements of the population would not have yet been traced and apprehended?"

"It is not impossible, true; but I shall personally see that a powerful force of my most loyal warriors holds the laser battery. Of honor, Arthon, having just freed my people from one foreign garrison, I cannot in all good faith see myself permitting *another* foreign troop, however friendly, to occupy the planetary defenses." Her tones were conciliatory, but the meat of her words was a definite refusal.

As if he had decided to test her mettle, the Arthon chose to deliver another veiled ultimatum.

"I'm afraid—of honor, *kazaral*—there can be no question of trusting or not-trusting. I must insist on this point, purely as a matter of friendship between our two sides of this pact. I dare not risk the chance of error in this, and, recall, my lady, if you will not trust my garrison to hold for a brief time the defenses of Valadon—how can I, in all gentility, possibly trust *your* forces to man the laser battery past which my fleet must pass to seek entry of the Rift?"

At this point, Linton decided the situation was perfect. He rose to his feet, pulling all eyes to him with his lean, raw-boned height, flaming thatch of foreign red hair, and flashing eyes. He fixed his gaze on the surprised face of the Arthon.

"Kak."

The obscene monosyllable exploded amid the festoons of flowery, complementive and ceremonially sugary Rilké like a needle-spray of iced water. The warrior-chiefs were literally frozen where they sat. Jaws dropped, eyes gaped at him.

The Arthon turned crimson, and then, as the full, hideous weight of the insult seeped into his consciousness, the blood drained from his features, leaving him paper-white. He sprang tremblingly to his feet, turning to the astounded Kahani and spreading his arms—but before he could mouth a single protest, Linton was at his side with a single great stride, and tore open his robes.

"This Outworld *zephth* dares speak of 'trust,' " he said in a thunderous voice, naming a peculiarly loathsome and repulsive Border pest resembling, both in habits and basic appearance, an obscenely pink and naked rodent which fed on human droppings. "*Trust*—and all the time he is ready and prepared to betray you all! Look—and see the amount of *trust* this fat, impotent boy-dandler has in you—"

Beneath the silken tatters of the Arthon's robe, his torso gleamed naked, strapped into a complex harness of miniaturized electronic equipment.

It would be difficult to have said, at that moment, who was more petrified with astonishment—the Arthon, wheezing and gasping like a fish out of water—or the warriors who were springing to their feet and staring at the harness. A confused babble of noise arose from a dozen tongues: Raul spoke over them all, his flightdeck command voice shocking them into silence. He spoke in finest Rilké, deep bell-like chest-tones:

"This is a device of *vokarthu* science, called a tightbeam communicator. It projects a narrow-focus beam of microwaves through neospace, without possible detection by an ordinary communicator station! Up there in the Rift, seventeen warships from Pelaire are waiting for his signal—just beyond range of your *kazara's* radar! If you were not willing, or could not be threatened or shouted into agreeing to every wish of the Arthon, he planned in cold-blood to violate the flag-of-truce oath of this conference and seize this world of Ophmar by armed force and *make* you perform his bidding!"

Uproar! Swords flashed from scabbards in a ring of hissing steel. Men shouted, cursed, blasphemed—no more gross insult is know to the Border Rilké than this sort of treachery.

The Arthon went mad with rage.

He torn himself loose from Linton's grip and faced them all, stammering incoherently with fury until froth gathered at the corners of his mouth.

Linton lifted a hand to still the tumult—

"Let the filth deny it if he dares! Speak—what have you to say?"

White face twisted in a rictus of blind rage, the Arthon glared at him with burning, basilisk-eyes of black fire. Linton met his furious glare with a cool, mocking grin.

"I have—only this—to say," the Arthon grated, struggling for control. One hand lifted swiftly to the control-box of the harness.

"This—only. *I can still summon my ships at this very instant if I desire!* I would prefer your free and willing co-operation—I still ask for it—but if not, then before one of you can move a finger, I can depress this stud and give the signal prearranged. Answer! Which shall it be—your co-operation in the pact—or the other!"

The Kahani, too, had risen to her feet and stood glaring down at the tense white face and mad eyes of the Arthon. Her face, too, was white—livid with the outrage and insult of broken truce. She regarded him with a piercing glance, eloquent of contempt and disgust.

"Not to save the lives of all of us would I stoop to discussion of any pact or union with such as you have proven yourself to be," she said simply, coldly. It was, truly, a royal answer, and Linton's blood leapt to hear it.

The Arthon sneered deliberately.

"Then you prefer to have this outlaw-nest scourged from one *kepht*-hole to the other by my ships?" he flashed. "And your women—what of them? And the children of your warriors who are here in exile with them?"

It was Zarkandu who answered for them all.

"No child of our blood would wish to be spared by such a mean bargain," he cried. "Rather that all die together, so that they die with honor!"

"Well spoken!" Raul shouted, and caught the tall Nomad's answering grin.

The Arthon was not impressed.

"Brave words—*stupid* words, oh penniless princeling! You have yet to learn, on the gaming-board of the universe, 'honor' and 'justice' and 'mercy'—and such-like terms as these, are but pawns—and he who would truly win to greatness must learn to sacrifice these pawns when need calls! Words—empty air, they are, no more—yet fools such as you choose to die for these words! Die then, if so thou wilt!" Ringed by his dull-faced guards who stood about him with bared steel, the Arthon gave a mocking laugh—and jammed home the stud that sent a call winging across neospace faster than light to summon his waiting ships. He closed the connection with a vicious twist of his hand.

There was a long moment of quiet—and then Sharl the Yellow-Eyed laughed, a short bark of pure joy.

"No—no—of gentility, my lords, my brothers, truly I think none need think about dying—not just yet, at least!"

He withdrew his hand from under his robes, exposing a crystal rod beaded within with tiny micro-circuits.

"Good man, Sharl! The 'dampener'—of course!"

The Rilké chieftains did not know of the function of the *vokarthu* instrument, but intuited something of its nullifying influence on electronic devices from the expressions of savage joy on the grinning faces of Zarkandu, Linton and Sharl—and from the flash of white-lipped panic which convulsed the Arthon's face when he realized his tightbeam communicator was totally "dead."

"Take him!" Linton shouted.

They fell upon the stolid ring of guards with shouting joy and war-cries that rang like bugles—young and old alike, those weaponed and those without arms, who seized up platters or wooden taborets to use as clubs against the Pelaire guard. Perhaps it was the exuberance and war-joy of their exultant mood, or the savagery of their detestation for the truce-breaker, or just that lack of fighting-space jammed the Arthon's guards into so small a space they did not have armSPACE to fight properly—but, whatever the cause, they overwhelmed the guards and the Arthon within moments.

There were no casualties on the side of Valadon, save for a bruise or two, a broken tooth, a blackened eye—

which none of them felt for sheer, singing joy. Nor were any of the guards killed or even disabled, save for one who suffered from a dislocated shoulder (he had come up behind Linton and was about to put a yard of steel through him, but that Gundorm Varl laid hold of his right arm and nearly tore it loose from its socket in disarming him).

The most injured of all—in esteem, at least—was the Arthon, who had been clubbed over the head with a heavy silver platter. This platter, at the time, had served as receptacle for a quantity of *vrome*—a variety of fruit, soft of skin and liquescent of interior meat, never eaten until over-ripe nearly to the point of putrefaction. As a result of this blow, the Arthon currently presented a rather sorry—or charming spectacle (depending on the point of view, of course), being splattered, stained and beslimed with stinking, wet, slimy fruit-pulp, from head to foot—particularly *head*—and most particularly-of-all, his curled, perfumed and dyed hair, beard and mustachios, which were now one dripping smear, stiff with drying and rotten-smelling *vrome*.

Oh, it was a splendid tussle!

And when it was done, and the Arthon and his men were disarmed and standing under guard, Sharl came up to Linton grinning savagely. One eye was blackened and a line of blood drew thin scarlet down his cheek, but his eyes were alight with the joy of battle as he saluted Linton grandly with a bare sword.

"Hail, Shakar! I am glad thou hast come to thy senses at last—and if thou wilt truly be my lady's Shakar, I am with thee to the death—command me!"

"We have much yet to do," he said swiftly. "This is only a handful of the squad the Arthon brought with him—where are the others?"

"Six or eight guard the skimmer down in the cavern-mouth, where it is securely cradled beside the Kahani's yacht. The rest of them—three or four—remain in the Arthon's quarters."

Linton thought swiftly. "Can you rouse a dozen or two warriors—without alarming the entire base?"

"Yes! There is a guard-barracks down the corridor from here, only a few steps away."

"Do so at once—Lord Zarkandul"

The Nomad Prince stepped swiftly to Linton's side, saluting him with a broad gesture.

"Command me, Shakar!" he said with a flashing grin. Linton noted that his crested cap was thrust askew and that half of his black tunic was torn from his brown, muscular torso. But he was unhurt and eager for more.

"Of honor, go with the chieftain Sharl. One of you take half the guards and go swiftly to the cavern to seize the Pelairi there—come upon them quietly, without showing weapons, and take them by surprise. They can have no hint of what has transpired here. The other must go with the rest of the warriors to the quarters of the Arthon's party and perform the same deed with those guards left to watch his property. Swiftly, now!"

They saluted and left. Linton ran a swift glance over the others, and called the Shann of Kartoy to him. He had noted the old warrior-prince during the melee and had seen the vigor and sword-skill he displayed, which belied his gray beard.

"Lord Shann, may I require you to conduct the Warlord of Pelairi and his suite to a suitable and well-guarded suite?"

"Aye, and with joy in the task!" the old warrior rumbled happily. "A more pleasant quarter-hour than the last I have not known for twenty years. Command me, Shakar!"

Raul suppressed a grin.

"Right. And make certain, of gentility, the quarters are sizable enough—for we shall shortly add the dozen or so remaining Pelairi to these."

The patriarch snapped a crisp command to those warding the crest-fallen Arthon and his battered soldiers, and marched the party from the hall.

Linton looked around absently—had he forgotten anything? No—that was it for the present. He turned to go, Gundorm Varl at his side, when—

"A word with you, my lord Shakar?" A voice spoke sweetly from the dais behind him. For some absurd reason he flushed pinkly to the ears.

At which Gundorm grinned hugely.

"What are you leering at, you old buffoon?" Raul snapped. The Barnassian shrugged.

"Then get back to our quarters—find Wilm Bardry and I'll meet the two of you shortly. Lift off!"

Then he turned to the Kahani.

"You lack something of the first requisite of a model Shakar, Lin-ton," she said with deadly softness. "For in the first twenty minutes of your command, you have wrecked the entire war and ended my chances of success. What have you to say for yourself?"

He swallowed, took a deep breath, and turned to join battle with an opponent more dangerous than half a planet full of Arthons—the woman he loved!

TEN

"THE BEST DEFENSE is a strong offense"—this ancient and immemorial rule of military tactics still held true after countless millennia of combat. Linton turned to face his Queen—she was pale but calm, and radiantly lovely.

"Do you trust me?" he demanded. Surprised a little, she eyed him curiously.

Then, after a minute, she replied: "Yes, I think that I may trust you."

"Then listen to me, and heed me. I am willing to be thy Shakar, to lead thy fight—but I am beyond the point where I will serve as willing pawn of any officialdom. I will not follow where another commands—I *lead*, or I do nothing. Choose! Choose now. Take me for thy Shakar—place your destiny and your trust completely in me—and I swear to you by all the thousand Gods of Space that I will serve you well, and will do aught that a man could do to render Valadon into your hands again—or decline my services. Speak!"

She looked at him long and steadily, with those marvelously keen and penetrating eyes . . . weighing the honest sincerity that rang in his tones and shone in his eyes . . . measuring the lean, explosive strength and clean, fighting manhood of him—and decided.

"Very well."

He took out Asloth and laid the golden sword at her feet, in the old, old Rilké ceremony. She took it up and handed it to him, hilt-forward. He kissed the naked blade and returned it to its scabbard.

"Now then, my lady. The help of Pelaire is lost to you—through no action of mine, but through the treachery inherent in your would-be collaborator, Yaklar of Pelaire, whom I exposed before your chieftains—nor do I apologize for it. To have kept silent would be to have betrayed the confidence you have just demonstrated towards me. Answer—could I have done other than I did, in honor?"

She smiled faintly, just a little, at the earnest—and rather boyish—intensity and forcefulness of this new Raul Linton—a stranger whose commanding ways she rather liked.

"No," she agreed soberly, "you did right. I was distraught, seeing my plans collapse, or I would not have flung out my words at you so recklessly."

"Very well! But although Pelaire is lost—we have still to deal with the problem of those accursed warships lurking up the Rift, but between us we shall dream up some pretext for getting rid of them—although Pelaire is lost, we need not give up Valadon. In fact, your hope of regaining your domain was never more certain of fulfillment than it is at this moment."

A puzzled frown creased her smooth brow: "How so? Frankly, I prefer my victories to bear less resemblance to a rout," she said, unknowingly paraphrasing the words of a very ancient but no less lovely queen, uttered under situations not very dissimilar from these.

He laughed.

"You know it not, but the battle is half-won! Although it is not to be fought in the manner of which you would probably prefer—we shall have to forego the brave bugles, banners snapping in the breeze, and bloodied tyrants, broken and kneeling at your feet!"

Her frown deepened, and she began to tap the fingers of one hand on her throne-chair.

"I do not follow you, and now I begin to mistrust you!"

What do you mean? Do you imply you will *not* lead my forces into battle?"

Blithely—and abruptly—he ignored the present trend of conversation, with a blunt question:

"What is your first name?"

She blinked. "Innald," she said, "but I demand that you tell me—"

"Innald. I like it. Strong and hard, yet female. A good, brave-sounding name. Now, you be a brave girl—trust me—and I promise my plan will see you clearly out of this."

"Shakar Lin-ton! I must insist—you have seized the initiative from me—you are speaking beyond me, but I must know what you intend—!"

He laughed again, a bit wildly.

"I shall take from you more—much more, Innald—than that! To follow me, as you have sworn, you must give up all your dreams of conquest and war and of splendid gory revenge! I shall take them all, each one—and give you Valadon on the point of this golden sword!"

Her eyes blazed. Innald could endure insult, defiance, even betrayal—but her royal (and womanly, as well) sense of pride balked at being laughed at and gentled as if she were *only* a woman.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he silenced her with a lifted hand.

"Enough questions for now! I have much to do."

"Are not you aware that you are only my officer—and that you are seizing command a trifle impetuously—that you are being a bit forward?" she hissed, icily.

"Have you selected me as your Shakar because you assumed that I was shy, meek, retiring, and—backwards?" he shot back instantly. It rocked her a bit, he noticed.

"*Hai!* You are the most stubborn, difficult, hard to manage, impolite, infuriating and insulting man that I have ever met! How dare you speak to me—"

"And you," he snapped back, not giving her time enough to finish her profile of his character and deportment, "are one of the most wrong-headed, self-righteous, self-pitying, self-martyred women I have ever met! And one of the most beautiful. No, I rescind that last statement, if you will per-

mit. You are *the* most beautiful woman I have ever met. But, to return to your description of me: let me remind you that I did not choose to come here—I was invited. I did not apply for the position of your Shakar—I had it offered to me. I did not agree to take it on *your* terms—you agreed to *my* terms. Now be a good girl and let me get about my business. I'll win Valadon for you, or do my best. But I must have a free hand!"

She was so furious she could not speak. Her eyes snapped sparks and her tawny face flushed with heady color, brightening cheeks and mouth.

"You are utterly adorable when you are angry. Did no one ever tell you that before, Innald? You should always be mad—cultivate it!"

With that, and a gay salute, he was gone, leaving her gasping with rage and tingling all over with fury. But when she got her breath back and had a few moments to digest the swift-moving flow of events, a half-smile warmed her lips. What woman, however aggressive, does not secretly desire to meet a man capable of mastering her? Before long a small dimple showed at the corner of her wonderful mouth, and the bright hardness of her eyes turned soft, almost dream-full, as she stared meditatively at the door through which he had just passed

It was twenty minutes later. Raul had just met with Wilm Bardry in his quarters. Gundorm Varl had related occurrences to Bardry and he was jubilant with the turn of events, saying things were working out precisely according to his plans. Now they must get rid of the war-fleet waiting down the Rift, and summon official government forces to Valadon, to whom they would deliver the captive Arthon and his crew, and to whom they could turn (having thus saved the Cluster a small, brief, but terribly expensive war) for redress of ills, revocation of exile and outlawry, and restoration of the Dais of Valadon to its rightful Kahani.

Events, however, had taken another turn—and very much for the worse!

Sharl came crashing into the suite, with a half-dozen armed

men behind him, including Zarkandu and the old Shann of Kartoy.

"Linton! Quick! Somehow the Arthon has broken loose—his guards have seized weapons and are fighting their way to the skimmer now!"

Raul sprang to his feet and headed for the door.

"Wilml! Gundorm—with us! There's no time to lose—once they reach the skimmer, Yaklar'll call his fleet on the comset. We've got to head them off!"

Sharl pointed with his sword. *"This way—they will be taking the other route—it is longer, but they cannot know it—we may be able to reach the skimmer before they do!"*

They followed his lead, hurtling down the corridor, boots hammering on smooth-worn stone, and then down a winding stair, stumbling, half-falling in their haste. Raul felt his heart thudding with anxiety, pounding as if it would burst free of the cage of his ribs. They *must* stop the Warlord from contacting his fleet!

It seemed to consume an interminable length of time—clattering down the coil of stone steps—but at last they burst into a central corridor.

"This way!"

They came out into the vast cavern-mouth, echoing with the clatter of their feet. Across the wide, flat floor, spotted here and there with oil-stains, and stacked with crated machinery, including some sections of hull-plating from a partially-dismantled ship—they saw the skimmer.

And in the same moment, from the opposite side of the cavern, a crowd of disheveled Pelairi burst out of another entrance. The two groups spied each other simultaneously.

Raul raced across the cavern, followed by the others. Asloth flashed nakedly in his fist, glistening in the dim illumination.

There was a soundless flash, a puff of white fire—a long, thin, intensely brilliant needle of energy speared past his shoulder to strike a man behind him. He heard the horrible *sizzling* sound of human flesh searing in a laser-beam and a full-throated cry of agony as the man fell.

"They have energy-weapons! Quick—take shelter behind these hull-plates!" he bellowed, scrambling behind one of

the curving shields of proton-steel. Panting hoarsely, gasping for breath, the others followed his lead. Another laser-beam flared in a dazzling shower of sparks as it raked the shield, but the heavy metal was sufficient to block the ray.

They were safe—but trapped! Helplessly pinned down, with the Arthon's warriors free to advance to the skimmer. Raul felt a terrible bottomless pit of despair open up within him, draining his will to fight.

"Are any of you armed?" he snapped. It was the small, plump Chahuna, Bar-Kusac, the man who had been his guide when first he arrived on Ophmar, who replied for them all.

"Only with steel blades, *kazar*."

Raul clenched his teeth, grinding savagely. Beside him, the huge blond hulk of Gundorm Varl crouched. "Say th' word, commander, and we'll rush 'em!"

He shook his tousled thatch.

"No good, Gundorm. They could pick us off before we could get halfway across the cavern."

Another sizzling beam played over the shield, spitting up a rain of blinding sparks.

"Listen!"

They huddled there, ears straining, as a shuffling, slapping sound came to them.

Sharl cursed vividly. "They are crossing the cavern! They will reach the skimmer within a moment—"

Suddenly Raul reached out and seized his arm.

"The dampener—you still have it?"

Sharl's eyes widened with delight.

"Aye!—but will it work on energy-weapons?"

Raul shrugged. "Arion knows! But try it—quick—time's running out!" while the chieftain fumbled, searching in his robes for the indispensable little tool, Raul whispered swift instructions to the others.

"If the gadget works, it will kill their lasers. We'll have only a few seconds to rush them, before they discover their guns don't work. Every man must be ready—sword in hand!"

"Here!" Sharl breathed. "Shall I—?"

Raul nodded vigorously.

"Ready, warriors! Make every second count—"

As Sharl activated the crystal rod, Raul rose to his feet and shouted to attract the Pelairi's attention.

One of them snapped a bolt at his head—or tried to. But nothing happened. The pistol would not fire!

In a flash, Raul was over the barrier and hurtling upon the astounded guards—the others pelting along at his side. Faces mirroring shock and astonishment, the Pelairi leveled the deadly snouts of laser pistols at the oncoming men—to no result.

Then Asloth sank to the hilt in one guard's bulky chest. Ripping the sword clear, Raul snapped a quick chop-cut at the lifted arm of a second, half-severing the limb. Shouts and cries of the assaulted Pelairi mingled with fierce, triumphant war-cries of the Rilké. His slim blade flashed out, piercing the throat of one of the Arthon's pet wizards. Beside him, bellowing out a wordless song of joy, Gundorm Varl was battering in the head of another with a length of iron pipe he had snatched up from the litter of spare parts and miscellaneous machinery.

All was turmoil—utter confusion. They had come upon the guards as they stood in a clump, and the two groups now intermixed—dangerous for close-quarters fighting, when it is hard to tell friend from enemy. Luckily, the Pelairi were garbed in the saffron livery of the Arthon's private guard, and were thus distinguishable. Through the confusion of strike, recoil, thrust, parry, strike again, Linton caught glimpses of what was going on about him.

He saw Zarkandu, nude to the waist, save for tattered ribbons of black cloth which still adhered to his intact collar, his bare brown torso laced with scarlet blood from a shoulder-cut, grinned with a fighting snarl that revealed the flash of bared teeth, as he struck away a sword with his bare arm and drove his dirk home in a Pelairi heart. Beyond him, the old Shann of Kartoy, shouting the savage rhythms of a Rilké war-song, was dueling with two grim-faced Pelairi at once, swords flickering as agilely as serpents' tongues. In the brief glimpse Raul caught before surging, battling figures obscured his view, he saw the graybeard parry a stroke and

strike—sinking his steel through his opponent's heart with a flawless stroke of superb swordsmanship.

And behind them all, straddling the steel barricade, Sharl stood aiming the dampener at the knot of struggling men—and cursing ferociously that he was doomed to stand “idly” by, and miss so glorious a battle!

But then suddenly Raul was too busy to note what the others were doing, for two swordsmen engaged him, too, as the Shann. Asloth sang and rang in the thrilling song of steel beating upon steel, as the golden blade wove a sparkling web of steel between him and the two enemies. Truly was the “Golden Girl” forged in a fortunate hour—a *sharbaré*, in very truth—nor did ever Mnardus God-Smith beat out a finer blade on his divine anvill. In his grip, she seemed to come to life with a strange power of self-movement.

Almost without action of his own will or sword-skill, her saber-blade and rapier-point flashed through the deadly air—drawing a thread of scarlet across one man's belly and toppling him to the floor, feet tangled in his own bowels—sinking a foot in the heart of his second opponent—and then flashing free to engage the steel of a third.

He fought in a timeless small continuum, occupied only by himself and Asloth, and endless Pelairi who arose to confront him—and fell in a gush of arterial crimson. Sound of the combat around him faded—vision smeared into a gray blue—exhaustion seeped through his dancing body like a slow, heavy fluid, weighing down his arm, dulling his brain, slowing his motions. One blade sped past his heavy guard to draw a red line across his cheek—another slim épée sank painlessly (and without harm) through the flesh part of his thigh. Another sword, swept in a vicious, back-handed disemboweling stroke, cut through the fabric of his tunic and grazed his middle as he sprang clumsily back to elude it.

Although fatigue numbed him like a drug, the training of years of sword-skill sustained him . . . or was it the fierce, singing spirit that inhabited the sword, pouring vitality into his exhausted body from its slim, living length of steel? He did not know. He fought on, as one in an endless dream.

And then, colors emerged from the dull haze that en-

wrapped him, and he suddenly found himself alone, staggering but still on his feet, fighting for breath, lungs heaving and throat on fire as if with every gasping breath he drew in fiery vapors. But—miraculously—no enemy faced him.

As the spinning mists faded from his vision, and he looked around with keener comprehension—he saw one figure racing across the floor towards the skimmer.

Yaklar!

The cowardly Warlord, seeing the struggling host engaged, had dodged around the clot of battling figures, and was making for the ship, leaving his followers to die fighting.

Raul stumbled, seeking to move, but his exhausted muscles could not be forced into action. He glanced around with despair, seeking aid, but all his friends were engaged and would not even hear if he had shouted. He snatched up a laser in desperation from one of the fallen and yelled frantically, windmilling his arms to catch Sharl's attention. When the chieftain noticed him, he gestured violently, pantomiming to Sharl that he was to switch off the dampener—and at last, Sharl comprehended, and the pistol came to life in Raul's numb hands.

By now the Arthon was entering the small atmospheric flyer. While bloodless fingers fumbled to fire the gun, he could see within the ship through the transparent observation blister, the bulky, cloaked form hunched over what must be a communicator.

There was no time to run after him. He raised and sighted the gun coolly—and fired.

The blazing needle of white fire snapped through the tough plastic and seared through the Arthon. His figure convulsed galvanically as the ray tore through his body and exploded in a flare of sparks against the control panel. Raul snapped off the weapon and watched dully as the dead body fell from view.

Had he been too late?

ELEVEN

WHEN YAKLAR FELL, the battle was over. Seeing their Warlord slain, the remaining Pelairi lost heart and surrendered. Tossing away their weapons, they lifted empty hands. Sharl took command, and herded the prisoners off to a dungeon cell, while Zarkandu summoned help for the injured.

The men crowded around Linton where he stood, the laser still clutched in one lax hand, recovering his breath. He traded jokes and compliments with them, as a leader should, and praised their fighting skill.

Zambar, the giant, ebon Faftol who was the Kahani's own guard, grinned at him with a flashing smile.

"Did I not say he was a man, the Shakar?" he demanded of the others. "Did I not say here was a true man at last, to lead us in battle? *Hu-ah!* The golden sword reaped a full harvest of blood—did not mine own eyes see it?"

Linton slapped him on the shoulder. "And did not my own eyes see the havoc wrought by thy great hammer, O Zambar? Ayel! Men fell before it as full sheaves of grain fall before the reaper . . . thy hammer drove many souls deep into the floor of hell this day!"

Mightily pleased by the Shakar's praise, the black giant grinned and strutted, beaming with pride.

"Drink, lord—replenish thy strength, for I too saw bright Asloth tirelessly ply through waves of men," the deep-voiced old Shann of Kartoy boomed heartily, handing Linton a skin of cold wine. He drank deeply, gratefully, feeling warm new strength seep into his weary muscles.

Sharl came up to them, his stern face grim.

"Alas! Shame unto me that I must stand aside when such a battle is fought before my eyes!" he groaned. "No honor unto my name nor my house, this day!"

"No *honor!*" Zarkandu laughed, happily. "By the Seven—had not thy *vokarthu* magic drained the venom from their guns, we would all be wandering the cold halls of the restless dead this moment. Honor, and thrice-honor, are thine, O chieftain!"

Raul drew the Yellow-Eyed one aside.

"How did they get loose in the first place?" he demanded. Sharl shrugged.

"In truth, I know not, O Shakar! For these eyes saw them securely locked and under stout guard. Perchance some agent of the Arthon was planted amongst our men—"

"Where's Wilm Bardry?"

"He has gone to the radar control, to see if Yaklar didst succeed in summoning his fleet. Honor to thy name, that thy hand slew the Outworlder, whose name henceforth in our memory shall be Yaklar Truce-Breaker!"

Then the battered warriors drew aside, for the Kahani was among them, slim as a girl in her white gown. Her eyes shone with triumph and her soft voice rang with pride as she praised their prowess and called them each by name.

"And you, too, Lin-ton! You more than all the others—O Sharl, how right you were! This was the man to be our Shakar!"

She gave him her hand and he took it and held it, feeling foolish, feeling all his manly competence fade away before her bright eyes. Standing close to her, the dry and spicy scent of her in his nostrils, inhaling the heady odors of candlewood, he didn't know what to do—to kiss her hand, or to take her in his arms—so he just stood and gawked, feeling as awkward as a boy experiencing the pangs of first-love.

But when Wilm Bardry, white-faced, was coming up to them, and the dangerous moment passed—making room for other dangers.

"Raul. They're coming. Radar spotted them heading down the Rift. They'll be overhead within ten minutes," Bardry said flatly.

The Kahani paled. Sharl cursed bitterly: "Then all this was for nothing! For we have—what is the phrase?—'won the battle, but lost the war!'"

Raul was not ready to give up. If defeat must come, he would make it pay dearly for every inch.

"Sharl—Innald—deploy your troops! How swiftly can we get *your* ships into the air, to fight?"

She said: "Too late! Too late, my Shakar! They are

stored at the foot of the gorge, under camouflage. By the time my pilots could reach the ships, the Pelairi would be overhead to gun them down as they arose to do battle!"

"Then, for honor, get your people into the deepest caves—hide from the bombardment. If the fleet lands, we can fight a delaying guerrilla action—"

"Wait!" Innald cried. "I have forgotten—curse my slow wits! There is a small battery of lasers on the cliff above these caverns. I know not if they will serve to fight off a fleet, but it is better than nothing!"

"That's better!" Wilm laughed, joyously. "Where do we find them? Raul and I have Naval training—we'll try to hold off the fleet while you disperse your people into the deepest caverns."

Sharl pointed. "There is an elevator behind that door. It leads to the top of the cliff. The battery is disguised under painted tarpaulins. I will show you—"

Raul shook his head.

"No. We'll locate them. You take command down here, chieftain. Get the pilots into their ships. Deploy the troops into the best bomb-shelters you can find. *Move!* C'mon, Wilm, we've a job of work to do upstairs—"

"Commander! I'm comin' with you," Gundorm Varl protested, hurrying up to them.

Raul refused. "Help Sharl get the people out of here—Wilm and I can man the guns—*wait!* Better yet, Gundorm, get to the radar control and have the men there stay at their posts. We may need them to give us a fix on the fleet. No arguments, now—I haven't the time!"

And then he and Bardry were racing across the cavern and into the elevator, slamming the door shut behind them and jabbing at the controls with frantic haste. In moments like this, Raul always experienced a curious sensation as if time itself were slowing down while his reactions speeded up. Every motion seemed to take three times as long to execute as was normal. This was a power-elevator, and he could feel it smash his weight down into his heels as it lifted up the shaft, but to his tense impatience, the trip seemed endlessly long—he felt as though any second they should feel the bone-shaking impact of a planet-buster bomb . . .

or hear the supersonic shriek of guided missiles cleaving down through the thin, cold air over their heads.

Actually, it took only seconds before the elevator stopped and the doors snapped open and they were out in the open, a bitter wind lashing their cloaks and tugging at their hair, running across the great dome of rock under the tumultuous medusa-mane of radiance that was the mighty nebula. The breath burned down his throat, searing his lungs. His legs jolted to the impact of his headlong race against time—he shot a glance aloft—but the fleet was not yet within sight.

"There it is—that pile of boulders, over there!" Wilm shouted breathlessly. They headed towards it.

"Right!"

The nearer he came, the more the pile of rocks began to resemble a cleverly-painted canvas. With numb hands he slashed Asloth's keen blade through the strands holding down the tarpaulin against the gale, ripping off the cover and exposing the battery of lasers. Never had cold metal looked so good to him! It was a ten-beam battery of 57-microns, smaller and less powerful than the great surface-to-space battery on Valadon, but fully competent to dispatch a few small ships.

Automatic habit-patterns imposed by endless hours of Naval gun-drill took command of his body. He slammed switches and ignited the firing-chambers, slapped wheels and watched the long glittering muzzles begin to elevate. At his side, Wilm was using the battery's communicator.

"Radar! Radar! Give us a fix, will you?" Bardry yelled. A tinny voice crackled back at them from the speaker.

"They're coming into range now, sir, braking for atmospheric entry." It was Gundorm Varl's voice, Linton knew.

"Give me a fix, Gundorm!"

"Right, sir! Set your guns at R.A. 14 hours, 36.2 minutes; Dec. -60° 38"—no, cancel that! Cancel that! The bastards are comin' in too damn fast for manual. Wait a minute—yes! Set your battery on 'automatic'—I see there's a tracking-computer hookup here. We can fire the guns automatically from here—find the switch?"

Raul searched the panel for the switch.

"Right!" His hand went out to close it.

"*Stop right there. Don't move, or I shoot!*"

Raul froze.

"Back up ten paces—come on, *move*, Linton! That's it. Now turn around, slowly, slowly. Drop those weapons, both of you—" the cold, hard voice from behind him demanded. Raul let his laser pistol and Asloth slip through his fingers. He turned to see a stooping figure in dirty Rilké garments covering himself and Bardry with a neuronc scrambler. Blinking his eyes against tears caused by the biting wind, he sought to make out the features within the suede cowl. A lean, sour-mouthed brown face—vaguely familiar—

"*Pertinax!*"

The sour mouth smiled primly.

"So I was right all the time about you, eh Linton! You really were a traitor, all the while."

Raul shook his head numbly, as if to clear his mind.

"Listen, Pertinax, I don't know how you got here or what it is you think I'm doing, but for all the stars in space, man, let me get back to those guns! It's our only chance—"

Pertinax spat.

"You treacherous turncoat! Enough of your lies. I came here yesterday, in disguise, with a number of other 'recruits' for this invasion. And all I heard from the dirty natives was how a great Shakar from the Inner Stars, a Commander Linton, had come to join the Kahani and lead her troops, along with those of other rebel princes from the Border-worlds, to invade and sack Omphale and the neighboring stars. You bloody-handed traitor! Lead a pack of grubby natives against your own people, will you? But I've got you now!"

"Pertinax, you've got it all wrong! Arion, man, if you don't let us get at those guns, we'll all be blasted to hell when the fleet gets here!"

A thin-lipped smile.

"None of your tricks, Linton! Keep your hands in plain view and don't try to jump me or I'll coagulate your brain! I don't know how you discovered I had summoned the Border Patrol, but I'm not going to stand here and let you burn them down!"

Linton felt his mind reel.

"I don't know anything about the Border Patroll I didn't even know you were here, much less that you had summoned the Patroll Listen to me, Pertinax—we haven't time for talk. Those are *Pelatri* ships coming—Wilm, can't you talk sense to this single-minded idiot?"

Ignoring the unwavering pistol, Bardry shoved forward.

"Pertinax! Put down that gun, man, and lend us a hand. Those ships are—"

But the Snake wasn't even listening. His eyes widened with disbelief, then half-closed with pleasure.

"*Bardry!* Well, I'm—so *you've* turned traitor, too, have you? Well, wait till Brice Hallen hears about *this!*"

Behind them, the speaker squawked sharply:

"Commander! *Commander!* For the love o' life—switch the guns to automatic! The fleet's within the atmosphere right now—hurry!"

Wilm Bardry fixed Pertinax with a level, fiercely urgent glare. He said slowly, with the ring of command like steel in his voice: "Colonel Pertinax. I outrank you, sir. I am a Captain-General in His Magnificence's service. *I command you*—put down that pistol. For once in your life, man, *think straight!*"

It was no use. Pertinax was not even listening. His little weasel-eyes were alight with joy and his thin lips curved smugly in a self-righteous smile.

"Oh, I know you're clever, *Captain-General*—very clever. You managed to fool everyone at Omphale—but not Nijel Pertinax! I know a traitor when I see one—and I've got you dead to rights, this time. You and Linton, both. Oh, it will be a great day when I take the both of you back to Omphale—I've spoiled more 'little games' than any agent in the Cluster, but this will be my greatest triumph!"

"Great Arion," Raul gasped. "Wilm—I bet *he's* the one who set the Arthon and his gang loose!"

Wilm groaned.

"You must be right, Raul! No one else around here more stupid than the Snake—*was* it you, Pertinax?"

Pertinax sniffed with self-satisfaction.

"Of course it was me. Do you think you can lay violent

hands on a Planetary Prince—clap him in a cell—like he was a common criminal? I was nosing about in disguise, and came upon the men who had been set to guard his highness. I told them I had been sent to relieve them and that they were urgently needed elsewhere. The Arthon told me, as soon as I identified myself, how he had come here to Ophmar in a vain attempt to dissuade the war-mongering Kahani from her mad plan to attack the Inner Stars . . . and how you, Linton, seized him by force and jailed him so that he could not get free to radio a warning to the Border Patrol. Naturally, I set him free!

“Don’t you realize that, renegade or not, Linton, you are still an Imperial citizen—every action you take reflects against the Imperium! I had to do some fast talking to persuade the Arthon not to sever diplomatic relations with the Imperium—he was all for lodging a full protest with the Emperor! But I assisted him and his men to freedom, gave them arms, and helped them find their way down to the hangar below, where their ship was moored—”

Bardry fixed burning eyes on Pertinax, and said in slow, deadly tones: “If ever I get free of this, I swear I’ll break you and run you out of this Cluster without a shred of honor or reputation to your name. You—incredible—blind—ignorant—*FOOL!*”

Above them, somewhere to the east, a shrill whine came to their ears, borne on the cold wind. *The fleet!*

And just then, at the edge of ultimate and complete despair, Raul felt his heart lift with a surge of incredible joy—a thrill so intense, that he fought to keep his face rigid, and not to show the blaze of relief that tingled through him.

Across the mighty dome of rock, Gundorm Varl emerged from the elevator and came swiftly, silently towards them, pistol clasped in one huge, capable hand, blond beard ruffling in the chill wind. Impatiently waiting below in the radar room for Raul and Wilm to switch the laser battery to automatic firing, guided by hookup to radar and course-computer, he finally had come up himself to see what was the matter. Now, seeing a stranger holding the two of them helpless at gunpoint, he lifted a finger to his lips and stole

silently across the clifftop towards them, walking with exaggerated caution.

But Pertinax never noticed. He was, in fact, talking again.

"Enough of this talk. Now, I want the both of you to come with me—hands in the air and walk carefully, no sudden moves—and we'll get down inside the base and wait for reinforcements from the Patrol—" he was saying.

Standing just behind him, now, Gundorm Varl recognized Pertinax's whining, nasal tones. The grim expression on his face turned to blank surprise—then lit with a great glow of unholy joy. He carefully holstered his pistol, and slowly, lovingly raised another "weapon"—his riding-whip.

He lifted it high above his head, gloating down on the unconscious Pertinax who stood still with his back turned to the giant Barnassian—then brought the whip down in a swift, shrieking arc—

Pertinax stiffened as if struck by lightning.

The pistol fell from suddenly nerveless hands.

His eyes stretched wide with shock—with a horrible recognition.

The whip rose—and descended again.

His dour little mouth opened in an incredible screech of indignity and pain.

Leaving *that* situation in firm and very capable hands, Raul whirled and sprang to the laser controls, closing the lever that switched on the automatic firing and sighting relays. Instantly the battery roared into action. Thin beams of intolerable brilliance spat from the muzzles of the guns. Above, the nebula was shadowed with the bellies of hurtling ships. Abruptly, one detonated in an eye-dazzling flare of intense light.

"One!" Wilm crowed, his dirty face splitting wide in a fighting grin. Raul smiled in answer.

"Two! and—three!"

(Behind them, over the roar of the lasers, they could hear certain, curious thumping, thrashing sounds—punctuated with shrill yelps and squeals of unendurable pain. Grinning happily, they pretended to ignore this and focused their attention on the action aloft.)

"Four!"

"Five—by Arion!"

Now the Pelairi ships were breaking formation, dipping and swerving like mad to elude the stinging beams of superheat. But the lasers were multi-mounted, and the radar was capable of independent tracking. The beams diverged, each gun hunting down and destroying ships on its own.

The sky was full of blossoming fires. In their panic to escape, ships rammed into each other blindly. And now the sky was raining fiery masses of semi-molten metal like some hellish kind of hail.

(Behind them, the thumping and thrashing sounds came to an end, and there was nothing to be heard but muffled sobbings and dull groans.)

Rather self-consciously, Gundorm Varl strutted up to join them, massaging the tired muscles in his right arm. He gazed up at the destruction of the enemy fleet.

"Ah! That's a beautiful sight, sir! Truly—it does my eyes good to see it. And I'm enjoyin' it all the more, if I may say so, for havin' had a little wholesome exercise!"

Above, the broken fleet was hurtling back into the Rift, still pursued by probing lasers.

It was all over.

TWELVE

SOME HOURS LATER, the Border Patrol squadron that Pertinax had summoned from Valadon's garrison arrived, and aboard it was Brice Hallen himself. The squadron took up parking orbit around Ophmar, and Raul Linton and Wilm Bardry came up to it in the Arthon's skimmer, which was still serviceable despite a punctured observation blister.

They met with Hallen on the bridge: Bardry, laconic and very matter-of-fact, now that the action was over; Linton, very uncomfortable in his gaudy suit of Rilke ceremonial finery.

Hallen shook hands with them both, and complimented them gravely on a good job very well done.

"Commander, let me also say that I'm damn glad you turned out to be as trustworthy as Wilm, here, assured me you were—and as I'd hoped and prayed you were."

"Thank you, sir," Raul said, stiffly.

Hallen turned to Wilm.

"How'd you talk him into your scheme, Wilm? Oh, sure, of course. You reassured him by telling him what happened to Carringson."

Bardry blinked.

"You know," he marveled, "I completely forgot about Carringson."

Raul's ears picked at the name, which had unpleasant connotations to him.

"What's this about Carringson?" he asked. Wilm smiled, vaguely foolish.

"Well, hell, Raul, one of the prime arguments I was going to use on you was to point out that all governments are *not* wicked. Often, they're just slow, very slow to do the proper thing. And one of the points I was going to make to support this contention, was to tell you *why* I was on the *Harel Palldon* with you, under incognito, during the war."

"Well—why were you, Wilm?"

"Gathering evidence against Vice-Admiral Carringson. We'd had reports he was abusing his authority, and running his command like a private little empire all his own. The 'scorching' of neutral Darogir, without even giving the poor bastards a chance to capitulate, was a prime bit of evidence against him. Well . . . anyway . . . it took a long time to get the court-martial underway, but it finally went through. They broke him and bounced him out of Naval service."

Linton felt a small warmth deep down within him as the cold knot of an old wound dissolved.

Wilm Bardry lit a cigaret and slouched back, legs dangling, in one of the capacious deck chairs.

"Sometimes it takes a government a long time to discover an error in policy, or of omission. But, by and large, these errors *are* discovered—and, usually, I think, corrected."

Raul smiled a little.

"Perhaps you're right . . ."

Hallen said, earnestly: "No government is perfect, but we all try. Sometimes the wrong man gets in, as Pertinax got in, but we find out what kind of stuff he's made of

sooner or later, and he gets taken care of in time—as we’re going to take care of Pertinax. *And* Mather, by the way. And speaking of that, now that the job of Border Administrator is vacant—or will be just as soon as I get back to Omphale—I think I have just the right man for the job.”

“Who?” Linton inquired.

“*You*,” Brice Hallen grinned. “Of course, you’ll probably err as much as Mather did—but in the other direction, for a change. You’ll be too much *for* the natives, instead of *against* them as Mather was, but—hell—it’ll be an interesting change, and maybe it’ll work. Mather’s ‘keep-them-diseased-ignorant-and-illiterate’ policy seems to have failed on all counts—and it almost resulted in a very dangerous and destructive little war that could have raised half the Border worlds against us. So maybe we’ll try the other tack for a while, and see how that method works out. One thing’s sure, after this little fracas on Ophmar, you’ll have every native in the Cluster squarely on *your* side, solidly behind you, ready to go along with anything you suggest.”

Raul cleared his throat a little.

“Well, Administrator. It’s an interesting offer—and I may accept you on it, later. But right now, I still *have* a job—as commanding officer of the Kahani’s forces down there. And I’ve got to finish up that piece of uncompleted business, before I can think about anything else.”

“I’m reading you,” Hallen said. “Go ahead. I take it you wish to formally surrender?”

Linton nodded stiffly.

“Yes, sir. But my surrender depends on three conditions.”

Hallen exchanged a long look with Wilm Bardry, who was grinning as he smoked.

“All right. Let’s hear ‘em,” Hallen said curtly.

“Condition one,” Raul said. “The government to dismiss charges—*all* charges, of whatever nature—against the entirety of the Kahani’s troops and followers. And that goes for her and for myself, as well. I want a clear board for every man and woman down there. Full pardon for everybody, exile, outlaw, criminal, the works. After all, they didn’t do anything more than *think* about waging war against the Cluster government. And the only thing they are guilty of

actually doing, is making a decisive and final end to the Arthon of Pelaire and *his* attempt to invade Hercules."

"I'll buy that. Granted—full amnesty for everybody," Hallen nodded. "And remind me later, Wilm, we're got to carry those Pelairi prisoners back to their planet and make sure what's left of that fleet doesn't trouble us again."

"Right, Brice."

"All right, Linton. Next condition?"

Raul ticked it off on his fingers.

"The Kahani to be reinstalled as monarch of Valadon, with full hereditary rights and powers for life, and for her heirs forever."

"Yes, I guess she's earned that," Hallen grumbled, "but what in space am I supposed to do with the present incumbent—what's his name, Lord Hastril—line him up against the wall and coagulate him?"

Wilm interjected an idea lazily.

"Brice, why'n't you pop him into this fancy palace-type prison you've got fixed up on Omphale to hold bothersome and unwanted royalty and pretenders and such-like—you know, the ones you want to keep out of trouble and under your eye?"

Hallen chewed his thumb thoughtfully.

"Kerrisam Palace? Not a bad idea, Wilm. Poetic justice, too—that's where I was going to put the Kahani whenever I caught her. All right, Linton: agreed."

"Then the third and last condition: Valadon to be removed from the jurisdiction of your government and created an independent planetary kingdom. That way, nobody can say a word if *we*—if *she*—wants to make improvements. Understand? A clear board for the works: roads, bridges, hospitals, schools, industries, whatever. She has plans to make Valadon one of the most advanced kingdoms on the Border, and wants no interference from the Provincial Government."

Hallen speared him with an eagle glance.

"*We*—eh? Hmm. She's a good-looking girl, isn't she?" he asked. And noted Raul's crimsoning face.

He heaved a small sigh.

"Ah, to be young again! Well, Linton, I grant you the

whole program. All three conditions will be scrupulously observed. And what's more, I'll even give the bride away!"

Raul flushed, if possible, even more crimson.

"The—*bride*—sir?"

"Certainly, you damn fool!" Hallen chuckled. "Any idiot could see at a glance you're hopelessly in love. What's the matter—haven't you even asked her, yet?"

"I—don't quite—you misunderstand, sir—I—"

They let him fumble and stumble on for a bit, and then Wilm said: "Bet I know what's wrong, Brice. That old idealistic conscience cropping up again. Here he is, a homeless, landless, penniless space-bum. And there she is, the fabulously wealthy absolute monarch of an entire planetary kingdom. How could he hope to get up nerve enough to propose to the girl, having nothing to bring to the marriage but what he stands up in?"

Wilm started laughing good-naturedly, and Brice Hallen joined in. Raul endured it for a while, and then started to get angry.

"I don't see anything so comical about that! As a matter of fact, that's precisely what *has* kept me from offering her marriage! Do you think I want her to class me with the fortune hunting, title-hunting bunch of suitors she has hanging around her right now? I want her to respect me!"

"She'll respect you a damn lot more if you'd speak up like a man and demand her hand because you happen to love her—instead of being so kaking stiff and noble and courageous about suffering. I tell you what, better yet, don't speak at all! Just walk in and grab her and give her a kiss that curls her hair for her! Action's better than talk, anytime!" Hallen advised.

Raul made no reply, because he could think of nothing adequate to say. He made ready to leave, but Hallen stopped him with a lifted hand.

"All right now, hang on, boy. I'd been wondering when I'd find the right stop to give you my news, and this looks like it. I've been on the beam all morning with this business of the Arthon and the Kahani and you—talking to the First Lord on Meridian. The Emperor's very interested in the whole mess, and very relieved it's settled. Yes, I spoke to His

Magnificence personally. He's quite grateful for your services—I told him the whole story, just as Wilm radioed it to me as we arrived. And, here"—he fumbled in his belt-pouch—"this is for you."

He removed a long loop of rich scarlet ribbon from the pouch and hung it gently around Linton's throat.

Raul fingered it blankly, hearing the blood roar in his ears. Dimly, as if from a great distance, he heard the Provincial Administrator say:

"The real thing, complete with the bronze medallion inscribed with your planetary sigil, will be arriving by special courier boat in a day or two—brought by a herald, in fact, by hand. But I scrounged up this, which will do for the moment. And I'd sincerely like the honor of being the very first to congratulate you—*Lord Barnassa!*"

Raul shook hands with Hallen, and then with a joyful and enthusiastic Wilm Bardry.

"And don't forget what I said, my lord! Don't do any talking—just grab her and give her a kiss to remember. *Then* tell her you love her. Remember, now!"

And when he released her, and she had recovered her breath, Innald said, faintly:

"But why did my lord never tell me before how he felt about me? Surely you knew I loved you from the first, when I saw you standing there all flustered, and angry, and flaming about the ears with embarrassment!"

Raul kissed her again and then held her close. She was very, very small, and her cheek fitted into the curve of his shoulder as if it had been cunningly designed to fit. And perhaps it had . . .

"But I have never before met the man whom I could love, no, truly! Not my late husband (may the Seven bring him bliss!), not the Lord Zarkandu (who desired me, although I desired him not at all)—no one, until you!" Then, in a very small, low-voice: "Will my lord tell me once again of gentility, how much he loves me?"

"Hush, *ylarna*," he said softly, "hush, my sweet one! I love thee more than honor, more than life itself!"

"Then I am very, very happy!"

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