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An adventure of the time beyond the future.

A forgotten planet holds the key to a Universe yet unborn...

THIS

FORTRESS WORLD

JAMES E. GUNN



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"Don't you think it's strange," she said, "that on every inhabited world you'll find pigs, chickens and potatoes?"

"And men and women," I said.

"Other forms of life are native to only one planet," she went on, "but these are everywhere. We call each other *aliens* yet we can mate. How do you explain it?"

"I had never thought to try. It's one of the Mysteries."

It has been a long, rich summer, the crystal said, but the winter must come at last. The galaxy will grow cold and dark, chilled by the winter of a new Dark Age. Men will forget. And Earth will wait . . .

THIS FORTRESS WORLD

JAMES E. GUNN

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PROLOGUE

... Wherever you are, wherever these words have been carried by chance or stealth, you read this in the splintered wreckage of the Second Empire.

Go out tonight, look at the sky, and see the scattered stars, distinct, separate, alone, divided by infinite chasms of hate, distrust, and the realities of power. See them as they really are—great, gray fortresses guarded by the moats of space, their walls manned against the galaxy.

The Second Empire. Say it aloud. Let it inflame the imagination. Let its meaning sink into the soul.

An empire. Within it the numberless worlds of the inhabited galaxy united, working together, living together, trading together. The name alone tells us that much. But how did it work? How was it held together? How were disputes decided, wars avoided? We don't know. We will never know. Only the name comes down to us. We remember it, and we remember, dimly, a golden time, a time of freedom and peace and plenty, and we weep sometimes for what is gone and will not come again.

The Second Empire. It implies another, an earlier, but of that we have no memory at all.

The Second Empire. Will there ever be a third? We dream, we hope, but we know, deep down, that the golden days are gone, and we cannot call them back. The Second Empire is splintered, and the wreckage is drifting apart, so far that it can never be pulled together again.

We are no longer men. We are shadows dancing a shadow dance inside our shadow fortresses, and the golden days are gone. . . .

—*The Dynamics of Galactic Power*

CHAPTER I

The first part of the book is devoted to a general survey of the subject. It begins with a definition of the term, and then proceeds to a discussion of its history and development. The author then turns to a consideration of the various theories which have been advanced to explain the phenomenon, and finally comes to a conclusion that the most satisfactory explanation is that which is based on the principles of the science of the mind.

The second part of the book is devoted to a detailed examination of the various theories which have been advanced to explain the phenomenon. It begins with a discussion of the theory of the mind, and then proceeds to a consideration of the various theories which have been advanced to explain the phenomenon. The author then turns to a consideration of the various theories which have been advanced to explain the phenomenon, and finally comes to a conclusion that the most satisfactory explanation is that which is based on the principles of the science of the mind.

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ONE

I was running through the infinite dark, alone and afraid. I was afraid because I was alone and alone because I was afraid, and I hurt somewhere, not knowing where, unable to find out because I was running, unable to stop because I was afraid.

Behind me came the patter of feet, chasing me down an unseen corridor, and the feet were light and almost noiseless because they were disembodied, and the corridor was black and unknowable because it was lost in time and space, as I was, without a home.

Worst of all was the silence, the complete silence that enveloped me like the darkness and was worse than the darkness because my need to speak and hear was greater than my need to see, and if I could break the silence, the darkness would shatter and I would no longer have to run. And the feet came closer in spite of my speed and the panic that urged me on ever faster through the darkness and the silence, because the feet had no leaden body to hold them back.

Slowly consciousness of where I hurt came to me. It was my hand, my hand hurt because of the glowing coal I carried there. Fresh fear surged through me, and the fear was mixed with shame, and I let my hand open; I let the coal fall away. And the patter of feet behind faded and my fear left me, but in its place came an aching loneliness because even the corridor was gone now and I was truly alone, floating in blackness without an anchor to anything, and truly without a home.

My mind spiraled through the emptiness and the silence and the dark, searching for something else alive in the infinite, but there was nothing. Nowhere was there anything to speak to, and if there had been something, there was no way to speak.

And I woke up, my hand fumbling automatically at my waist pouch for reassurance, but the pebble was gone, and I knew why it was gone, and I remembered. I remembered how fear first entered my world. . . .

The liturgy was echoing through my mind when I saw the girl

step through the flickering golden translucence of the Barrier. She was terrified.

. . . your God is here . . .

Terror! I recognized it, and I did not know how I knew.

All my life had been spent within the monastery. The monastery walls are wide, and within them is the world's peace. The monastery walls are high, and the world's torment can never climb them. Behind them I was contented and at peace, and it was quiet joy that the clear pattern of my life would never lead me outside.

I did not remember ever being outside. I did not remember my father or mother or their names or how they had died, if they were dead, but it did not matter, because the Church was father and mother to me, and I needed nothing else.

The emotions I knew were few and simple: the Abbot's powerful piety; Brother John's intense, sometimes feverish, search for scientific truth; Father Konek's absorbed contemplation; Father Michaelis's occasional mystic rapture. But terror was an alien. Like the other soul-disturbing passions, it could not pass the Barrier, just as physical objects could not pass.

. . . behind the veils of ignorance and doubt you must seek Me, for I am there, as here, if you will see . . .

Here in the Cathedral it was a little different, but I had only been on duty here twice before. The people entered the place that had been set aside for them, their place of contact with the life of the Church, seeking what we had so much of—peace. They came through the Barrier troubled, and they left in peace, reconciled with the Universe. I had felt their troubles distantly, and I had pitied them, and I had been glad when their troubles were taken from them.

But now I knew that the passions I had received in the control room were poor second-hand things. The girl's terror was an aura that surrounded her. It touched me with cold fingers, springing to my eyes from the screen, to my fingers from the gauntlets—

My eyes flicked to the clock. Already the timing was seconds off. I pulled my right hand free, tripped a switch, adjusted a knob. The Dissipation would have to be abrupt. If the Abbot should learn. . . .

Below, the mists began to fade, to drift away in wisps, and a nebulous face looked down out of the black depths of space. Nebulous, and yet the worshippers fleshed it out with details

from their own need. I knew. I had been below during our own services, and I had seen what they saw, felt what they felt, heard in my mind what they heard.

. . . for I am peace, where I am there is peace, where peace is, there you will find Me, peace everlasting . . .

My eyes returned to the screen, to the girl. She was still there, just inside the Barrier, and as surely as I had known that she was terrified I knew that she was beautiful. I wondered briefly if this was temptation. The thought was fleeting, and I did not pursue it. It was enough that I was twenty, and she was beautiful and afraid.

She was out of place among the people below. Freedmen and slave came here and occasionally a serf when necessity brought him to the Imperial City. They called this the Slaves' Cathedral. I saw many below, dressed poorly or richly according to their master's wealth but all with their imitation metal collars: gold, silver, iron. . . .

The girl was obviously patrician. Her bones were fine; her features were delicate. She stood straight and slim and proud. Her skin had never been blighted with the long days under burning skies or the slow destruction of the death-dust rooms; her back had never bent to stir the stubborn soil. Her clothes were rich. Her cloak was a silky, woven plastic glistening with metallic threads; her skirt molded itself to long, slender legs.

. . . nothing enters that place set apart for your enlightenment except that which can receive Me and My gift to mankind . . .

She was breathing hard. One hand was clenched into a white-knuckled fist at her side; the other was a palm pressed against her breasts, as if to calm their trembling. She looked over her shoulder, back through the Barrier. She stiffened, her chest swelling with a great, half-strangled breath. Then, slowly, she let it out.

. . . for here is sanctuary where none but the peace-loving can enter, where strife is forever barred . . .

I switched to the outside screen. Four men stood outside the Barrier, looking up the long easy steps toward the Cathedral entrance, toward the golden web. They were dressed alike, but I didn't recognize the uniform. In a world of color, they wore black. They weren't members of the Spaceman's Guild because the black of that uniform is relieved with silver. Neither were they nobles or Peddlers or mercenaries.

I shivered. They were like black shadows on a cloudy day.

shadows of evil, shadows where there should be no shadows.

I remembered what they were. Once a visiting priest had mentioned them. Father Konek had shuddered, but I had listened eagerly.

They were mercenaries who did not wear the uniforms of their masters. They were the clever ones who worked with their minds as well as their guns, who slipped soundlessly through the cities of this and other worlds on missions that were secret and sinister. They were deadly, like snakes, and like snakes they were privileged. No man touched them for fear of their fangs.

I saw other things: the inconspicuous bulge of guns under their arms, their casual, almost languid expressions of indifference. Were they as indifferent to life as the priest had said? Did they kill so easily, and did the killing mean nothing?

I looked at one face longer than the others. It was dark and bold and amused; cold black eyes were separated by a huge, jutting nose that was grotesque but not funny. It was not funny at all; it was frightening.

I shivered again and switched back to the view inside.

. . . life is chaos, life is hunger, pain, unending struggle, life is death—but death is life . . .

The girl paid no attention to the service. She ignored the spectacle revealing itself before her, the words that must be imprinting themselves on her mind as they were on mine. Perhaps she was a skeptic as so many of the patricians were, accepting the fruits of the Church while they scoffed at its tenets, tolerating its existence for the service it rendered in pacifying the people—

Tolerating? I gasped. I had come close to heresy. My thoughts had approached a dangerous edge. At the bottom of the precipice beyond were piled the bleached bones of countless unwary thinkers. No one tolerated the Church; it was, it existed by its own spiritual power, it lived by the strength of its faith and the forces that were the physical extensions of that faith.

Why had the word sprung into my mind?

. . . your life that is death render unto those who have been given power over it, for it is nothing. Your death that is life belongs to you and to Me, and you shall live it insofar as it is of Me . . .

Perhaps the girl's terror blinded her eyes and mind to the Message. A complete skeptic could not have passed the Barrier, except seeking sanctuary. Sanctuary was here if she wished to

claim it. Beyond the walls protected by the peace of the Church she would never need to move, if she wished to dedicate herself to those things which were the domain of the Church or if she wished merely for peace, peace and forgetfulness, now and hereafter. She had only to pass through the Portal, which was similar to the Barrier except that it was light blue and opaque. It was directly under the Revelation.

Choose the Portal! I wished. The terror will disappear; you will never tremble again.

The wish went as quickly as it came. A knowledge that I did not recognize whispered that the girl's life force leaped too high; her death wish was almost non-existent. She could never pass the Portal, even if she wanted to.

And yet her glance leaped desperately around the Cathedral, searching the smooth walls and floors as if for a place to hide. She stepped nervously toward the front of the Cathedral, toward the hard kneeling-benches dotted with silent worshippers. She stopped, indecisively, and looked back again through the golden veil of the Barrier toward the carelessly watchful men outside in the drab street.

They could not enter, but she could not leave without facing them and their purpose. Both hands were clenched at her sides now, one slightly larger than the other, her shoulders slumping. Her hands would be cold, I knew suddenly. Mine were cold too, inside the gauntlets.

... into the hands of My ministers I have given the power of working miracles in My name . . .

Guiltily I awoke to my duties. I had allowed myself to be distracted again. Responsibility for an occasional Cathedral service was a special honor for an acolyte, but if these slips were noticed, my taking of orders might be delayed another year. Already I was a year beyond the usual age. I adjusted the cap and slipped my hands back into the gauntlets.

Out upon the darkened platform below I stepped in the full, coarse, gray robes of the monastery, my head cowed, my face shadowed into anonymity. And if the image was an illusion, the effect was solid and three-dimensional. Softly, slowly, the Miracle Theme began, swelling throughout the rest of the service until it reached a thundering, triumphant note of challenge and plunged into a gently muted blessing.

At first the miracles were ritualistic and uninspired. My image cupped its hands. Out of them grew a brilliant red flower. My

hands drew away; it hung suspended in the air. It was only a bud, but it blossomed and grew, its colors brightening, glowing, until the petal lines were lost in the brightness. And it was a sun, yellowish instead of the familiar white, flaming gently on a family of planets. They circled it, spinning in the darkness; as the third world swam into view, the sun began to fade. And the third world swelled up blue-green and lovely until its spherical outlines melted into a flat, pastoral land, a green land of peace and plenty.

... to tend My creatures . . .

Fleecy, four-footed animals grazed peacefully on the cropped green turf, but their guardian was not the usual cowed monk. Sudden inspiration made it a girl in flowing white robes, the girl whose terror had led her to seek sanctuary in the Cathedral. Here she was not tormented by fear; here she was at peace with herself and her world, her clear eyes gazing out untroubled upon an untroubled land. Here she was beauty, even more beautiful than reality.

She turned and skirted the foot of a low green hill. A large white building rose behind, a building with a beautiful hemispherical dome. She passed through a wide archway that had no doors, into a room almost filled with tall racks, each rack with its row of plastic-enclosed memory tapes or even older, tattered books.

... to preserve knowledge . . .

The vision was detailed because I knew it so well. It was the historical Archives. Monks worked and listened and studied in small, bare cubicles along the wall. The girl drifted through the room and into another beyond, where large transparent cases exposed their mysteries for an endless distance.

... the history of mankind—for all men are one . . .

It was the museum of ancient artifacts, with its displays of strange tools, machines, and weapons, restored and reconstructed, gathered from a hundred worlds. But that huge room, too, was left behind, and the girl entered a third.

... beauty . . .

Beauty—the room blazed with it: statues, paintings, patterns of light for the eye; delicate carvings, fabrics, and artificial stimuli for the finger tips; bottled and generated odors of rare sweetness and strange pungency for the nostrils; uncounted sources of music for the ear. . . . And even among these resurrected masterpieces of a thousand forgotten geniuses, she

was more beautiful. . . . When she came out at last into the open again, it was night. A large, luminous satellite let down a pale silver light upon the face she lifted to the jeweled sky.

Her arms spread wide, she embraced the heavens in a gesture that claimed kinship with the universe. Her body was love, her face was hope, her gesture was unity—mystic unity, the infinite circle that encompasses all existence but does not restrict. Up the path of the girl's arms, the view fled, out into the denser blackness of space until the worshippers were once more face to face with their God.

. . . custody of these things I have given to My ministers to hold in trust for humanity because they contain man's search for eternal truth . . .

My participation was over. I realized what I had done. Innovation! It bordered on rebellion. I didn't want to rebel. I was happy. I was secure. I was dedicated to a life that was eminently worthwhile, with which my life was intertwined, in which it could find its greatest fulfillment. Rebellion? At what did I have to rebel? And then I saw the girl on the screen, and I knew.

Not life but Life—not the specific sense but the general one. Life that brought here to the Cathedral almost mindless men, that left them here briefly for a moment of almost mindless peace, Life that had scourged a girl with terror into momentary sanctuary. And I realized that there is a greater duty, a greater fulfillment, than unthinking obedience.

I wondered if I would ever be the same.

I had given the girl something—I could not say exactly what it was—a wordless message of beauty and hope and faith and—and love. She was kneeling at a bench in the back, her face upturned to the Revelation, smiling a little, her eyes glistening with unspilled tears. And I was glad. Whatever price I was called upon to pay, I knew that regret would never erase the memory of her face or the warm, sweet feeling of love bestowed without desire for return.

. . . only those who seek can find, only those who give can receive . . .

Slowly the girl got up. Free from terror, she walked toward the front of the Cathedral, straight toward the Revelation. Over the offering plate she held her hand as if engrossed in a last minute debate, but her decision was already made. The fist, no longer clenched, opened. Her offering fell toward the plate—to

disappear, flickeringly, the instant before it touched.

She turned and walked back the way she had come. But the burden she had carried was gone. Her step was carefree; her shoulders were straight and buoyant. She might have been going to some gay, impromptu party called forth by youth and the season, where laughter would rise like silver birds into the warm, scented air. . . . Outside the men waited, like evil black shadows. She didn't hesitate.

In the control room I struggled with an impulse. There were only two exits from the Cathedral—the Barrier and the Portal. But I had wondered before if there were not a third—if I dared to try it, if I dared to interfere once more. The Abbot would never approve. And what could I do with her? How could I help her?

The impulse might have won, but she turned at the Barrier and looked up. For a mad, fleeting moment her blue eyes seemed to be staring directly into mine, as if she saw my ugly face and yet liked what she saw. Her lips worked for a moment in a wordless appeal. I strained forward, as if that would help me to hear, and in that moment, before I could act, she turned and stepped beyond the Barrier and beyond my power to interfere.

The watchers lounged forward carelessly in the dusty street, but their carelessness concealed an artful boxing that removed every possibility of escape. The scene was imprinted indelibly upon my memory, framed against a background of the slums surrounding the Cathedral: a tottering rabbit-warren of a tenement, an abandoned, decaying warehouse, a bookshop with an almost new front. . . .

She waited for them, smiling. A fat-barreled gun appeared in the hand of the dark one. She said something to him, and he answered, smiling. But the passing freedmen and slaves averted their eyes and scurried away, as if they could deny evil by ignoring it. I sat fixed to my chair in an anguish of expectation.

And there in the street the dark one cut off her feet at the ankle. With a thin jet of flame from his gun, he sliced them off, casually, smiling gently, as he might have gestured to an acquaintance. A brief spurt of blood, and before the girl could topple, two of the others had caught her from each side. The girl smiled up at the dark one, mockingly and clear, before she fainted.

I was sick. The last thing I saw were the slender white feet left standing upon the pavement in front of the Cathedral. The last

thing I heard was the muted sadness of the benediction and the soundless whisper. . . .

. . . *there is one word for mankind, one word alone, and the word is—choose . . .*

TWO

I raised my hand to knock at the Abbot's door, hesitated, and let it drop. I tried to think clearly, but thinking was hard. What I had been through had drained my body of strength and confused my mind. And I had never before made a major decision.

Our monastic life had been fixed into routine centuries ago: up at five to kneel beside the bed for morning prayers; ten minutes for each silent meal, six hours of prayer and meditation; six hours of duty within the monastery, in the Cathedral, or at the Barrier; six hours of study, research, and exercise; evening prayers beside the bed at twenty-five; sleep. This was my life.

My hand fumbled in the pouch at my waist, strapped beneath my robe, fumbled among my few personal belongings, and found it. It was still there; already my fingers had learned the slick, polished feel of the crystal pebble I had found in the collection box, gleaming dully among the small coins. I brought it out to look at it once more. It was roughly egg-shaped but smaller than a hen's egg. It was water clear and uncut and unmarked. It was meaningless. Nothing within interfered with its perfect transparency; nothing marred its smooth surface; there was nothing to indicate its purpose, if it had a purpose.

For this a girl had known terror. For this she had sought sanctuary, and when she had passed it on, blindly, trustfully, for this—surely for this! why else but for this?—she had gone forth to meet the fate she knew waited in the dirty street. Waited with a smile on its dark face, waited with cold black eyes and a gun in its hand, waited to cut off two white feet at the ankle. . . .

I drew in my breath, remembering, and it made a funny sort of sob in my throat, and I remembered how I was sick in the control room. I knew I should forget, but my mind clung to the memory stubbornly, bringing it up again ever new, ever more horrible. . . .

Again I asked myself the question: *What can I do?* I wasn't wise; I knew nothing about the outside world. Did I have doubts about the cruelty of Life, about the wisdom of the Church? I

shoved them down. I buried them deep and scuffed out the markings of the spot where they had been. The Abbot was kind and good and wise. That was beyond question.

I knocked timidly.

"Enter," said the Abbot's deep, gently resonant voice.

I opened the door and stopped just inside the doorway. The Abbot was not alone.

He was seated in his deep armchair. It was the one concession to his age and white hair in a room otherwise as bare and simply furnished as my small cell. Beside him stood one of the younger acolytes, scarcely more than a boy with fine, golden hair, red lips, and fair, soft skin. Two spots of color burned in his cheeks.

"William Dane, Father," I blurted out. "Acolyte. I would like to speak with you—privately."

In the Abbot's massively powerful face one white eyebrow moved upward and that was all. The psychic force of his piety seemed to fill the room, to dominate it from that shabby chair, to spread outward in expanding, irresistible waves. Back toward him flowed my automatic response, the love that recognized him as my true father, the father of my soul, whoever may have been responsible for the accident of my being.

Doubt? Did I ever doubt?

"Wait in the inner-room," he told the boy. "We will continue our conversation a little later."

The boy opened the inner door a crack, and slipped through. The Abbot sat calmly, patiently, gazing at me with his all-seeing brown eyes, and I wondered if he knew already what had brought me here.

"Father," I said breathlessly. "What should an acolyte do when he has—doubts? About the world—and its justice? I have just come from the Cathedral and—"

"Is this your first time in leading the worship?"

"No, Father. I have served in the control room twice before."

"And each time you have been troubled? Doubts have arisen in your mind?"

"Yes, Father. But it was worse today."

"It is the miracles, I suppose," he mused, almost to himself. "The people accept the miracles as living proof of their God and of his active interest in their welfare and the state of their souls. And the knowledge that they are really only illusions produced by the trained thoughts of an operator and a manipulation of knobs and dials—that knowledge disturbs your faith." It was a

statement, not a question.

"Yes, Father, but—"

"And do you know how those illusions are produced? Can you identify the forces that create a three-dimensional image so deceptively complete that a hand must be passed through it to shatter the illusion, an image which exists only in the mind of the operator? Do you know how thoughts are transmitted from one mind to another, how material objects are transferred from place to place in spite of walls, how the Barrier and the Portal act to screen those who wish to enter, to pass those who have needs that we can and should satisfy and bar all others?"

I hesitated. "No, Father."

"Nor do I," said the Abbot softly. "Nor does anyone on this world, nor on any other. When one of the machines breaks down, sometimes we can repair it and often we cannot. Because we don't know anything about the forces involved. I might say to you that this is, in itself, a miracle. That we can use these strange, divine forces, knowing nothing of their principles, to spread the Message among the people is a gift from God; we have been given guardianship over a small part of His divine omnipotence. That would be the power to work miracles of which we tell the people, and that would be true."

"Yes, Father."

His eyes studied me wisely. "But that would be casuistry. I will not use that argument to satisfy your doubts. For the machines we use in the Cathedral were the work of men, divinely inspired though they may have been. You have studied in the Archives. You know that we still find plans, occasionally, which our trained lay brothers decipher, from which they draw up designs and our craftsmen execute, and we test. It has occurred to me that man was once wiser and greater than he is today. But perhaps, if we persevere in our labors and our faith, someday we, too, may understand the forces with which we work."

"I have thought that, Father."

The Abbot glanced up shrewdly, nodding. "There is one explanation I have not offered. It is usually reserved for those who have taken orders and even then it is not often given."

I flushed, feeling subtly flattered. "If there is anything I should not—"

He silenced me with a strong, white hand. "That, William," he said gently, "is for me to decide. It has been left to my discretion by the Bishop and through him from the Archbishop himself.

Your need is great, and because of that, because of your very doubts, you will be of great worth to us and to the service of God. Others, more easily satisfied, will be content to do less and be less. Someday you, too, will be Abbot, I am sure, or even"—he smiled with humility—"rise much higher in the hierarchy. Perhaps even to Archbishop itself, for though the galaxy is wide still one man in it must be Archbishop."

"Oh, no, Father," I objected. "I have no ambition—"

"Perhaps not. But preferment will seek you out. This, however, is what I want you to consider. The people—the slaves, the serfs, the freedmen, the mercenaries, the Peddlers, even the nobility—live in a world of chaos, besieged by countless sense impressions, beset by a thousand daily doubts of the wisdom of God. Their lives are hard, often bitter, and it should not be surprising that a simple message of faith finds them unresponsive. The masses of the people demand proof, constant daily proof, of the presence of their God and his power. Is it trickery to give them what they need? No. It is kindness."

"I see that, Father."

"But we live simply here in the monastery. We are protected from chaos and even from ourselves. We have the time and inclination for study and contemplation. We live close to God. Should we need the crutches to faith with which we aid the people?"

"No, Father. No." And for a moment, forgetting all else, I was swayed by the rich persuasiveness of the Abbot's voice into what seemed like a blinding flash of insight.

"That we should not need miracles to sustain our faith," the Abbot continued, "is our gift from the Church for renouncing the wordly life. We are provided with the environment most conducive to spiritual growth. But in the case of the specially gifted—in your case, William—we have special obligations. It is our opportunity to rise above the knowledge that the means we use to spread the Message are physical illusions. When the doubts are keen, that requires a superior faith. It demands a spirit that can recognize the imperfection of the means and yet believe in the higher truth which lies beyond means. It is your challenge, William, as it once was mine, to see and yet believe, to have your eyes not partly but fully opened, so that the truth of God can enter naked and pure. If you can do that, William, believe me, the rewards will be great—greater than you can now imagine."

I sank to my knees, trembling, to kiss the hem of his coarse, gray robe. "I can, Father. I can."

"Bless you, my son," the Abbot said huskily, and he traced in the air the mystic circle.

Purified, inspired, I started to rise and then—horribly, disastrously—memory returned and the glow of inspiration cooled. Into my spiritual world came two small, white feet; my world of peace and exaltation crumbled at their touch. *Save my faith!* I trembled again, but this time it was not with spiritual passion. *Preserve that moment of innocence and power, of knowledge and exaltation!* My face paled; my forehead became beaded with sweat. *Let me not doubt!*

"Father," I said, and my voice, as I heard it distantly, was dull and flat with remembered evil, "this afternoon—in the Cathedral—a girl entered—"

"Was she beautiful?" the Abbot asked gently.

"Yes, Father."

"We are forbidden the pleasures of the flesh, William, because our spirits are so weak. But, when we are young, a sigh or two may be a sin, but I think it is not a serious one. The Archbishop himself—"

"The girl was terrified—"

"Terrified?"

"It was the first time I had seen a member of the nobility so close—"

"Patrician—and terrified," the Abbot repeated, leaning forward in his chair. With a conscious effort he relaxed again.

"Go on, William."

"Men followed her"—my voice was still dead—"four of them. They waited for her in the street, beyond the Barrier. Mercenaries, without uniforms. It was they whom she feared."

"Free agents—Go on."

"They waited for her to come out, to grow tired of the Cathedral's temporary sanctuary. Before the end of the service she came to the front and dropped an offering on the plate and left the Cathedral. She stepped through the Barrier into their hands, and they cut off her feet."

The Abbot nodded gravely, unsurprised. "It is often done, I understand; for psychological as well as practical reasons."

I went on, unheeding. My voice had come alive, but the life was remembered horror through which I groped for words. "They smiled while they did it. How can there be such evil in the

world? They smiled, and no one cared, and they cut off her feet."

"No doubt she had committed some crime."

"Crime!" I said, lifting my head. "What crime could she have committed?"

The Abbot sighed. "Many things are considered crimes by the Barons or the Emperor—"

"What crime," I went on, "could justify such mutilation? They couldn't be sure she was guilty. They hadn't brought her to trial. They hadn't let her speak in her own defense. If they did this now, what will happen to her later?"

"In the temporal world," the Abbot said sadly, "justice is stern and seldom tempered with mercy. If a man steals, his hand is cut off. Many minor crimes are punishable by death. But it is likely that the girl was accused of treason."

"The miracles are illusions," I said bitterly, "but these things are real. Pain, hunger, violence, injustice, brutality. Only here in the monastery is there safety and shelter. And I am hiding from the world."

"That isn't pity," the Abbot said sternly, "that is a perversion, and close to heresy. Stamp it out, my son! Harry it from your mind with the scourge of faith! Here on Brancusi, God has given temporal power to the Barons and the Emperor. He has given them the right to administer justice and look after the physical lives of their subjects. If they are unjust and cruel, we should pity them, not their vassals and villeins, for the rulers are cutting themselves off from God's eternal peace. It is right that we should pity the temporary suffering of the people, but we must never forget that the physical life is more of an illusion than those we create in the Cathedral. Only the death that is life is real and eternal."

"Yes, Father, but—"

"As for our purpose in the monastery, it is not a withdrawal from life but a dedication to a better life. You should know that, William! You know our duties, our purpose, our goals." His voice dropped; he sighed. "But I must not be too severe. Your sympathies are too easily stirred. They have led you astray."

"I shall pray for guidance, Father," I said uneasily.

The Abbot looked down. When he looked up again his expression was unreadable. "You said that she left an offering. What was it?"

I hesitated. Then, abruptly, "I don't know, Father."

"You didn't look?"

"In the excitement, it slipped my mind completely."

"You are sure you don't have it with you?" the Abbot asked gently.

I controlled a start. "Yes, Father."

"Whatever it is, William, it should be turned over to the secular authorities. Its value—if it has any value—is nothing to us. And, from a practical viewpoint, we should never antagonize the temporal powers. We exist in peace, side by side, because our aims do not conflict. Instead they complement each other. Our physical defenses, even our spiritual powers, might not be strong enough to protect us from hostile secular forces. The Church must always look to its future."

Tolerated, I thought suddenly. "Yet she sacrificed—"

"She sacrificed nothing," the Abbot broke in sharply. "Whatever she had, it did not belong to her or she would not have been pursued. Her personal suffering was the direct result of her misdeeds. Misdeeds from which she doubtless hoped to gain."

"Yes, Father," I said reluctantly.

"But this is not a matter for discussion," the Abbot continued in a milder tone. "It is a matter of Church policy that anything for which the secular authorities have a just claim should be turned over to them as quickly as possible. An object cannot claim sanctuary."

The Abbot got up slowly. He was a tall man, as tall as I am, and heavier, and his powerful personality enveloped me like a thick cloak.

"Go and get it," he said firmly. "Bring it to me so that I can return it to its proper owners."

"Yes, Father," I said meekly. At that moment disobedience was unthinkable. My mind was working as I turned toward the door. I had never lied to anyone before. Why had I lied to the Abbot now? And he knew that I lied. He did not believe me.

I might win forgiveness even yet, if I gave up the pebble. The pebble was worthless. If it had a meaning, I could never decipher it. With the door half open, I turned, my hand fumbling at the pouch beneath my robe. But the Abbot was disappearing into the inner room; the door was closing behind him.

I went through the doorway and closed the door silently behind me.

I paced the monastery corridors for hours. If I went back to the Abbot and told him I couldn't find the object the girl left— It

was no good. He wouldn't believe me. He would tell me to leave the monastery, and I would have to go. Could I leave, uselessly? Who would I help? How could I live? All I knew about life outside was what I had seen this afternoon.

I decided to give up the pebble. I decided it several times. Once I got as far as the Abbot's door and stood there with my knuckles upraised. But I could not knock. Oddly, wonderfully, the girl had trusted me. The only thing she had known about me was the miracle I had worked for her, and it had been very little, but it had been enough. Blindly, she had trusted me. How could I betray that trust?

I didn't want to see anybody. Twice I turned away from monks moving rapidly down the corridor and slipped into another room where I could be alone. It would have been relief to have confided my problem to someone, but after the Abbot there was nobody. Brother John would have been interested in the pebble, but he wouldn't care what happened to it. Father Konek would patiently explain the fallacy of my position. Father Michaelis would have been overcome with horror at the thought of rebellion.

I lingered in the Archives, but in all that vast accumulation of wisdom there was no answer to a problem like mine. I worked out in the exercise room for a little while, as I did for an hour or so every day. The Fathers said it helped to rid me of the fevers of youth, but there was no help in it now for this fever. The art room held me for half an hour as I listened to my favorite composition in light and sound by a composer long forgotten. But it ended, and before I could find another, a party of monks entered, and I faded down a side corridor.

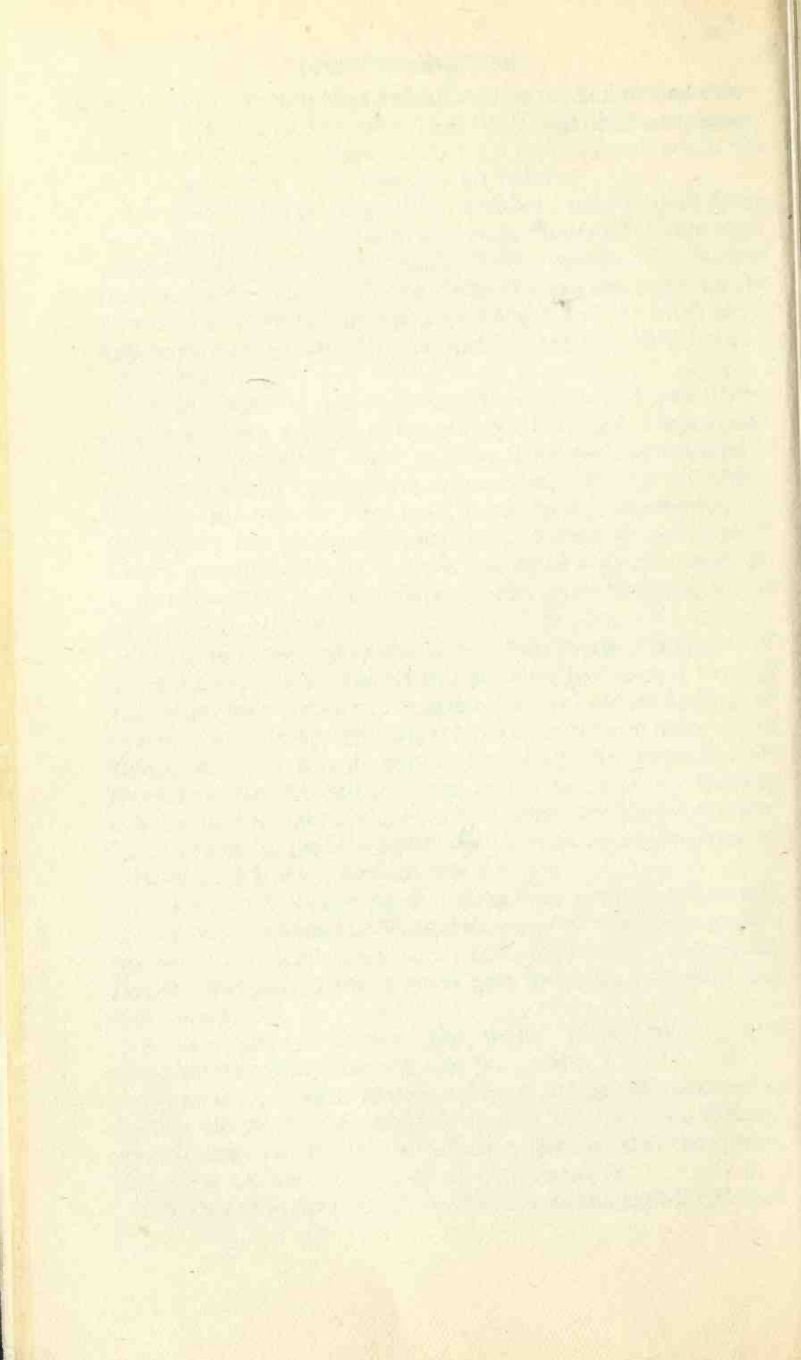
At last, tired, discouraged, and without a solution, I started for my cell. Perhaps I could find in prayer and sleep the answer my weary, wakeful mind could not supply. As I neared the familiar doorway, I saw a monk step through it and after him three more.

I must have mistaken the room, I thought in wild astonishment. But I knew it was no mistake.

My cowl was pulled up over my head; my face was shadowed. I drew closer. The first monk looked up. My step faltered momentarily as I realized with frozen disbelief that the coarse, gray robe did not clothe a monk or an acolyte.

Looking at me with hard, bold eyes was the dark-faced man

who had waited for a girl outside a cathedral and when she had come out had cut off her feet.



THREE

Betrayed!

The word exploded in my mind with the ghastly white light of a fireworks rocket. A dozen lines of disjointed thought streamed fiery trails behind my eyes.

Betrayed to these men who killed and mutilated and. . . Why? Because I saw— No. There was no reason—but one. . . . The pebble. Resting in the pouch at my waist like a burning coal. I had been foolish to keep it with me. . . . Someone wanted it, wanted it badly. They had hired these men—these killers—to get it—or get it back. . . .

Betrayed—by whom?

I thought automatically of the young acolyte. He could have got word outside that the pebble was here, that an acolyte named Dane knew where it was. But—my mind stopped—he could not have let them in. He had to have help, expert help, in lowering the Barrier. He had to have help in getting robes for them and directing them. He couldn't have done it alone.

That meant—the second shock almost made me reel—that meant an organization. There were men inside the monastery who could be bought like mercenaries, to whom oaths and duties meant nothing. There was an organization which could betray the Church and its defenses into the hands of the secular authorities. But that—God save the Church!—I couldn't do anything about. My predicament was more immediate and more deadly.

The knot of fake monks stood whispering and undecided outside my door. I could not turn back; that would bring immediate suspicion. There was only one thing to do. I had to go on, hoping they would not stop me, would not see my face, or, seeing it, would not know me. I had to trick these sharp-eyed masters of trickery. The price of failure was my life. My heart beat loudly in my chest; my legs felt liquid. And it was not the thought of the pebble.

"Dane," said the dark one in a soft voice that was the touch of a cat's paw before the needled claws sprang out, "the acolyte."

My heart stopped beating—and then began again. It had been a question. They didn't know they were in front of my cell; they couldn't be sure they had found the right one. I turned without hesitation, keeping my face in the shadow of the cowl, and I pointed to the second doorway down the way I had come. Slowly then I turned back and resumed my measured pace.

It was physical agony to move slowly. It would have been ecstasy to run. But I knew instinctively that running or looking back would be fatal. I had a few seconds before they discovered that the cell I had pointed out was bare. I had bought the seconds. I must not waste them. Three cells on that side of mine had been empty for a long time. The old monks who had lived there had died, one by one, and they had never been replaced. I had scarcely known the old men, but the manner of their passing had impressed me. Now, if I could not reach the first side corridor, I would go, not as they had, but young and afraid.

The corridor was twenty steps away. I had not dared direct them farther; they would have suspected a mistake of four or more. Fifteen. I held my breath. Ten. Perhaps I could make it.

"Monk!" One of them called from behind but it was not the dark one.

I walked on deafly. Five steps more. Four. Three. Two.

"Dane!" came the velvet voice.

I whirled at the corner. A thin, bright-blue bolt hissed past me, splitting the darkness. I felt my hair stir under the cowl. As I picked up my robe and ran, I heard behind me a dull, smacking, fleshy sound and a muffled curse and the noise of running, stumbling feet.

The hours I had spent in the exercise room had not been wasted. I blessed them now. In spite of my weariness, I could still run, and the men behind me were hobbled by unfamiliar robes, confused by strange corridors. And I ran.

A corridor split off; I followed it. At an intersection, I turned again. There was a chance of losing them. The monastery was a maze; it had grown steadily but haphazardly until it covered several blocks. But the slap-slap of shod feet on stone floors followed me steadily wherever I turned. I could not lose them, and they were running better.

Where could I go? Where could I hide? The killers were inside. The monastery was no longer a sanctuary. And there were traitors here now, who had let the killers in. The Abbot? Even if I gave up the pebble now, I wasn't sure that he could protect me.

Would want to. I had lied to him. And there was the pebble—and the girl.

Behind me the feet followed. And followed, while the breath burned harshly into my lungs and the blood pounded into my head and muffled my ears. *Two feet*, I thought crazily, shuddering. *Only two. The girl's feet were following. Only the feet, cut off at the ankles. Come to reclaim the pebble . . .*

For a mad moment I thought of casting the pebble behind me, like the spaceman in the folk tale, the one in the lifeboat who cast out his child to the relentlessly pursuing beast of space. Then the feet might stop, satisfied, and let me go.

But the fantasy passed. The feet were once more many and heavy and inexorable.

Outside? Could I go outside? I shivered. I would be lost outside. In my robe, without money, but most of all—most fatally of all—without knowledge, I would be a man marked and alone. Outside was where the killers lived, the sea of chaos where they could snake through like amphibious mammals, scarcely leaving a wake, while I would flounder in a turmoil of white water until they came for me. Outside I was helpless, their prey to be caught whenever they wished, to be treated as they wished, to be discarded when they had finished with me.

But here!—oh, God, I had no refuge, no home, no hope. My world had offered me up as a sacrifice to the killers' evil gods. I could see only a gaping mouth with fangs stained red with blood. *Damn them!* I screamed silently as I raced along the dark corridors with fear pounding behind me. *Damn them all!* There was no escape; for me there was no sanctuary anywhere, and already I was gasping for breath.

I scarcely knew where I was. Somewhere to the right was the Archives. To the left was the dining hall. Below was the exercise room. But none of them had a place I could hide for more than a moment, and the feet were close behind me. I could not double back. Ahead of me was the Cathedral. Better to die here than to desecrate the Cathedral with my blood. But—

The thought made my stride falter. This was my world. It was still my world for a moment. The killers were here in my world, and if I couldn't make use of that I deserved to be cast to them. If I couldn't turn the powers of my world against them, if I couldn't sell myself, at least, for a price that the killers had not planned to pay, let me be taken.

Ahead was the Cathedral. In its control room were powers

they had never dreamed of. I needed a little more lead—

I broke into a sprint. The pace was impossible for more than a few seconds, but those seconds were priceless. When the blue Portal glowed in front of me, the sounds of pursuit had faded away beneath the noise of my own running feet. A moment's hesitation beside the apparently seamless corridor wall, and a panel slid back. Before it was more than half open, I was through and the panel was closing behind me.

Breathless, I sprang up the steps. I threw myself into the chair facing the controls, flicked the power switch, fitted the cap to my head, slipped my hands into the gauntlets. The screen grew gray, brightened, flickered, and cleared. The Cathedral was empty as I had known it would be at this hour. Then—one, two, three—all four of the false monks broke through the blue veil of the Portal. And were trapped. . . .

A wave of madness swept over me. For the first time in my life, I knew power. I felt it pulsing beneath my finger tips, surging through my body, swelling in my mind. Power was mine. Over this small segment of creation I was God. Punishment was mine. Life and death were mine. But first I had to seal off my kingdom.

The Portal was one-way. They had gone through but they could not go back. The Barrier was another matter; it opened onto the street. The twist of a switch reversed the field. *They must not escape!*

They had shed their robes during the chase. They were black shadows in the Cathedral, shadows in snug trousers, shirts, and jackets, fat, ugly, snouted guns in their hands. Three of them searched frantically, bewilderedly, among the kneeling benches for a fugitive who had vanished impossibly. The fourth, the dark one, stood in the middle of the Cathedral, gazing thoughtfully around the smooth walls with a quirk of wry amusement twisting one corner of his mouth.

Finally the three searchers looked back toward the front of the Cathedral. I was facing them, a tall, hooded figure in a coarse gray robe, awesomely shadowed. One long arm stretched out accusingly.

Leave the Cathedral! a voice whispered in their minds. *Murderous vermin, torturing cowards, slimy killers, scum of the universe! Go! Before I erase your desecration from this temple of holiness.*

The answer was a bright-blue bolt, a scorching flash that seared its way into the wall behind the shadow figure. Another shot and another shattered the darkness of the Cathedral.

Formless shadows reeled drunkenly toward the walls and came surging back. But the figure in front of them stood untouched, its arms folded across its chest contemptuously.

Fools! the soundless voice rumbled. Your guns are useless here. They are toys to frighten children, you men who have sold your souls for money. You have based your lives on the power of these playthings, but here they are nothing. You are weaponless, here in the presence of God!

And a divine laughter thundered through their minds, a laughter that was more than a little tinged with madness. *Go! Go! Before I repent me of my mercy.*

One of them broke. He turned, fled toward the Barrier, shaking and unnerved. But a tingling warning stopped him short of a fatal plunge. He turned a white face toward the cowed figure at the front of the Cathedral.

What? You will not go? Then you must stay and face my wrath. For money you have sold yourself. For money you kill and torture and terrify. For a few coins you torment the weak to please the strong. You want money? Take it! Money, money, money, money, money. . . .

Out of the air coins streamed into being, hurtling showers of metal pieces flung with great force, mysterious missiles aimed at their faces, striking cruel, stunning blows. Before they could throw up their arms for protection, all were bleeding from cuts and one had lost an eye. Cursing defiantly, he stood there, one hand clasped over the bleeding socket until a new shower forced him to seek cover, like the others, behind the kneeling benches.

Starkly, suddenly, I was sane again. Sane and shaking. Seeing that empty socket and the blood and jelly upon his cheek, I was sane and empty, and I longed for the divine madness that would not return.

I tried to think. This couldn't last. Just as the madness couldn't last. Even if I could hold off the four in the Cathedral or even—God pity me!—kill them, sooner or later some of the monks would come to investigate. I couldn't use my weapons against them. The end must come.

One thing I had to make sure of. I had to see that they didn't get the pebble. They wanted it badly. They would search for it endlessly. As long as the pebble was missing, ruthless men could not rest.

I fished the pebble out and placed it on the control panel in front of me. It winked at me like a crystal eye, all-knowing, mute. My hand crept out toward it. I couldn't bear to part with

it. What would I be when the pebble was gone? Nothing. Worse than nothing. I had been nothing before this afternoon, I realized now; from this day on—however short that time might be—I would know it. And yet—

I pulled my hand back. I had to get rid of it. Something whispered to me, and I knew that—cowardice or logic—the whisper was right. I couldn't protect it, I couldn't riddle its mystery. I couldn't—I picked it up with the beam and knew in that instant where I would hide it in a world that had no hiding places.

Inside the Cathedral walls would be a cavity, placed there by the Cathedral builders as a receptacle for the past. Almost every public building had one. The Archives had benefited richly from all such wrecked or excavated buildings. Surely the Church had put such a dedication to the future in the Cathedral.

I probed through the murky darkness of the walls, slid within them, searching for a lesser darkness. And I found it, and the pebble flickered momentarily as it dropped and disappeared, and I felt suddenly hollow, empty of meaning. There, in the cornerstone, was the reason for my present hopelessness. There it would rest long after I had returned to the soil and the air and the water. Some future historian would pick it up in his fingers and wonder how it had come there. He would puzzle over it. He would try to decipher it, and in the end he would toss it aside as an accident or a prank.

When I looked back at the screen, I realized I had been preoccupied too long. The end of the shower of missiles had let the killers split up. They would be harder to hit now, but that was meaningless because my supply of coins had run out. There was nothing left to throw, and the beam was incapable of lifting anything heavy—anything as heavy as a man, say—at this distance.

From the corner where the dark one crouched, there close to the Portal, came a flash of movement. Something exploded close by. The room rocked around me. The dark one had thrown a bomb, with uncanny skill, picking out the location of the control room. The blast had torn a huge hole in the forward wall of the Cathedral. They were willing to destroy the Cathedral to blast me out!

My teeth grated. There was something I could do if they were unwary enough. The beam flashed out to the man who had lost an eye. Before he realized what was happening, his gun was

soaring through the air like an ugly black bird. It came to rest in the shadow hand of the monk standing at the front of the Cathedral, unshaken by the explosion.

I searched frantically for the trigger with my pseudo-hands as blue bolts streaked through my image below. They were trying to shoot the gun out of the air before I could fire it. The lever below, in the proper position for the forefinger, must be the trigger. I pulled it. Nothing happened. There was a small button on the barrel of the gun? No. Accidentally, then, I pressed the back of the handle at the same time I pulled the trigger. A blue flash sped back toward the killers, aimless.

Aimless, but not futile. Nausea gripped my throat. I clenched my teeth on sour stomach acids as I realized the unimportance of the fact that one man had lost an eye. For a shockingly long heartbeat, the smoking trunk of a man stood upright before it collapsed in the aisle.

They were three now, and they were cautious, not recognizing the sheer, blind, deadly luck of that first shot. Now nothing showed above the level of the kneeling benches. While my eyes searched the screen, I wondered if I could force myself to fire again. A man was dead down there in the Cathedral, a worthless man, a gunman, a torturer, a killer. . . . It made no difference. He had been alive and now he was dead, and I was sick.

There!—an arm flung back. Automatically, my hand twitched. The bolt was feet wide. It smashed a kneeling bench into smoking ruin, but the arm jerked. Something slipped from the hand, something small, cylindrical, gleaming as it fell. . . . A whole section exploded in a gout of flesh and blood and wood.

I turned my eyes away from the screen, grimacing. *Death! Death! I was death!* Those who lived by violence were dying by violence, but death should be cold and hard and bloodless. And I was weak and afraid.

The Portal flickered. I saw it out of the corner of my eye. The gun swiveled below in the hand of the shadow monk, but I could not force the hand to close. There had been enough killing. And the gun remained dark and silent as the dark killer dived fearlessly through the Portal. He had been helped by someone inside the monastery, helped again, and as I wondered again who it was, I realized that now I would have to watch for an attack from behind. For the first time in long minutes I remembered that I could be killed as easily as they could be killed, and I would be as dead as they were. And it was likely that

I would be.

Quickly I got up and stepped to the doorway. The hallway panel below was still closed, and the steps were empty. Seated back at the control, I eyed the mirror placed high on the wall. It gave a clear view of the long stairway behind. I tried to think. If I had another gun. . . .

I grabbed with the beam for the gun of the killer still in the Cathedral, but he clung to it grimly, fighting off unseen hands. My eyes switched back to the mirror; the panel below was still closed. I triggered off a quick bolt toward the one in the Cathedral. It wasn't even close; benches smoldered behind him. It had been a warning: *Keep your head down!* My mind raced. . . .

Trapped. Hopelessly, finally trapped. There were two ways out of the Cathedral, the Barrier and the Portal, but there was only one way out of the control room, down the stairs and into the corridor, and that way was blocked by the dark one. It would be a quick ending. I promised myself that. They would want to capture me alive. They would want to torture out of me the location of the pebble. I wouldn't give them the chance.

There were only two exits. . . . I clutched at the thought like a dying man at the last strands of life. . . . But I had wondered before—if there was not a third. . . .

I needed clothes. I needed money. Without these escape was impossible, and an exit is worthless if it leads back to the same deadly room. With them— Here there was no hope for life— nothing. But outside, violent as it was. . . .

The headless killer's clothes were almost unharmed. Luckily, the closures were magnetic; they yielded easily to the tug of the beam. The jacket, at least, was easy. The shirt gave more trouble. I fought with the body's dead weight, rolling it from side to side to shake the lifeless arms loose from the sleeves. Dead, he resisted even more stubbornly than he had alive.

When the jacket and shirt were lying beside me, I glanced at the mirror and knew I had been reckless. The hall panel was open, but no one was on the stairs. All I needed was a few minutes, just a few minutes more. I bought the gun to the control room. I stepped quickly to the doorway, triggering a wash of blue flame down the stairs. That would make the dark one hesitate before he risked a suicidal dash up the stairs. But he could afford to wait.

A thunderous explosion shook the room for a second time. I

staggered as I tried to reach the controls and the room sagged beneath my feet. I grabbed for the back of the chair to keep from falling. I pulled myself to the panel. I needed too many eyes, too many hands. The killer left in the Cathedral had thrown another of those tiny, fantastically powerful bombs.

I sent the gun back to the Cathedral and I tried to ferret the gunman out. The only result was a waste of shots—and time. I went back to the headless body. The torso glimmered whitely in the darkness. My eyes darted back and forth between screen and mirror as I tried to skin the pants from the corpse, and I swore at them and at the body and at the fashion of tight pants. Finally I grabbed the waistband firmly and lifted. Something slipped.

A blue beam seared into the wall above my head. I dropped the pants and looked up, startled. A mirrored arm and gun were pulled back around the corner. But he couldn't do any real damage that way. The danger lay in my becoming so busy with other problems that I might give him a chance to make a dash up the stairs. Then the chances would be all with the dark one and his experience.

An arm upraised in the Cathedral! I threw a shot that missed, but the arm was pulled down hastily. I watched the mirror and struggled with the pants. And they gave, they slipped, they peeled off like skin off a grape, and they were beside me. I had the clothes, if I could hide my trail.

I raised my gun above the trunk of the naked killer. There was a dark band across the whiteness, a wide belt. I pulled it loose with a single jerk, and fired. The body jerked and smoldered and was a black, unrecognizable mass. Nausea rose in my throat; I choked it back.

The flash surprised the remaining gunman. Incautiously he raised his head above the kneeling bench to peer at the flame and acrid smoke. My gun twisted, spat, and he sagged limply to the floor between the benches. And I was truly sick—sick of killing, sick of blood, sick of death, and almost sick of life.

Again blue flame licked over my head. My self-revulsion vanished. I looked up to find the mirror gone; where it had been was a white rectangle in a blackened circle. I discovered then that survival is an instinct. I wanted to live, and it all depended on the dark one, whether he would let me have the few moments I needed. Was he on the stairs? I could not trust my feeling that the final rush had not come. I brought the gun from the Cathedral; I would not need it there any more. I got up, holding

the gun high above my head, pointing down the stairs as I approached, pulling the trigger. The gun jerked in my hand. The stairs were empty of everything except flame.

No time now for thought. I jumped back to the pile of clothing on the floor. My robe slipped off. I picked up the belt, wrapped it around my waist, and pressed the ends together. It sagged loosely, but there was no time for adjustments. The pants were large, too. I was thankful for that as I struggled with them awkwardly.

I sent two more shots down the steps before I tackled the shirt and jacket. The shirt went on. A hand stroked down the front, sealing the closure. It was tight; so was the jacket. The jacket would have been tighter if I had slipped the gun into the tailored pocket inside, but I kept it in my hand.

Once more I swept the steps with blue fire. Then I sprang to the controls and worked at them hastily. They had to be adjusted finely. The timing had to be perfect. Maximum power had to be channeled through the machine in the shortest time. And it had to be automatic. A final check took a long moment. I marked a spot on the floor with my eye, forced the gun into its inside pocket, and reached over to press a button.

I heard the sound of running feet on the stairs.

The lights dimmed. The last thing I remembered was the dark killer, flickering strangely, dodging aside at the doorway behind a gun spitting blue fire; the incredulous look on his face, and a flame that wrapped around me and shut out the light.

FOUR

It was the first time I had the dream of the running and the dark and the silence and the fear, of being chased by feet that were too horribly light, and the burning of my hand—except now my face was burning, too—and the dropping of the coal, and the shame and the emptiness. . . .

That part was always the same, but the endings were different. . . .

The thought came to me that I was blind or dead, or both. Then a light was born into the darkness, a blue light from above and a green light from below, and I discovered that I was lying in a peaceful meadow. My face didn't hurt so much because a four-legged, grazing animal was licking it with its soothing tongue. In spite of the way my head ached, I stood up to find out where I was, and the place was familiar, although I couldn't name it somehow, but that was all right because it was peace, and peace really doesn't need a name.

Around the edge of a low hill came the girl who didn't have a name either, and that was all right, too. She walked on air because she hadn't any feet. But her lips were smiling, and she held out her hand as she came closer, and I reached out to take her hand. A burning sensation streaked up my arm and circled through my body in ever-widening arcs until I felt intensely alive. And when she took her hand away at last, a crystal pebble rested in my palm, innocent, transparent, inscrutable.

Her lips moved, but I heard no sound.

"What is it?" I asked.

She looked puzzled. She shrugged her shoulders impatiently and pointed to her ears. Her lips moved silently again.

There was a question I had to ask. I had to know the answer, but I couldn't remember the question. "Is it life?" I asked instead, so that she wouldn't go away. "Is it hope or freedom? Is it love?"

But she began to fade, and the animals began to fade, and the meadow began to fade, and I tried, frantically, to keep her from leaving.

"Is it worth living for? Is it worth dying for?"

But she looked sad and shrugged her shoulders and everything kept fading. Then I thought of the question I had to ask.

"Come back," I shouted. "Come back."

She shook her head silently, helplessly.

"I don't know the secret," I shouted. "I don't know how to read it. Tell me. Tell me. . . ."

Far in the distance I could see her lips framing themselves into a word, but I was too far away to make it out, and I looked down and the pebble was gone, too, and I was alone, always alone, forever alone, alone and afraid. . . .

I blinked into the dim light overhead and felt gentle fingers rubbing the back of my right hand with something that was oily and soothing. The light was only vaguely bluish and my eyelids felt stiff and sandy and the back of my head hurt. Slowly a face swam into sight, bending over me, and at first I thought it was the girl's face, because it was fair and pretty and the hair was blond. But my eyes focused, and I saw that the hair was short and the face belonged to a man.

"Waking up, eh?" the man said in a voice that was high and clear and casual. "Thought you would."

I struggled to sit up. "I've got to get away," I said. My lips hurt when I moved them, and my voice came out in a hoarse croak.

The man pressed me back easily, gently. The pneumatic bunk under me gave a little. The man was sitting on the edge of it. I turned my head. I was in some kind of living quarters. The room was larger than my own cell, but it wasn't huge. The furnishings seemed comfortable and colorful, but they weren't luxurious—the bunk I was lying on, a couple of deep chairs, a small bookcase filled with old-fashioned books, drapes concealing the walls all around except for a single open doorway.

"You aren't going any place," the man said gently. "Not tonight. Not in your condition."

I relaxed, not completely but a little. The man seemed kind. My mind was confused, but one thought came clear. "It's dangerous," I blurted out.

His eyes narrowed. "Why?"

I put my hand to my forehead and winced. I closed my eyes for a moment and opened them again. "It's hard to remember.

There's someone after me. A gunman in a black uniform. He wants to kill me. He'll kill you, too."

The man smiled lazily. "That's not so easy to do. Where I grew up we got trouble more often than food. Been so quiet since I got to Brancusi I haven't felt more than half alive. Now if you were what you seem to be"—his eyes glittered with a wicked amusement—"you wouldn't be any trouble at all. You'd be dead, and your body would be disposed of."

"What do you mean?"

"You dress like a Free Agent. You're not. Skin is too white. Hands too soft. Clothes were made for a man bigger around the waist, smaller around the chest and across the shoulders. Offhand, I'd say you're a monk."

"An acolyte," I said, unconsciously imitating his clipped speech. "Or I was. What do you mean, 'Free Agent'?"

"One of the hard boys, the smart boys, the high-priced mercenaries. Free with a gun, free with a woman, free with their money, and free to change sides if someone offers them a little more money."

"I think I killed three of them," I said, and the memory sent a shudder rippling through my body.

"That wins the medal for acolytes," he said, smiling, but I thought I detected a new note of respect. "A few more sprees like that and you'll be a master."

Suddenly full realization swept over me. I lifted myself on one elbow. "Where am I? Can they—?"

"Not unless they followed you." His eyes seemed a little narrower. "Found you wandering in the street, dazed, just before you collapsed. Lie back. Relax. Get some strength. I dragged you in here, but any farther you get under your own power."

He selected a thin white cylinder from a case and drew it into life between his lips. An acrid, sweetish smoke drifted through the air; the man's eyes got brighter. I took a good look at him for the first time, and I realized how I could have mistaken him for the girl. It wasn't only the blond hair; his skin was delicate, though lightly tanned, his lips were redder than seemed natural for a man, and when he got up—as now—he seemed small and slim, although he moved with a sort of catlike grace and supple strength.

"As for where you are," he said, pacing as he sent thin threads of smoke curling from his small nostrils, "you're in the shop of

Fred Siller, Bookseller"—a smile mirthlessly curled his lip and tilted the corners of his light blue eyes—"bookseller to the masses. Business is terrible. Tell me, how did you do it?"

"Do what?" I asked cautiously.

"Get those burns on your hand and face."

I raised my hand. It was red and glistening with grease. So that was why my face and hand hurt. "One of them shot at me."

Siller whistled softly. "That's a new one. A burn from a flash gun! Usually there's nothing left to burn."

"I was—I was going someplace else at the time," I said.

"You must have been," Siller said, raising an eyebrow, "and in a hurry. Don't you remember?"

"I don't know," I said vaguely. "Some of it— I remember that my name is Dane. William Dane. I was an acolyte until this afternoon—when a girl came into the Cathedral while I was on duty. She came in to escape from four—Free Agents. . . . And when she went out, they cut off her feet—"

"Go on," he said impatiently.

"Don't you understand?" My head was confused and aching, but one idea cried out for recognition. "They smiled and cut off her feet."

"Yes, yes. I understand that." His eyes seemed magnified by the drifting smoke between us. "What happened then?"

I lowered myself hopelessly to the bunk and passed a hand across my forehead, ignoring the pain. No one was interested in the vital things. In fragments, sketchily, confused, the story came out. My eyes were closed as I finished. "It's hard to remember. I can't remember any more."

When I opened my eyes again, his eyes loomed through the smoke, large, blue, feverishly bright. "Why did she come into the Cathedral? . . . What did she have with her? . . . Why did she leave? . . ."

My head rolled from side to side. "I don't know. . . . I don't remember. . . . I don't know. . . ."

The eyes finally went away and the voice with them. I sank into a kind of stupor. I was roused by a chuckle which seemed to come from a long way off.

"You need a rest," a voice said, "and a chance to let those burns heal. Must have thrown up your hand to protect your eyes just as the gun went off. Lucky for your sight. You're not exactly pretty right now. Eyebrows and eyelashes burnt almost off. Face looks like raw meat."

"What am I going to do?" I asked weakly. "I'm like a baby outside the monastery walls."

The chuckle rolled out again. It was almost a giggle. "Well fixed for a baby. Clothes. Money—five thousand imperial chronors in one hundred chronor pieces—"

My eyes opened.

Siller giggled. "In the money belt."

I reached toward my waist with my unburnt left hand.

Siller exploded with laughter. "It's still there. If I'd wanted to rob you, I wouldn't have left you around to worry about it. Always find out what I'm getting into. The Agent you stripped was well padded. If it was the price for his share of the job, he or the job came high. Unless you raided the Abbot's treasury." He poked me in the ribs as I struggled to rise. "Never mind. It isn't important. To conclude—you've got a gun worth at least five hundred, a respectable stock of ammunition—"

He pulled down a flap on my jacket to expose a row of slender metal tubes stuck into padded cloth pockets. "Ten of them. Good for about one hundred short bursts apiece, ten long ones, or one big whoosh. Enough power to heat and light this shop for ten years. Fifty chronors each—if you can get them. Oh, there's no doubt about it. You're well fixed all right."

"You can't buy freedom with money," I said, "or peace."

"You'd be surprised what it will buy—if you know where to go and how to spend it. And how to protect it. That means a lot. That you'll have to learn. With a little education, a good deal of ruthlessness, and a lot of luck, you might be able to survive."

Survive. I shivered as a face swam up into my mind. "Not with the dark one after me."

Siller's face sharpened. "Who?"

"I don't know who," I said. I was tired and sick and the endless questioning had made me petulant. "He had a dark face, careless and bold at the same time. Cold, black, ruthless eyes. A hard, heavy jaw, and a big, grotesque nose that wasn't funny at all. He was big—at least as tall as I am—"

"Sabatini," Siller said. His voice was low and unsteady. The light tan seemed to bleach from his face.

"You know him?" I said stupidly. I was too tired to be astonished any more.

"I know him," Siller said, almost talking to himself. "We've met twice. Once on MacLeod. Once on the United Worlds. But I wasn't in his way, and he wasn't in mine—not directly. This

time—" He shrugged, but his face was puzzled. "Sabatini had a stake on the United Worlds that should have nailed him down until someone came along just a little faster and harder and smarter."

"But the United Worlds are over a hundred light years away," I objected.

"Exactly," Siller muttered. "Who'd have thought—?"

His aimless movements became purposeful. He went to one wall and pulled aside the hangings. Beneath his fingers a piece of the wall opened out. Behind it was a small cupboard. He selected a few objects and slipped them into his jacket pockets. One of them was a gun, although it didn't look like the one I had taken from the Agent. This had a long, slim barrel. It slipped under his arm, inside his jacket.

He was getting ready to leave. I watched him, not knowing what to say. Finally he turned back toward me.

"We'd better be moving along," he said easily. "This place may not be—"

He stiffened, and I felt a strange, unlocalized sense of alarm. A moment later, from beyond what was apparently an adjoining room, came a loud, officious knocking.

Siller crouched. "Knock!" he whispered viciously. "Come in and get a taste of hell!"

Slowly, casually, as if the scene just before had never happened, he straightened and turned a carefree face toward me. "On your feet," he said. He was beside the doorway leading, I presumed, to the bookshop. In that direction, at least, the knocking continued. He pressed a section of the door frame. Nothing happened.

"Who is it?" I asked. The knocking stopped, ominously.

Siller looked at me, apparently surprised that I was still lying on the bunk. He shrugged. "Some customer, perhaps. The shop is closed. Permanently."

While Siller went to the draped wall opposite the doorway, I listened in silent torment to the beginning of a sound I was coming to know too well—a thin, spitting sound, muffled now by distance. Then, in the other room, a crash, a shout, and a crackling roar. The last sound was meaningless to me. Then a wave of heat radiated from the wall, and a tongue of flame licked through the doorway.

"Come on!" Siller's voice was impatient. "Get up. Even if I could wait, the fire won't."

I looked toward him. He was standing by the wall, holding back a drape from a rectangular, black opening. I sat up. The room wavered and spun. I forced myself slowly to my feet. The room rocked under me. Instinctively I reached out to support myself against the nearest wall. The hand jerked itself back without my volition; the wall was smoking hot.

I clenched my teeth and concentrated on taking a step. Sweat beaded my forehead as the room steadied. There were ten steps in all. I took five of them cautiously, slowly, as if I were balancing myself on a thin wire above a gulf. On the sixth step I stumbled. The last four I made in a headlong dive. At the last moment I grabbed the edge of the doorway with both hands to keep myself from plunging through.

"Good man," said Siller, patting my arm. "I had to make sure you were worth taking along."

I raised my head with great effort. Siller's face was a pink blur. I forced the words out like bitter pellets. "And—if I hadn't—made it?"

Siller's voice had a shrug in it. "I would probably have left you here."

The flames were eating hungrily into the room behind us, but the space beyond the wall opening was dark. A slim tube in Siller's hand became a light and illuminated a corridor. I took a step. It was not so much a corridor as an unfinished space between two rough walls. Dusty, cobwebbed, it was littered with broken boards, pieces of metal and plastic, and other discarded building materials.

Behind me, Siller slid a thick plastic door into the opening and touched a button beside the doorway. A thin line of fire ran around the edge and sputtered out.

"Now," Siller said, chuckling, "if they save this room—as they probably will—let them figure out how we left it."

He draped my left arm around his shoulders and led me down the musty corridor. Even in my exhaustion, I wondered at the weight Siller's slight figure could bear without apparent effort. For the trip seemed eternal, and the light splashing ahead suggested no changes in the corridor, no possible end to the journey. Stumbling, coughing in the haze of dust raised by our feet, I made my way onward until time and distance became meaningless.

At the end of eternity the feet stopped, and I stopped, and Siller was gone from beneath my arm. I sagged against

something hard and rough, and Siller made vague, blurred motions in front of a blank wall. Then there was a doorway where the wall had been, and I was inside, blinking in a blaze of magnificence.

I've lost my way, I thought disjointedly. We've come through a back door in space into the Emperor's palace.

But I knew I was wrong. Somewhere a voice whispered that this was the room of a humble bookseller, but my senses, shocked into a moment of clear vision, rebelled.

Humble? Not this! Pictures built into the walls in almost three-dimensional reality were surely the work of genius. The walls themselves glowed with hidden light and subdued color. Shimmering chairs and a davenport squatted on the deep-carpeted floor. An alcove held tall bookcases, and the bookcases held row on row of magnificently bound volumes. In one corner stood an oversized three-dimensional teevee. . . .

The room blurred into a fantasy of color. I threw a hand up in front of my eyes. With the other I caught hard at the edge of the doorway for support. . . .

Siller said something, but it was only a senseless jumble of sounds.

I took one step forward and fell. I was unconscious before I hit the floor.

FIVE

I woke up next morning and my education began. I was in a large bed. The room was not the one I had seen last night. I felt rested, but when I tried to move, stiffened muscles screamed their protest. My face felt hard. My hand smarted. There was a knot on the back of my head. . . .

"Where's your gun?" Siller whispered from the doorway. His voice was like the hiss of a snake.

I sat up, groaning, trying to shake the sleep away.

"Where's your gun?" Siller asked again, even softer, and I noticed that his gun with the long, slim barrel dangled from relaxed fingers.

I pawed at my chest. I found nothing but skin. A rumpling of the smooth, soft blanket revealed only the fact that I was naked.

There was a tiny explosion from the doorway, as if someone had expelled air from between his lips. Something hissed through my cropped hair. I looked up. The gun no longer dangled between Siller's fingers. It pointed straight at me. *What a little opening it has*, I thought foolishly, *no bigger than the head of a pin*.

"What—" I began.

Siller cut me off. "If I had been any one of a million men you would be dead by now."

Sheepishly I glanced behind me. Just above my head a small needle was half embedded in the wall.

"All right. I've learned my lesson," I said, and reached up to remove the needle from the wall.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Siller said casually. "It's poisoned."

My finger tips trembled an inch from the needle.

"Lesson number two," Siller said. "Never touch anything you don't understand. Corollary: never become involved in a situation until you know what you hope to gain and what you stand to lose and the extent and quality of the opposition."

With a pair of tweezers, Siller loosened the needle from the wall. He dropped it carefully into a small vial, which he corked

and placed in his left-hand pocket.

"Then you don't follow your own advice," I snapped ungratefully, "or you wouldn't have taken me in."

"That," said Siller, "is where you are mistaken."

After that he was silent. When I had dressed and eaten, he gently applied new salve to my face and hand. His hands felt unpleasantly warm and moist.

"I imagine you were never a handsome man," Siller remarked drily. "So your change in appearance can't be called disfigurement exactly. The face should be completely recovered in a week. Except your eyebrows and lashes and perhaps a little discoloration. The hand may take a little longer. If you live that long.

"But you can claim the distinction of being the only living man who was ever hit squarely by the bolt from a flash gun."

I decided that Siller's suite of rooms was hidden in an abandoned warehouse. From a doorway in his somehow-too-luxurious bedroom, a flight of steps led down to a subterranean level. There was plentiful room for an adequate and secluded practice range. That day, among stones, dirt, insects, and rodents, I learned the rudiments of weapons.

Siller balanced my flash gun in his hand. "Somebody named Branton invented the energy storage cell. Or maybe he only found it and rediscovered the principle. That's what you have under that flap on your jacket. Slip one into the butt of the gun, it strikes two contacts. Pull the trigger"—*spat!* a blue bolt sped from the gun to splash against a crudely painted outline of a man on the stone wall—"the circuit is closed. A one-hundredth part of the energy is released. The barrel is non-conductive. It channels the energy in the direction the gun is pointed.

"There's a button on the barrel. If the forefinger presses this when the trigger is pulled, the burst is ten times as long. That's useful against a mob. The cell itself has a small lever on the side. When the cell is inserted in the butt of the gun, that lever is pressed down. Otherwise no energy can be released. You can press it down by hand, though. Drop it, or throw it, and the lever will spring up, and the cell will let loose all its energy at once when it strikes against an object."

I practiced short bursts. From the first I seemed to have a natural aptitude for shooting. My shots seldom wandered far from the outline of the figure on the wall, and soon they were

centering in the body every time.

"The body is the place to aim with a flash gun. It's the largest target and the target most difficult to move. A body-hit and you're dead. If you shoot at the head, you're bragging. Braggarts don't live long."

Siller was a storehouse of gunman's wisdom.

"A flash gun is the fist in the face, the heel in the teeth, the knee in the groin. It's brute force, unabashed violence. I like the needle gun. A poisoned needle in the right spot will kill almost as quickly and far more quietly. The needle gun is the poison in the cup, the knife in the back. It's subtle, secret, stealthy; it gives no warning before, no notice after. A flash gun has its advantages—if you ever have to face a half-dozen attackers or a mob. I'll never get in a spot like that. Besides, needles are cheaper. And you can always get them. Cells are scarce."

All that day I practiced. Soon, from fifty feet, I could hit the part of the body I aimed at, nine times out of ten. After that I practiced drawing the gun out of the shoulder pocket. But I couldn't equal Siller's catlike quickness. When he went up to the suite for food, I inspected his jacket. Into the gun pocket was clipped an ingenious little device constructed from a spring, a catch, and a release lever. When the gun was thrust in, it cocked the spring. When the hand entered the jacket, pulling it out a little from the body, the lever released the catch and the gun shot upward into the palm.

I unclipped the device from his pocket and fitted it into mine. When Siller returned, put on his jacket, and shoved his gun into the pocket, he looked puzzled. We drew. I had my gun pointed at him before the barrel of his gun had cleared the jacket.

He frowned, but it slowly turned into a grudging smile. "You're smarter than I thought, Dane. You might have a chance outside after all."

I offered to return the device.

"Keep it," he said. "I have others."

I went on practicing. Draw and fire. Draw and fire. Draw, turn, fire. Practice until the movements became as automatic as breathing. Siller would say, "Dane!" A gun would appear in my hand. He would take a cautious step forward, a whisper of a movement that scarcely stirred the dust, and I would spin, crouched, a gun spitting flame into a blackened stone figure.

We duelled for hours.

"Watch the eyes," Siller would say. "The eyes are mirrors of

decision. Before the hand knows, the eyes have revealed the mind's intention. Except Sabatini. His eyes never change expression whether he's kissing a girl or mutilating a child."

I would cover Siller with my unloaded gun. His hand would dart out, snakelike, to twist the gun away, push it aside, and draw his own.

"Not so close. Keep the gun away, back against your side or your hip. You have to disarm me and still stay far enough away so that I can't bother your aim."

Practice again. Draw and fire. Draw and fire. Soon I could hear a scuttling sound among the stones, draw my gun, and leave a rat smoking and twitching in the dust. After a moment Siller joined the game.

"Good shot!" he said, his eyes glittering. "The next one's mine."

The rodent population took a sharp and sudden drop.

Siller showed me how to hold and use a knife, how to silence an enemy quietly and finally, how to duel, how to deal with a man when you have a knife and he is weaponless and, more important, when the situation is turned around. He showed me how to make a sleeve scabbard and gave me a keen knife to slip into it. Finally, grudgingly, he admitted that I would have a chance of staying alive, even in a world of Agents.

After a late afternoon meal, Siller vanished with my clothes. He left a robe that strained at the seams and reached only to my knees. I searched the suite. I had already noted that the subterranean room had no windows and no doors, and I could find no others upstairs. There was only the one door, and it was locked.

I roamed the suite restlessly. Finally I looked through the bookcases. The majority of the titles seemed to be fiction. I passed them by. But at last I came upon a small case filled with more serious books. The wide range of subjects revealed a facet of Siller that I had not suspected.

There were a number of Jude's books. I might have taken down *The Book of the Prophet*, *The Church*, or *Ritual and Liturgy*, but I knew them by heart. And the others were meaningless to me, the technical ones like *Principles*, *Energy and Basic Circuit Diagrams*, *Machines and Man's Inheritance*, and so forth. I had received a religious, not a lay, education.

The book I finally pulled out had a battered cover and well-thumbed pages. There was no author listed and no publishing

details. There was only the title, *The Dynamics of Galactic Power*. I settled down in a deep chair to read. I read slowly and carefully, but the time passed swiftly, because there was meat in the book, a strange new food that made my head swim with something close to intoxication. All of it was fascinating, but one passage I can remember still, almost word for word.

We must face the realities of power. The key to understanding is the fortress world, and there is no key to the fortress. Let us look at it, clearly, with eyes unglazed by dreams, unblinded by false hopes.

Defense is supreme. Its symbol is the fortress. Within the fortress are all the men and supplies necessary to defend it. Let the attack come. It comes over vast distances, over light years, bringing with it the vast army of men it needs, the arms it needs to fight with, the ammunition it must expend, the mountains of supplies necessary to clothe and feed its men. Let the attack cross the great moat, eating up its supplies, expending its energy on distance, losing its men through boredom, disease, and dissension. Let the attack come. And let the defenders be determined. The attack can never succeed.

Consider the expense, the economics of power. The demands of mounting an attack can drain a world of men and wealth. What does a world need to defend itself? A ring of pilotless, coasting rockets and an efficient monitor system. The attacking ships cannot pass until the rockets are swept out of the sky, and if the defense is properly geared to production, it can easily keep up with the losses. And the attackers must wait and disintegrate, if their home world does not first rebel against the insatiable demands of conquest.

And if the attack succeeds in spite of odds, in defiance of losses, count the cost. Behind it a broken planet, its resources squandered on conquest, its people impoverished, starving, rebellious. Count the gain. A world which cannot be exploited. The commander of the attacking force is inside a fortress which is now his. He is the ruler, and his former ruler can no more enforce his orders than he could make the defenders obey him before the conquest. And if anyone says loyalty, I do not know what he means. The only loyalty inside a fortress is to oneself.

That is the psychology of the fortress. And this, too: A man on another world is an enemy, not a fellow human but an alien. We will hate him.

And this is the politics of the fortress: The defense must be determined and it must be efficient. Determination and efficiency are qualities that masses of people cannot share and continue sharing without diffusion. These can be enforced only from above. A fortress must be ruled by one man or a few men. A democracy is impossible.

There have been democracies within recorded history. Count them. There have been few enough. What was their fate? They changed their form of government, or it was changed for them. Progressive centralization made them into dictatorships, or they were conquered.

Count the major forces in the galaxy. The individual rulers, the Church, the Peddlers. The rulers are satisfied, the Church is satisfied, the Peddlers are content. The only loser is the people.

Is there no hope, then? And the answer is, none. The people cannot revolt because they have no power. They have no power to fight, but, more important, they have no power to think or, having thought, to communicate. The people are ignorant and illiterate. The rulers have kept them so. And if by some miracle, they do revolt, what then? In the ensuing chaos the nearest world swoops down to conquer.

And so we look at the stars and sigh for the golden time. And our sigh is a windy nothing fading into nothing. . . .

I closed the book and put it aside as Siller entered with my clothes. They had been altered to fit me, and the dark stain around the neck had been removed.

There was no one nearby who looked like an Agent, Siller reported. If Sabatini was still searching, he was doing it secretly. Siller had heard that the Cathedral was being repaired. Hurriedly, because it was rumored that the Archbishop might make an inspection of Brancusi. When he spoke about the Cathedral, his eyes were on me, but my face was almost masklike from the immobility of the burned skin.

He watched me while I put on the clothes.

"What did the girl leave?" he asked casually.

"She left—" I began, and stopped.

"What?" Siller asked sharply.

"I don't remember."

"Sit down," he said. "It's time we talked."

I sat down on the edge of one of the chairs, conscious of a great fatigue. My face hurt and my head was aching again.

"What about?" I asked.

"About the girl and why she went into the Cathedral and what she left there and why you're going to give it to me," Siller said flatly. His emotionless, confident voice made me cold.

"I—"

"Never mind," he said. "You remember. You can stop pretending."

"I can't," I said wearily. "I can't give it to you. Even if I could give it to you, I wouldn't."

"You can," he said calmly. "And you will."

"I don't have it." His confidence gave me a feeling of desperation.

"I know. You can get it."

"I can't. It's hidden too well. No one can get it."

"I don't believe you," Siller said, and his mask of confidence slipped aside for a moment. Then it was back. "Let me tell you why you're going to give it to me."

I listened, frowning.

"Gratitude," he said. "I saved your life." He flipped a finger out negligently. "I have provided you with a hiding place. I've taught you what you need to stay alive."

"I am grateful," I said. "But I'm not that grateful."

He shrugged, but his voice was a little sharper. "Second, the matter of rightful ownership."

"The girl—"

"The girl is dead."

I flinched. "How do you know?"

He shrugged again, impatiently. "If she isn't, she wishes she were. She's in Sabatini's hands. From that moment, she was dead. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that the object falls into the proper hands now. Mine."

"Why yours?" I asked wearily.

"We know what to do with it, my employers and I. You don't. More important, it was on its way to me when the girl discovered that Sabatini and his Agents were on her trail."

"How can I believe that," I asked skeptically, "when you don't even know what it is."

Siller smiled, mockingly. "It's a small pebble made of clear crystal. A Peddler found it among some ruins on a small planet of the periphery. There were no inhabitants, only ruins. And the ruins were old, old beyond description. They indicated that the vanished race had space flight and a considerable degree of

civilization. The Peddler found the pebble, wanted it, and took it, suspecting that it held a valuable secret. Word leaked out when he landed on Brancusi. He was killed; his crew was slaughtered; the location of the world was lost. But the pebble turned up in the hands of the Emperor. He guarded it jealously, but yesterday it was stolen from the palace."

I listened. The information might be useful, if it was correct, but it proved nothing. "How do I know that the girl was bringing it to you? What was her name—?"

"Her name was Frieda. She was the Emperor's latest favorite." Siller described the girl and her relationship to the Emperor and what she was wearing when she left the palace. I listened with a strange, sick feeling growing in my stomach.

"It's not proof," I said, swallowing hard. "Sabatini would have known all this. And even if she was going to give it to you, why should I?"

"What do you want, man, documents?" he asked. His voice was rising. "You may have the pebble, but you'll never have anything else. You won't even stay alive very long. Give it to me!"

I shook my head bewilderedly. "I can't."

"Why?" Siller screamed. "Doesn't your life matter to you? Wouldn't you like to get away from Brancusi? Start life over? The pebble means nothing to you. . . ."

The pebble meant nothing to me. The pebble had put me here now; it had lost me my hope of priesthood and given me terror instead and the threat of death and torture; it had made me kill three men. But more than that—I couldn't give it up.

"I can't!" I said. "It means— You wouldn't understand." He wouldn't. He couldn't. That was the one thing about him I was certain of.

He glared at me, white-faced.

"You've been kind to me," I said apologetically. "You've risked a lot to hide me. But if you expect me to give up the pebble because of that, I have no right to stay here any longer."

I got up from my chair and walked slowly toward the door. Here for a brief moment had been sanctuary. In less than a day I had come to look on Siller's suite as a second monastery, a refuge from the world. The day's training in self-defense had been academic, unrelated to reality. Now. . . .

"Don't be a fool, Dane," Siller said with great disgust. "You're

not leaving." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Unless you get smart, you're never going to leave."

SIX

I stiffened, my hand against the door. I pressed against it. But I realized, even before it refused to move, that it was locked. I turned around to face him. He was there, just in front of me. His hand dipped into my jacket and came out with my gun. Contemptuously he turned his head and tossed the gun onto the davenport in the middle of the room.

Panic washed over me. I swung my left arm around backhanded and slapped him across the face. My hands reached for his shoulders, to grab him, to shake him. . . .

"Let me out!" I shouted hysterically. "Let—"

Something cold and pointed touched me just below the ribs. I looked down, suddenly chilled, my belly sucked in. The eight-inch blade of his dagger was at my diaphragm. My hands dropped.

He raised one hand to his reddening cheek and stroked it reflectively, but his eyes were glittering. "I should kill you for that," he said quietly.

I waited for him to push. I waited for the cold steel to force its way into my body and lick out my life with a hard, foreign tongue. Suddenly the pressure was released. Siller tossed the dagger in the air, caught it by the handle, and giggled as he slipped it back into his sleeve.

"I like you, Dane," he said. "We could be good friends if you'd let your mind do the thinking. Come back and sit down."

I came back and sat down. I sat down on the davenport where Siller had thrown my gun. I didn't pick it up. I was afraid.

"I can't understand you, Dane," he said. "Maybe it's because you don't understand me. Look at the galaxy! Tell me what you see!"

His voice was friendly and sensible. He acted as if nothing had happened, as if I were not a prisoner. But it was not easy for me to forget, and I sat there, chilled and unhappy, thinking that as long as we were talking sensibly nothing else would happen.

"Stars," I said. "The scattered stars."

"And I see billions upon billions of serfs, slaves, and

freedmen," he said slowly, his gaze distant, "and above them millions of mercenaries, some Peddlers, some clerks, and a few nobles. But at the bottom of everything the serfs, slaves, and freedmen. You may have seen them when they came into the Cathedral, but you don't know how they live. Despair, disease, and death—that is their life. A little plot of ground or a narrow room—that is their world."

He stood up. He seemed taller.

"You don't know how they live," he repeated. "I know. You don't know what it is never to have enough to eat. Never. Not once in a lifetime. I know. What do they understand? Nothing but the most basic impulses. They breed, they struggle for a few years, they die. Animals. Worse than animals." He paused. He turned toward me. His voice softened. "If you saw one of them torturing his land into furrows with a crooked stick, would you give him a plow and land of his own? If you saw one of them filling rocket warheads with radioactives until the flesh dropped from his bones, would you take him out into the living air?"

"Yes," I said, looking into his eyes.

"Then give me the pebble," he almost whispered. "It is their only chance."

I tore my eyes away. My hand crept toward the gun. "Why?" I asked.

"Would you like to give it to the Emperor? What would he do with it?"

I didn't answer.

"He'd grip Brancusi a little tighter. Or, if the secret is potent enough, he'd look around for something to conquer. He's not too old, and there hasn't been a conquest in the imperial family since his great-grandfather. He'd like to be remembered as the Emperor who conquered Thayer.

"Or maybe you'd rather give it to the Peddlers."

I looked at him, waiting. My hand gained an inch toward the gun.

"They'd peddle it. To some ruler, perhaps, for a few concessions. It would go to the highest bidder.

"Perhaps you'd rather donate it to the Church."

I glanced away, flushing.

"The Church would turn it over to the secular authorities, you know," Siller said softly. "That's what the Abbot wanted to do. Just as he turned you over—"

"You're wrong," I said coldly. "It was the young acolyte."

Siller shrugged. "Was it? The point is—there's no one. No one on the side of justice, change, progress, humanity. Except—"

"Who?" I asked. "Who are so noble that they alone can be trusted with the pebble?"

"The Citizens," he said.

Somewhere I had heard the name, but it was only a name. "And what would they do with it?"

"They would make a united galaxy. Without emperors, dictators, or oligarchs. The power would be where it belongs—in the hands of the people."

"A pleasant dream," I said. "But your book insists that it is impossible." My fingers crept closer.

"*The Dynamics?*" he said. His eyes grew bright. "An excellent book. But pessimistic. It did not consider the one possible solution."

He walked toward me, leaned over, picked up the gun. I sat, unmoving, watching him as he juggled it thoughtfully in his hand. Then he smiled, bent toward me, and slipped the gun back into the pocket inside my jacket.

"Now we can talk more easily," he said.

I had the gun now, and I should have felt more like a man. But I didn't. His action made me feel more like a prisoner than ever. "The solution?" I said.

"A simultaneous revolution all over the galaxy," Siller said quietly. "No power will be able to take advantage of the confusion. Afterwards, a confederation of worlds which will gradually develop into full union."

"A pretty plan," I said. "Why not?"

"The people," Siller said bitterly. "The stupid animals. They don't know enough to want to revolt. They think their lives are the way they are meant to be. They have nothing to compare them with. They never quite starve. They have their free teevee theaters. And we can't reach them. The rulers control every method of communication except one. And they've blocked that very effectively."

"Books?" I asked.

He nodded gloomily. "There's only one way to stop the people from reading, and they've done it. They've kept them ignorant and illiterate. If the people could read, they would have words and ideas to think with. We could educate them, organize them. And so the Congress says, 'Teach them to read.' Try it. I tried it. It's impossible. What we really need is power. Power to blast the

rulers out. Let the animals stew in their ignorance. If we had the power— That pebble may be the weapon we're looking for, Dane."

"What do you mean, you were teaching them to read?" I said quickly.

"There's no reason we both can't make a good thing out of it," Siller said softly. "So you know the value of it! That isn't any good, if you can't sell it. You can't handle something as big as this. You don't know where to go, who to see, how much to ask. All you'd get is a hole in the guts."

"You don't understand."

"Listen. The Congress is willing to go high. I could tell them that you want fifty thousand chronors for the pebble. They'd pay like that." He snapped his fingers. "Twenty-five thousand each. Or if we could find the pebble's secret first, there's no limit. To you it's worthless. To you it means only death and torture. To me and the Citizens it means life and hope for the galaxy."

"What do you mean," I said, "you were teaching them to read?"

He sighed, his eyes watchful. "The animals don't want to learn, you know. Thinking is fantastic effort for them. So you do what you do with other animals. You offer them some candy."

"Candy?"

"Simple stories about irresistible subjects: success for the unsuccessful, power for the weak, love for the despised. . . . We offered them stories about serfs overthrowing their masters to become their own rulers, laborers owning the factories and shops in which they worked, and passion—the eternal necessity to feel strongly. . . ."

He selected a book from the shelves filled with fiction and brought it to me. As I glanced at it, he twisted a knob on the teevee. The book was inexpensive but sturdy.

"... large type," Siller was saying. "Easy to read. Well-written, too. Lots of thought and money went into the project. In addition, they taught the ultimate subversion—the basic equality of men. A bargain? They were priced far below cost, but I would have given them away. I got rid of five. Do you know why? There, that's why!" He pointed to the teevee.

Captured in a block of crystal like an ancient work of art was a girl, living and moving, in exquisite colors of flesh pink and coral red and filmy black. . . . The technical feat was worthy of better things. It was shallow and pointless and stupid, but, more

than these, it was evil.

Father Michaelis once told me that there is nothing evil except what man puts into the world or takes out of it. This thing that I watched was purposefully evil. Evil had been poured into it to satiate the viewer so that he would never want anything else. It was a thing of blackness that stained the soul; no amount of scrubbing would ever make it clean again.

"That's what they want," Siller said. "It's all imagined for them so they don't have to think, and—God!—how the animals hate to think!"

I dragged my eyes from the teevee and looked at the book. It was a collection of stories, told simply but expertly by an anonymous craftsman. They carried the reader on, unthinking, and I turned the pages with growing interest and a slow sickness. . . .

This wasn't basically different from the Imperial Free Theater. There was in these stories an underlying immorality—a lack of any basis for right conduct—that made them evil, too, and perhaps a greater evil because it was less obvious.

It had been written by the bored, skillful fingers of decadence. . . . And, strangely enough, it was not the remembered monastery precepts of purity that closed the book for me but the image of a girl that came between its pages and my eyes. Whatever she had been, life to her was not old and weary, emotions were not nerves to be tormented, love was not merely desire. I saw her, clean-limbed and filled with terror, beautiful and touched with death, capable of great love and able to die bravely because of it.

And I knew, suddenly, surely, that ends can never rise above their means. . . .

Siller was sitting close to me. Suddenly I was sick of him, and I stopped being afraid. "Get away from me!"

He caught my hand. "You're young and strong and clean. I like you, Dane. We could be friends, you and I—"

"Shut up!" I shouted. "Leave me alone!"

His hand tightened on mine. "Don't be a fool, Dane. Be sensible. You need me, and I need you—"

"Shut up!" Something exploded inside me. My hand clenched. The color drained from his face, leaving it an ugly, mottled white like a mushroom. His teeth clenched, and a moan forced its way between them. His hand collapsed with a gristly, crunching sound.

With a sudden sickness, I let his hand drop. He started to get up, his left hand dangling shapelessly, and my arm swung toward him in a full sweep, as if I could forget if I could only clear the sight away. The back of my hand caught him on the mouth, and he spun across the room, staggering backward until he hit the wall and crumpled. My hand felt as if it had been dipped in filth. I shuddered and wiped it savagely on my jacket.

He was rising. Words spewed from his lips in half a dozen languages. I found myself facing him, on my feet, half crouched. He was on one foot and one knee. Blood trickled from one corner of his mouth. His eyes were mad. His good right hand moved, darted toward the butt of his gun in a blur of speed. But I had watched his eyes, and my hand moved first. My gun jumped into my palm with an eagerness that was almost alive.

"Don't do it!" I said. The flash gun was trained on him, and my voice was cold. I was surprised at the lack of emotion in it now that action had taken the place of thought.

With the gun half out of his jacket, his hand stopped.

"I don't want to shoot you," I said flatly. "I owe you a lot. Nothing you can do will change that. But I'm leaving here now. If you try to stop me I'll kill you."

Gradually his eyes stopped burning. They were icy marbles now, blue marbles filled with frozen hate.

"You'd better kill me," he whispered. "You'd be a fool not to kill me. If you go and leave me alive, I'll hunt you down. You would never have a moment when you wouldn't wonder whether I was close behind you or far away. You would never draw a breath without wondering if you would draw another. You would never think a thought without fearing that the next would be filled with terror. And when I found you, you would beg me to kill you. After a week or a month, you would beg for death."

He had not moved. He crouched there on a knee and a foot, as motionless as death, his gun half-drawn and the blood trickling, trickling from the corner of his smashed mouth. His unblinking eyes did not move from my face.

"Shoot!" he whispered.

My mind said that he was right. My mind told me to kill him. And I tried to pull the trigger, but my finger would not move. For an instant I wondered at the astonishing fact that my mind sent a command through a nerve to my finger and my finger would not obey. I could almost trace the path of the impulse from my neck, through my shoulder and down my arm, but

somewhere close to the immobile finger it died away to nothing.

Siller began to move. Slowly, as if all time were his, he gathered his foot under him and began to rise, and as he raised himself to his feet, he slowly brought his needle gun from the jacket. For a moment wonder held me, and then my finger contracted on the trigger of the gun as if it had never needed an order from my mind.

Nothing happened. I pulled the trigger again. Siller smiled, maliciously.

"Did you really think I would give you back a loaded gun?"

He laughed, and I had never heard anything more mirthless. I looked down at the gun in my hand. I turned it over and saw, without surprise, the black hole in the butt where the cell should have been.

"You fool!" Siller said tonelessly. "You blind, stinking fool! And you expected to live out there." He jerked his head toward the door. "I'm going to kill you, Dane. I'd like to do it slowly, but I know you now. You're too strong and too stubborn. You could break me in half if you got your hands on me. And even if I could cripple you, you would never tell me where to find the pebble even if I cut you into squirming pieces. I'll find it. It's in the Cathedral."

His eyes were searching my face, but I gave no sign.

Emotion poured back into the cold void of his hate. "You stinking hypocrite! You don't fool me with your pretenses of innocence. I know your monasteries. Chastity! Celibacy!" He made a retching sound deep in his throat. His gun hand shook; the shattered hand twitched sympathetically. His face paled.

Desperately, in blind anger, I threw the gun and knew that it was hopeless. I dropped close to the floor, hearing a tiny pop and a hiss close to my head and the metallic clank of the flash gun hitting—Siller's pistol! My head was up as I took three sprinting steps toward him, still low, seeing his gun spin from his hand, and pushed myself off in a shallow dive.

His eyes flashed between the gun and me. He couldn't reach it before I hit him, and we both knew it. He shook his sleeve—and my shoulder smashed into his middle. It should have crushed him against the wall. But he was stepping back and to the left. He went reeling toward the wall, but he stayed on his feet.

My feet were under me as I hit the floor, and I was moving toward him again while I was still absorbing the fall. His knife was an eight-inch sliver of steel in his hand. I had to close with

him before he could get set, before he could turn the knife and impale me upon it as I plunged toward him.

Fighting to stay upright, he had his knife half turned toward me for that peculiarly deadly underhanded cut upward that spills a man's guts in front of him before he knows he has been sliced open. So Siller had said, and I countered the way he had showed me—my two hands together, spread flat in a single V, my one thought to catch his wrist in the neck of the V.

"Die!" he panted, and jabbed. But he was still off balance, and my hands slipped on either side of his wrist—and held.

I thought only of the knife, gleaming now just a few inches from my belly. I concentrated on punishing the wrist, trying to make him drop the knife, completely forgetting that I had a knife in my sleeve, too.

I wondered distantly about his strength and suppleness. With only one good hand, he twisted and lunged and retreated, but I clung to his wrist, increasing the pressure, thinking only of that. And that was almost fatal.

His wrist grew slippery. It could have been sweat, but it wasn't. It was blood, and a thin stinging of my forearm told me that it was my blood. The knife had sliced my arm when I had caught the wrist. I redoubled my efforts to immobilize the wrist. The bones began to grind together.

He threw himself backward, savagely. When I resisted, he threw himself forward. The knife plunged unstoppably toward me, and his knee came up toward my groin. *Get out of the way!* something screamed silently. I fell backward, twisting as I fell, still holding his wrist.

He fell with me, unable to stop. His wrist twisted. I heard a dry, brittle pop as something snapped. Siller gasped as he hit the floor. He writhed beside me for an instant. And then grew still. still.

I got up wearily, cautiously. He had fainted from his broken wrist, or he was trying to trick me. He lay still, face down. I watched him for a moment, my breath rasping in my throat. I knelt beside him and shook him by the shoulder. He was limp. I rolled him over on his back.

His left hand was shapeless. His right hand dangled at an impossible angle. But I did not look at them as I knelt beside him. I looked at his eyes, open and staring up at me, their too-light blue muddled and dull where they had sparkled and blazed, sightless where they had seen too much.

And, as my head dropped heavily, I saw the flower blooming in his chest, the black flower of death blooming in a field of spreading scarlet.

SEVEN

I got up from my knees. I felt numb with fatigue and remorse and used-up emotions. Whatever he was, whatever his motives were, Siller had befriended me. He had given me sanctuary when that was what I needed most. He had cared for my burns. He had taught me the techniques that had kept me alive, the techniques that had brought him death.

Death? Only last night—*my God! only last night?*—I had thought that I, myself, was death. Everything I touched, everything I looked at, withered, drooped. I was a carrier. Untouched by the Plague, I carried it with me. Undying, I infected others. Death was with me always, but it was not for me. And afterwards, if I could wish, as I did now, that I might be the one lying lifeless upon the floor, the wish was futile. When the moment was upon me, my only thought was—survival.

Survival? Why? Why did a man have to survive? If life is sorrow, torment, and slow death, why should a man nurse it along, why should he drag it out endlessly to the last bitter dregs? If life is pointless, why should a man cling to it desperately, demanding meaning and purpose? Death was the only end. But something inside me said "Live!" and I killed because I could not refuse.

I left him there. I left his body on the floor. I would have liked to have put him somewhere, to have closed his staring eyes, but I couldn't force myself to touch him again.

I picked up my flash gun. I put a new cell in the handle, and I burned the lock from the door so that I wouldn't have to search his body for the key. If the thought occurred to me that I could stay here now as long as I liked, as long as the well-stocked larder would feed me, I pushed it away instantly. I wanted to get away from what was lying on the rug in that splendid room. I wanted to run. I wanted to keep running until I couldn't remember any more, until I was so far away that I could never see my starting place, never find my way back.

But some things are impossible.

I picked my way down the littered corridor, my nostrils filled

with the charred, smoky odor of old fire. For a little while the light spreading from the open doorway behind picked out the scattered bits of rubbish. But it faded away and the dark crept closer until it held me all around in a black velvet net. I struggled against it, feeling my way onward, stumbling, tripping, coughing in the dust, until I stopped, suddenly, stood still in the silence and the night, and realized that I could spend a lifetime here and never find my way out.

I stood there for a long time. Finally I stooped to the floor and felt around in the rubbish. I picked up several shards of plastic and tossed them aside. Something small, many legged, and hairy ran over my hand and scuttled away. I shuddered and stood up, wiping my hand hysterically on my jacket. I had to force myself to kneel on the floor again and put my hand down in the dust and the refuse.

At last I found what I was looking for—a short length of wood, thick and dust dry. I held the muzzle of the gun close to one end of the board and pulled the trigger. In the blue flash the wood smoked and burst into flame. Small fires sprang up on the floor. I stamped them out.

With the torch flickering feebly overhead, I made more speed. In a few minutes I passed the spot where Siller had sealed the rear door of his bookshop. He had been right. The fire had been extinguished before it got to the wall. But there was no exit here. The sealed door hadn't been touched. Somewhere there had to be another way out. Siller had been out.

It was possible that I was going in the wrong direction, but I decided to search this corridor to the end. A dozen steps later, the corridor ended.

A blank wall of plastic fitfully returned the light of the torch. The torch was flickering. Soon it would go out, and I would have to retrace my steps, back past the lighted doorway, where I could not stop myself from looking in and seeing the dead thing on the floor.

And then I realized that the walls on both sides of the corridor were of wood and lath. There was no reason for a plastic wall between them.

The torch sputtered out, and I dropped it to the floor. It didn't matter. I needed both hands. I felt the edges of the wall carefully, but I could find nothing that felt like a lock. There were no bumps, no indentations. I pressed anyway. Nothing happened. I tried to slide the panel to one side; it did not move. I moved to

the other side and pushed and almost fell into the street. The panel didn't slide; it swung outward, hinged on one edge.

Behind me a discolored slab of wall swung silently shut, but I scarcely noticed. Directly across the shabby street was the side wall of the Cathedral.

There are other cathedrals in the Imperial City, and I tried to tell myself that this was one of them, but it was no use. I knew the Cathedral too well, its size and shape and architecture. Around the corner would be the entrance, the Barrier, golden, translucent. Not far from it, inside a hollow stone, would be a clear, crystal pebble, egg-shaped but smaller than a hen's egg, unreadable, meaningless, and innocent. *It should be red*, I thought, *stained red for blood*. Opposite the Cathedral would be a tottering rabbit-warren of a tenement, an abandoned, decaying warehouse, and a bookshop which, until last night, had an almost new front. It would be a gutted, blackened shell now.

Siller had lied to me. He had not found me wandering the streets. I had not wandered the streets, mindless, after my escape. I had plunged directly from the control room to his door. I had struck my head when I landed. I had been unconscious. He had dragged me inside. And he had lied to me.

Why? There wasn't any good reason except that Siller was what he was, devious, subtle, shrewd. Why tell the truth when a lie will do just as well and gain you an unforeseen advantage? He had wanted me to feel insecure and completely dependent upon him. Perhaps he had thought that the knowledge of the Cathedral's nearness would give me strength. Perhaps it would have. Now it took my strength away. I leaned back wearily against the side of the building.

What had Siller wanted? The pebble, mostly. He had wanted the pebble and he was dead, like the Agents who had wanted the pebble and were dead. I wished briefly that I had given it to him, and then I remembered his ruthlessness and his greed. He had wanted it for himself. He would have used it for himself if he could. The Citizens, if they were his masters, would have got it only when Siller had found it useless.

The pebble was deadly. It had killed five people already, five that I could count. If Siller had not been lying about that, too, it had killed many more before it reached the girl. I closed my eyes. The pebble would stay where it was. There had been enough killing.

I opened my eyes and pushed myself away from the wall. I

couldn't stay here. Danger was here, close to the Cathedral. I had to find some place to rest, to sleep. It was night. I could be thankful for that.

Curiosity led me down the street toward the Cathedral for one last look at the place I would always think of as my home. Perhaps I would never see it again. I walked briskly toward the intersection.

It was a mistake. The side street was dark, but the intersection was brilliant from the reflection of the night-lit Cathedral. I had stepped out into the street before I noticed a glowing coal floating in the darkness on the other side of the street. It was just the height of a man's face.

A husky voice floated to me. "Get back in the shadows, fool!"

My mind froze, but my body acted. I nodded and stepped back out of the light.

The shout came simultaneously. "You ain't Brand!"

"No, he ain't," said a voice so close behind me I could feel the breath of it in my ear. Something hard pressed into the small of my back.

I seemed to hear Siller's high-pitched voice saying, "Don't get so close! Stay back!" The moment I felt the gun, I twisted, spinning on my left heel. My left arm knocked aside the hand and the gun. The gun spat beside me and chased the darkness with a brief, blue glare. My right fist was coming around, slowly, it seemed, so very slow. But the man's head moved slowly, too, and my fist smashed into flesh and bone. The man grunted and fell back. I didn't wait. I ran.

I was twenty strides away before the first bolt sizzled electrically past my head. I felt my hair lift. There were shouts behind me now and running feet.

"Call Sabatini! . . . Aim for his legs! . . . Go that way; cut him off! . . ."

Chase him, shoot him, catch him, make him tell! Run, legs, run! It's you they're after. Run, legs! They'll cut you off, like they cut off the others. Run while you can or you'll never run again. Run!

I ran through the dark, deserted streets, and I felt that I had always been running, that I would always be running. I ran hard and the pursuit retreated. I slowed to catch my breath and the running feet behind grew louder. The dark tenements flashed by on either side.

I couldn't lose them on a straight run, but they couldn't catch

me, either, as long as I kept running. They couldn't cut me off. And I was afraid of the alleys, narrow and dark and unknown. Unknown to me. The Agents knew them. They knew which went all the way through and which were cul-de-sacs, traps for fools. But they would catch me eventually unless I did something besides run.

I turned a corner and stopped, panting. My gun was in my hand. They were close behind me. I triggered a volley of bolts down the street. The feet stopped and then scuffled cautiously. I crept away.

I got two blocks before the cry was raised again. My harsh breathing had eased; my heart had slowed a little. But the rest had not been as helpful as I had expected. I realized how close to exhaustion I was.

I ran, and even though my body was ready to drop, my mind, strangely, was working coldly, calmly. The dark streets rolled by. *A place to hide, a place to hide.* It was a rhythm of running, a jarring, hopeless rhythm. *Siller would have known where to hide.* The buildings on either side were not quite so run down. The street seemed brighter. *If I only knew these snake-twisted alleys, I could lose the Agents and slip away.* The street was brighter; ahead the sky glowed, a reflection from a better-lighted section of the city. *If they catch me there, I will have no chance, no chance at all.*

Blindly I ducked into an alley. It was like diving into a black pool. Faintly, as I fled, I heard a voice calling behind. "He went in there! Split up! Box him in and flush. . . ." It faded away.

My running foot hit something, something that clanged and started to tip. I felt it moving in the darkness and leaped. My arms closed on smooth, rounded metal. I fell, rolling, the can cradled in my arms.

I set it upright, silently, and felt my way forward. Only a few feet farther on, my hands met a wall. As I felt my way to one side and then the other, I realized that my luck had run out. There was no break in the wall. It met the houses on either side. I had chosen a blind alley.

My breath was a flame in my throat as I looked up. A few feet above my head, the dense darkness of the wall met the lesser dark of the sky. I didn't face the back of a building; it was a wall, with a top to it.

I leaped. My fingers touched the top of the wall and slipped off. I fell back into the alley. I jumped again, desperately. This

time my fingers caught and held. For a long time I hung there without power to move, feeling the strength ebbing from my fingers. Then slowly, painfully, I pulled myself up until I got my arms over the top. I rested again.

Cautiously, with great effort, I swung my body over. With the wall conquered, my fingers could no longer hold me. I toppled over the edge into a deep, dark pit.

When I opened my eyes, I was staring into the sky. It was still dark. A strange thread of sound reached my ears. Very distant or very soft, I couldn't tell at first, and then I realized what it was and where I was and what was happening. The sound was close. It was the whisper of shoes on pavement. They were on the other side of the wall, creeping closer.

I stood up, feeling curiously rested. Motionless, silent, I peered through the darkness. I seemed to be in some kind of enclosed court. It was paved, and the ground here was higher than that on the other side of the wall. The top of the wall came just to my shoulders.

The feet were closer now, only two of them. They stopped, just on the other side of the wall. A soft, swishing sound was the brush of palms against the wall. I debated stealing away to another exit, hesitated, fearing the noise, and as I hesitated, decision was taken away from me.

There was a light scuffling on the other side of the wall, a thump, a thin rasp of shoes against the wall, and a slight sigh. Against the grayish blackness of the sky the round blackness of a man's head was outlined. It changed as I looked, bending forward and twisting to pierce the night.

My right hand flashed out and caught his throat so that he couldn't warn the others. He hung there, half over the wall, writhing in my grasp. I could sense his indecision. If he let loose of the wall, all his weight would be suspended from the hand that clutched his throat.

Instinct won. As my hand tightened, he released his hold on the wall and clawed for my wrist and fingers. But already the lack of air had begun to weaken him, and desperation drained his skill. He tore at my hand. I grabbed his wrist with my left hand to help support his weight. He twisted, the cords in his neck swelling in protest. I sensed his eyes bulging in the darkness, his face purpling, thickening. His clawing hand began to paw, ineffectually. I leaned backward, pulling. As he came over the wall, he stopped struggling. A limp body fell at my feet.

I knelt beside him, feeling for his heart. It beat strongly. I sighed. There had been enough killing. I stripped off his jacket and shirt. The shirt, thin and silky, tore easily in my hands. With one sleeve I gagged him. The other bound his hands behind him. A wide strip from the body of the shirt tied up his feet.

I could waste no more time. I raised myself to the top of the wall and lowered myself silently into the alley. I made my way out slowly, cautiously. As I drew near the street, the darkness lessened. I stayed in the shadows while I looked up and down the street as far as I could see without exposing myself. It seemed empty. I hesitated for a moment and shrugged. Time was more precious than caution.

No shouts greeted me as I stepped out of the alley. No deadly flashes marked my exit. I walked down the side of the street, hugging the buildings, breathing deeply. It was not ordinary air I drew in; my lungs tingled with the wine of safety. I walked toward the glow ahead. Now it did not spell danger. It meant people who would not know me. It meant light and laughter and life. I was tired of skulking in the dark. I was weary of hiding and hate. And most of all I was sick of death.

A few minutes brought me to the edge of the lights. I heard nothing behind me. The tenements had slowly given way to larger, newer, and more luxurious multiple dwellings. These had been replaced by small shops, but they were dark. The light came from larger places farther on. They were brilliant with glowing signs and colorful, alluring decorations. Into the street from their open doors came bright streamers of light.

I had been right. From these places came the sound of boisterous laughter, free and unrestrained, a clink of glasses, and a murmur of many voices. I stopped and looked around me. A few pedestrians were in the street, some wandering out of one door and into another, some walking purposefully toward some destination.

A uniformed mercenary, his scarlet and gold bright even in dishevelment, stepped out of a doorway into the night and blinked at me owlshly. As he made out my black uniform, he straightened, his back stiff, and walked away. A ship, sparkling in the night, drifted down from the sky on slowly turning vanes.

I watched, and it was strange and lovely and wonderful. And I was an alien, apart from it, alone and unwanted.

I moved slowly toward one of the smaller places. It did not seem quite as crowded as the others, and the music that drifted

from it was softer and more personal. I stopped in the doorway, blinking in the light. The interior was blurred and indistinct, but I could hear the strumming of a stringed instrument clearly now and the soft music of a low voice. . . .

*"The stars are my home.
I shall see them no more.
They are lost in the black of the night—"*

The voice broke off. The babble of voices stilled. As my eyes grew accustomed to the light, I saw that the men close to me had turned to stare, their faces hard and unfriendly. My gaze drifted to the girl perched on a table at the rear of the place. In her hands she held a wooden instrument with a long neck and a broad body. It had six strings. As our eyes met, her fingers drifted across the strings with a faint, jangling dissonance. Her eyes were blue and deep.

I started. For a moment she had reminded me of— But the girl Siller had called Frieda had light hair. This girl was smaller, too, and not so beautiful—or was it beauty I was thinking of? Certainly she was lovely here with her dark brown hair tumbling around her shoulders, her arched dark eyebrows—one just a little raised and crooked—over surprisingly blue eyes, her straight, short nose, her vivid, generous red mouth, the smooth flow of her cheek and chin to a startling amount of white shoulders set off by a bright yellow tunic. . . .

No, this was not Frieda, and there was really no resemblance. Except that she seemed as out of place here as Frieda had seemed out of place in the Cathedral. I had known immediately that Frieda was patrician. With this girl, I wasn't so sure. But there was something vital about her, something in her pose, in her slender white hand barely touching the strings of her instrument, in her face, in her eyes. She lived! One could sense it like the warmth from a flame. It radiated from her, perhaps it was responsible for the ring of uniformed men clustered around her, standing or sitting on chairs or on the floor.

She stared at me intently, her eyes narrow with speculation. Her eyes shifted, widening, to inspect the room and her fingers drifted across the strings of her instrument. A wry smile curled her lips as the chord rang low and clear.

*"Stars, stars, millions of stars,
Everywhere they shine.
Worlds, worlds, millions of worlds—
Come back, O man of mine.*

*Come back, come back, O man of mine,
Wherever you may roam.
My arms are wider than the stars—
To welcome you back home."*

Her arms opened to me. The room rang with laughter.

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EIGHT

I could feel my face growing red, my jaw hardening. It was a joke. I didn't understand it, but the others did, and they were laughing at me. I wondered why she had made them laugh at me.

As I wondered, the answer came. I was the only man in the room who was dressed in black. They thought I was an Agent. Tension—I had sensed it subconsciously—had been tightening every nerve in the room. Laughter had been a release.

There were spacemen in black and silver, mercenaries in various sparkling, two tones, although Imperial orange and blue predominated; there were a few women in brilliant, skin-tight tunics and short-skirts, but there were no shadow-black Agents.

Across the room, the girl's arms dropped, urgently, her eyes wide with a mute appeal. She wanted me to leave. She was right, but I couldn't force myself to move. Behind me was the night. I would not go back into it. My face was grim as I met her eyes and slowly, almost imperceptibly, shook my head.

She shrugged and looked down at one of the men sitting on the floor. She spoke to him and forgot me. As quickly as that, she forgot me.

There was an empty booth near the back. I walked toward it, and the noises that had drifted to me when I was outside rose around me now, the talk, loud and soft, the clinking glasses, the music. I sat down, and the room receded until it was a long way off, and I wondered if I would have the strength to get up again.

Reluctantly, a waiter brought me a glass of light wine. I huddled over it. The world revolved around me. It spoke in loud, coarse voices, spinning around my silent, near-mindless eddy at the hub.

—Young? Hell, yes! The younger the better, I say

—garrison duty. Agh! A few drinks once a month and a broken-down—

—but her old man started cussing, see? And I said, "Look here, old man, we whipped you. You're nothing, see? I'd just as soon burn you as not, see?" So I slapped him once or twice, and I never heard another word—

—and I left there with over one thousand chronors in hard money, fifty rings, a half-dozen watches, some of them platinum, and three diamonds, the smallest as big as my little fingernail—

—now this one was noble—

—sign on with one who's going places—a leader who hasn't got much but a flame in his eyes—and you've got a chance for promotion, wealth—maybe even a barony—

—should have been at the loot of Journey's End. God! What a place! Why—

—Was I sorry to leave Arcadia! And was she sorry to see me leave—

—there we were, practically in the middle of this sun's corona, and the Captain—

—class is class, I always say—

—so I says to her, Baby, for five chronors—

—three years without touching port. Never again—

Chairs pushed back, squealing protest. A woman torn from a silver-and-black lap to stand panting and glowing-eyed and a little afraid by the side of scarlet-and-gold. Silver-and-black rising, weaving slightly, making ugly noises and waving his hands menacingly in the air. Scarlet-and-gold moving forward, fists balled, sneering. Arms reaching out behind them, pulling them down into chairs. Silver-and-black finding another woman in his lap, talking to scarlet-and-gold in a gay, friendly, ribald fashion.

The world turned around me. . . .

It turned against a background of melody, a clear girl-voice in front of singing chords—not a great voice or even a very good one but a voice which was more than both, a friendly voice, a sincere voice. It was a good voice for what it sang; men listened and were moved to tears or laughter or passion. Occasionally, through the chaos of noise and my own dulled senses, I heard a voice come clear. . . .

"I knew a man on Arcadee.

I knew a few on Brancusee.

And Lord! they were all men to me

No matter what men say. . . ."

—so the Captain, he says to the Navigator, kind of slow and

nasty-like, "All right, Mr. Navigator, just where do you think we—"

—wanted money, see? And I said, Baby—

—and the Navigator said, "Captain, I'll be hanged if I know where we are." And the Captain said—

*"The stars are free
Though men be slaves.
Imprison me—
The stars are free.
And when the slaves
Look up, they see—
The stars are free
Though men be slaves. . . ."*

I stared at the pale yellow stuff in my glass. I lifted it up to my lips, sipped it. It was vile, sweet, cloying-wine.

—All right, Swifty, you've had your drink, now get out and don't come back!

The words were repeated, louder, before I realized that they were directed at me. I looked up slowly, past a swelling orange-and-blue belly, up and up to a big, unshaven face, red with anger and wine. I stared at him curiously.

"We don't like your kind, Swifty," the mercenary said. "Better leave while you can still walk."

He swayed. Or maybe it was my eyes. I started to get to my feet, slowly, undecided whether I disliked his remark and his heavy, arrogant face enough to change them. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice, cold and analytical, was whispering that I would never get out of the place alive if I hit him. I decided that I didn't care. I didn't like his remark. I didn't like the way his mouth moved. I disliked his face intensely. It would be a pleasure.

Something slipped between us. Beardy orange-and-blue was pushed back. I was shoved down into my seat.

"Leave him alone," a clear voice said. "Can't you see he's sick?"

"Aw, Laurie," the mercenary complained like a little boy, "you'd comfort a mad dog. But this—"

"Leave him alone!" the voice said. Clear and bell-like and angry. Orange-and-blue faded away. Something jangled as it

was leaned against the edge of the table. Something yellow and flesh pink and red and blue and dark brown slipped into the seat opposite me.

"I'm not sick," I said. It sounded surly. It was surly. I focused my eyes on her. Close, she was still pretty, even prettier, maybe. Her face was young, but her eyes, as they looked into mine, were blue and deep and wise. *A man could drown in eyes like those*, I thought crazily. *Laurie. Laurie*. I liked the sound of that. I kept saying it over and over in my mind.

"You *are* sick," she said. "Up here." She tapped her forehead where the dark hair swept back smoothly at the temple. "But that isn't why I said it. I had to get Mike away before he got killed. He's a friend of mine. I don't like to have my friends killed."

I studied her face, wondering what it was that made her so attractive. "I don't like to see my friends killed either. But they die, they die. And you realize that you don't really have any friends. No friends. That makes sense, doesn't it? You don't have any friends, so you don't care if they die. You think I'd have killed him?"

She nodded slowly. "Oh, yes. You don't care any more. You don't care if you live or die. That makes you the most deadly thing in the galaxy."

"Almost the deadliest, too," I said bitterly. I looked away. "You're right. I think I'd have killed him. Then the others would have killed me. But a man gets tired of running away. He runs so far and then he stops, and he won't run any more."

"Killing never solves anything," she said gently.

I looked into her eyes again. They asked me to listen, to understand. I laughed harshly. "It solves the problem of who gets killed, you or the other fellow. You don't know."

"I know."

"Yesterday—yesterday I would have agreed with you. Yesterday I would have done anything to keep from killing." I felt my lip curl up at the corner. "Yesterday I was a fool. Since then I've learned that if you want to live you have to kill. Since then I've killed four men."

She reached out quickly and laid her hand over mine. There was something maternal about it, like a mother soothing a child. "It hurts, doesn't it?"

I jerked my hand away. "What do you know?" I said. "The

world is ugly. The world is disease and death, torture and betrayal, cruelty and lust and hate and fear and greed— Why shouldn't I kill? I've seen the face of the world. It's a grinning skull. It wants my life. It would like to tear it out of me, agony by agony. Who can blame me if I fight back? Why shouldn't I kill?"

"Because you're a man," she said.

"I'm an Agent. They aren't men."

"Even they. But you're no Agent."

I looked up quickly. The movement made my head swim, and it was a moment before her face came back into focus. Her eyes, wide and compassionate and deep, drew mine like a promise of peace and understanding.

"You don't know," I said weakly. But it was no use. She knew. Nothing I told her would be a surprise or a shock; to her nothing was alien; nothing would change her belief in mankind. I felt a formless sort of relief, like a storm-beaten wanderer who sees a light far off and knows that somewhere in the world there is comfort and shelter and warmth. Even if he can never reach it himself.

"Look at your hands," she said. She took my hand again and turned it palm up on the table. "No calluses. They're white and well-formed, except where the burn is. But it's more than that. You don't walk like a killer or carry yourself like one. You don't have the arrogance and the wariness. And your face—ugly as it is"—she smiled as if ugliness had a charm all its own—"you can't change the lines of a lifetime with a few days of terror and violence."

Laurie . . . Laurie. I looked away. "Laurie. You're Laurie. What do you do?"

"Me? I—entertain."

"Here?"

"Here and elsewhere."

"It can't pay much."

"Oh, this is just for fun." She smiled. "I like to sing. I like to see people happy."

"These?" I swept a hand at the bawdy, drunken crowd.

"Even these." It was the second time she had used a phrase like that. It was like an affirmation of faith. I saw—in a flash of insight—that there was something between the Church and the carnivorous world. Or perhaps not between, either, but above.

It hit me like a blow. I began to shiver. "My God!" I said. It

came out like a sob. "Oh God, oh God, oh God!" I could feel tears springing into my eyes. I blinked rapidly but they kept coming. My shoulders began to shake, and I couldn't stop them. "What's the matter with me?" I gasped.

"Don't hold it back," Laurie said softly. "Let go, if you feel like it."

I put my head down on the table and cried. I had one of her hands in mine, under my head, and I bathed it with tears. I wept for all the evil in the world, for all those who labored and saw no end to their labors, for all those who suffered and saw no end to their suffering, for all those who went on living because their only other choice was death. I wept because I had met kindness for the first time.

I felt a small hand on my head, smoothing my bristly hair gently. "Poor boy," she whispered. "What are you running from? Why are you running? Is it as terrible as all that?" Her voice was a soft thread of melody, weaving around and around me, insulating me in a soft cocoon of words and sympathy and gentle kindness.

Laurie! I will never tell you the answer to those questions. You must never know, for the truth is a deadly thing. . . .

Her hand stiffened on my head, pressing down firmly so that I couldn't lift. Instinctively, I tried to raise up; her hand pressed down harder. The room was suddenly as silent as space.

"Don't move!" she whispered. "They're in the doorway, standing there, just like you did, searching the room. Maybe they'll go away if they don't find what they're looking for."

"Who?" I whispered urgently. "Who are they? Tell me!"

"Agents," she breathed. "Three of them. Not imitations like you. They're the real thing, as deadly as coiled snakes. They haven't moved yet. Now they're looking this way." I felt her hand tremble. "What cold, hard, black eyes!"

"Who?" My voice was harsh and low. "Who is it? What does he look like?"

"Dark—amused—cold. He has a big nose. Not a funny nose. A terrible nose."

Sabatini! I shivered.

"Don't move!" There was terror in her voice. Then she sighed. "They looked away. They're going to leave. No! The dark one has called them back. They're coming into the room!"

I struggled to raise my head, but she would not let it come up.

She lowered her face close to mine. I felt the silken touch of hair against my cheek. I felt the whisper of breath against my ear, sweet breath, breath coming fast.

"Listen carefully. There's a door straight back from here. It opens into an alley. When you get a chance, go there quickly. Wait there for me, in the alley. I'm going to get Mike to come over here. Hit him! Hit him hard! But please—don't hurt him any more than you have to. Understand?"

"Don't!" I said. "Don't get. . . ."

She screamed. It was indignation and outrage. As she lifted her hand, my head came up. She slapped my face viciously. The new pain on the old burn brought tears back to my eyes. My teeth grated together.

I felt a steel grip on my shoulder. Orange-and-blue was there, to my left. Here and there in the room, men were standing, looking toward us. Beyond them I caught a glimpse of black clothing.

"You slimy sewer rat," Orange-and-blue said savagely. "You foul everything you touch. Why don't you stay with your own kind, where we won't be bothered by the smell of you? Now I'm going to break you in two with my bare hands." His hand tightened.

As if moved by a volition of its own, my hand flicked the glass resting on the table. The dregs of the yellow wine splattered in his face. I stood up, tearing the table from the floor with my straightening legs, swinging my fist as I rose. It disappeared into the orange-and-blue belly with a solid, splatting sound. He folded in the middle, and his face looked pained and unhappy. His hand released my shoulder. I started to swing again, for his face, but I remembered Laurie and opened my fist and shoved him hard. He staggered back across the room, splintering the tables and chairs in his path, scattering men to either side.

In a second the room was a melee of crunching fists and arms and feet. Women's screams split the air, the hoarse shouts and grunts of fighting men knit it heavily together again, the shattering of bottles and glasses was a kind of music. The thin, pungent odor of alcohol fumed up.

I turned toward Laurie. Her blue eyes begged me. Her mouth shaped a single, silent syllable: Go.

I went. I turned. For a moment there was a narrow aisle between struggling bodies, an aisle that led to the rear. I plunged

through it, one shoulder thrust forward. Men bounced off the shoulder, back into the crazy montage of fists and flashes of color and torn, bleeding faces. I reached the door. I struggled with the lock for a moment, gave up, pulled. Wood splintered. The door swung open. I stepped out into the cool, quiet night and shut the door behind me on carnage and man's brutality.

I breathed deeply for a moment, my back against the door.

"Wait for me," Laurie had said. *Wait? Wait here to bring death to you? Wait here like death to draw you close with bony arms and press your face with fleshless lips? Wait? No. Laurie. There may be peace and quiet here, but you are better off back there. Death is peace, too; death is quietness.*

The end of the alley was framed with lights. I started walking toward the lights, feeling cold and lonely and lost.

Good-by, Laurie. Good-by.

NINE

The dream was upon me like a smothering blanket. I writhed under it, helpless to change it, unable to wake. I dreamed about the running, the dark, the silence, and the fear, the feet that chased me, the burning of my hand, and the dropping of the coal and the shame and the emptiness. . . .

Both of them were there, Frieda and Laurie, first one and then the other, and sometimes fading together into one person who was both of them. Frieda would give me the egg-shaped crystal pebble, and I would try to hold it, tightly, but it would vanish and Laurie would give it to me again. And sometimes they would be together, friendly, and seem to whisper although I couldn't hear a sound, and they would look at me and smile or shake their heads or laugh. And Frieda faded away and then there was only Laurie.

She sat upon a low, green hillock, strumming upon her stringed instrument, singing. I knew she was singing because I could see her mouth open and shut and her white throat swelling, but there was no sound. I held the pebble, and inside me was a living flame, strong and irreverent. With a final flourish of her hand, she finished and tilted her head back and raised her arms, spreading them wide, opening to me. I took a step toward her, struggling, because something held me back.

Slowly, her yellow tunic began to peel away from her body like petals from the heart of a flower. She rose from the spreading petals, a thing of blinding beauty, white, slim, lovely, and infinitely desirable. I stumbled toward her on leaden feet, my hand stretched out to touch her. She leaned toward it. . . .

The strings on her instrument broke. They curled around her waist like live things. . . . My hand was crushing a slender white flower, and below, coiled around the stem, was a nest of writhing snakes. . . .

I woke with an overwhelming sense of shame and sin and bewilderment, wondering why I should dream these dreams,

and yet caught up in them so strongly that it was hard to face reality again.

Beneath me was a hard, smooth surface. I was lying on my back, and I could feel it slick under my hand. I opened my eyes. Sunlight streamed through a narrow window upon a clean, dark-red, plastic floor. I sat up. It was only a small room. There was a table in it, two chairs, and, in an alcove, a small stove and a cooler.

Everything was old but spotlessly clean. I got slowly to my feet, remembering. . . .

The light from the street had reached into the alley with probing fingers. I was only a few steps from the fingers when I heard a door open behind me and the running of light feet.

"Wait!" a voice had whispered, drifting to me on the night wind. "Don't go out there! Wait!"

Helplessly I had waited. I waited until she reached me. I let her put one hand on my arm and turn me around to face her. Standing beside her for the first time, I realized how little she was. Her dark head did not reach much above my chest. She scolded me angrily.

"I told you to wait," she had said, scowling. "Men have no sense at all."

"They were after me," I had said. "You knew that. If you're with me when they catch me or if they find out that you have helped me, they'll kill you. That would be the kindest thing they'd do."

"Killing!" She had made a wry, disgusted face.

"Let me go," I had pleaded. "Things happen to people when I'm around them. Unpleasant things. Don't get mixed up in it."

"But I am mixed up in it. Where are you going?"

I shrugged. If I had known of any place that would have satisfied her, I would have lied.

"Come with me, then. You can't sleep in the street."

She had turned and marched off. Helplessly, I followed her. She led me through narrow alleys and down dark streets, up unsuspected steps and through empty warehouses that rustled with secret scurrings. She was careful but not overcautious. She knew where she was going and how to get there.

She spoke only once. "Why do they want you?"

"They want something they think I have."

"Do you have it?"

I couldn't lie. "Not on me. I know where it is."

"Who does it belong to? Them?"

"No."

"Who, then? You?"

"I don't know. Perhaps to me. Perhaps to no one. Perhaps to anyone."

"But not to them."

"No!"

She had nodded then, a white blur in the darkness. She had said nothing more until she led me up the narrow steps on the outside of the building, through the door, into this kitchen. She had pulled heavy curtains across the windows and turned on a small light. Only then did I notice that the instrument she had been carrying in her hand was smashed, the strings dangling loosely.

"It's broken," I had said stupidly.

She had smiled at it ruefully. "It can be mended. Quicker than some of the heads that were broken tonight."

"Because of me."

She had hesitated. "Because of you. I thought it was the right thing to do."

"You were wrong."

She had smiled at me. "It's too early to say. Are you hungry? I can fix something."

I shook my head.

"Then we should get some rest. You look exhausted."

I had realized then how very tired I was. I looked around the room.

She nodded at the door and looked at me curiously. "There's only the one bed—"

"I'll sleep here on the floor. I've slept worse places." I remembered the oversoftness of Siller's beds.

Her smile had been almost shy. "All right. Good night." She went to the outside door, pushed a bolt into place, turned, and walked quickly to the bedroom door.

As she hesitated there, I remembered something. "You don't even know my name."

She had turned. "That's right. I don't."

"It's William. William—"

"That's enough. Good night, William."

"Good night," I had said softly.

After the door closed behind her, it had been very quiet, I

listened for a long time. But after she had closed the door, she had not touched it again. The door between us remained unlocked.

A blanket was on the floor. I must have tossed it off during the restless night. She had come out in the darkness to cover me. I pictured her, standing above me to lower the blanket gently over my body and silently returning to bed.

I gritted my teeth. I had let her help me. I had put her into danger as deadly as my own. But that wasn't enough. One thing the dream had told me I could understand. I must get away from here, now, before she woke.

Quickly, quietly, I walked to the outside door. Silently I snicked back the bolt, swung the door open. . . .

"Where are you going?" Laurie said reproachfully.

I turned, slowly. She was standing in the bedroom doorway, a white robe wrapped close around her throat, falling straight almost to the floor. With her sleep-filled eyes and her dark hair tumbled around her shoulders, she looked like a little girl.

It was no easier to lie to her now than it had been last night. "I was going to leave before you woke up. That would have been rude. Safer but rude. Good-by, Laurie. I won't waste time trying to thank you for what you did for me. Words can't even suggest how much I owe you, how grateful I am."

"Don't be silly," she said, tossing her head back. "You can't leave now. They'll be watching for you."

"They'll always be watching for me," I said slowly. "So it doesn't matter when I leave. But every minute I'm here increases the danger to you."

She frowned. "Come back," she said imperiously. "Sit down!" She motioned to one of the straight wooden chairs.

Reluctantly, I came back. I sat down. She went into the alcove and opened the cooler door. She took out a ham and a handful of eggs and some cold, boiled potatoes. Over half the meat had been cut neatly away.

"Don't you think it's strange," she said, "that wherever you go, on any world, you'll find pigs and chickens and potatoes?"

She looked at me out of the corners of her eyes as she cut thin slices from the ham and dropped them into a skillet on the stove.

"I didn't know that," I said.

"It's true. There are other animals and vegetables that are native only to one or two planets, but these are everywhere. And

there are men everywhere. And men can intermarry with women from other worlds and have children, and the pigs and chickens and the others that are universal can mate, but none of the rest. Isn't that strange?"

"Yes," I said, wondering what she meant.

The ham sizzled and fried. Into another skillet she put butter, and cracked eggs into it. She diced the potatoes in with the ham. "How do you explain it?" she asked.

I frowned. "I guess there's only one explanation. Men must have come from one planet originally. They spread out to the other worlds from there, and they took the pigs and chickens and potatoes with them."

She turned, her face glowing. Perhaps it was from the heat of the stove. "You see that, then. It's clear, isn't it? And yet I can't find anyone, hardly, who will admit it. They'd rather distrust each other and let themselves hate aliens than admit that we all are related." She shook her head.

"Was that why you sang those songs?" I asked. "To suggest that?"

She smiled. "You're the first man who ever accused me of being subtle." She turned back to the stove, humming, and then began to sing in her clear girl-voice.

"I knew a man on Arcadee.

I knew a few on Brancusee.

And Lord! they were all men to me

No matter what men say. . . ."

"That's what Jude says in *The Book of the Prophet*," I said, musing. "Not in the same words, but it's Church doctrine—"

"You're from the Church, then." She turned quickly. "I should have guessed. Had you taken orders?"

I shook my head.

She heaped up two plates and brought them to the table. "And you came out of the monastery into the world. It must have been a terrible shock."

My jaw tightened. I didn't say anything.

"All right," she said. "Let's eat."

Slowly I relaxed. I took a bite. The ham was delicious. It was hot and tender, and the eggs weren't cooked hard, just enough so that the white was firm. The potatoes were brown and crusty. I ate hungrily, looking across the table at Laurie, thinking how

wonderful it would be to sit across from Laurie every morning, to eat the food she cooked, to listen to her effortless singing, to watch her expressive face. . . .

"You've been on other worlds?" I said quickly.

"A few."

"Are they as bad as Brancusi?"

"Bad?" She turned the word over in her mind, looking at it from all sides, weighing it. "If you mean hard, cruel, unjust—"

I nodded.

"Some of them are worse, and some of them are a little better, but not much."

"Why?" I asked. "What's the reason for all the evil in the galaxy? Is it God's will? Is it there to test people for a better world after death, to purify their souls by fire? Or is it because men are basically evil?"

Laurie shook her head. "I don't believe it."

"Which?"

"Either. If there is a God, he wouldn't be concerned with anything so petty as testing individual souls. He could do that without all this suffering. And people aren't bad. They're good. But they get all confused because they can't understand each other, because words can't express enough, and they can't trust even those closest to them."

"But if people aren't born evil, how do they get that way?"

"They're afraid of getting hurt, and they build up a wall around themselves for protection. They build themselves a fortress and sit inside it, sheltered and afraid. Afraid that someone will break in and find them there, see them as they really are, alone and helpless. For then they can be hurt, you see. When they are naked and defenseless. We're a whole galaxy of worlds, revolving endlessly, never touching, crouched within our fortresses, alone, always alone."

"If we could only tear the walls down, all at once, and everyone could see everyone else, a man like themselves, hoping for kindness and fearing a blow." It was a stunning vision, and I sat there entranced by it.

When I looked up, Laurie's eyes were filled with tears. "You're right," she whispered. "It would be wonderful."

We finished our breakfast in silence. Finally I shoved back my plate and got up. "The food was delicious, Laurie. It's been beautiful, knowing you. But I've got to leave. I've stayed too long already."

"I won't let you go until I know where you're going," she said firmly.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I'll try to leave the city. Maybe I can hide away in some village."

She shook her head, frowning. "You couldn't leave the city without being caught. They found you last night, and they'll be watching for you. And even if you got outside, you couldn't hide. The serfs are wary of strangers. They'd turn you in."

"The city's big. I'll find a hiding place in it somewhere."

"You don't know it or the people. You don't know the way the city thinks. You'd have to trust someone, sometime. You'd be sure to trust the wrong person. And the nets are spread out. You'd fall into one of them."

"What can I do?" I asked helplessly.

"I can find you a safe place," Laurie said eagerly. "I can bring you food. You can't stay here. It's too public. But I could find a place you could hide until they got tired of looking. I have friends who would help me—"

It was infinitely tempting, but even as she described it I knew it was no good.

"No," I said with finality. "It's too dangerous. I won't let you risk anything more."

She sighed. "All right. There's only one chance for you. Leave Brancusi."

"Leave?" I repeated. "Leave Brancusi?"

She nodded. "They'll turn this planet upside down until they find you. I know the hunters. They can't go back to their masters without their prey. Failure is a death sentence. They'll search, then, until they find you or you are dead. Brancusi is small; the galaxy is wide."

"Leave Brancusi," I mused. "Take a ship to another world, out among the stars. Start all over again." The picture was fitting itself together in my mind. The pieces were falling into place, and all the pieces were beautiful. I would climb up into the air on a planet-spurning leg of flame, high, higher, until Brancusi was a ball behind me, a blue-green ball for a child to play with. I would leave my other life behind, with its sins and remorse. Out in the eternal night I would be washed clean. Out of the womb of space I would be born again upon a new and finer world, as innocent as a baby. "I'd like that," I said. "I'd like that very much."

"Slowly," Laurie said. "It won't be simple. You can't just step aboard a ship and be whisked away. It's not easy to get passage."

"But how?" I said. "What can I do? Who—?"

She was scribbling on a piece of paper. She pushed it over to me. "Here. Find this man. He works for the Peddlers. You'll find him at the port. Show him this note, and he'll help you. It may be expensive, though. Do you have money?"

My hand started toward my waist and stopped. "Yes," I said. I looked down at the note.

George Falescu:

Please help this man get passage.

It is important to—

Laurie

That was all. The handwriting was clean and flowing without any affectations. The signature was firm and readable. Instead of a dot over the "i" she had put a small circle.

Laurie was giving me instructions. "Don't go directly to the port. Take a circular route, loiter, make certain that nobody is following you. And don't march up to the first person you see at the port and ask for George. Wait around the Peddlers' repair shop until someone asks you what you want. Show him the note." She sighed. "After that it's out of our hands."

I got up from the table and stood looking down at Laurie. It seemed a long way down to her face. "There's nothing I can say to express my gratitude. I never knew there were people like you in the world. You've made me think better of it. Good-by, Laurie. Good-by, for the last time."

I walked to the door, not looking back, not daring to.

"Will!" Laurie was at my side, turning me to face her. "Don't thank me until you're safe. Be careful! Don't take any chances! And—and—"

As if to say what she couldn't frame into words, she put her hand behind my head and drew it, effortlessly, down to hers. Standing on tiptoe, she pressed her lips to mine.

Her lips were warm and soft and sweet. And then they were gone and she was gone and I walked out into the sunlight and down the steps into the black-and-white city.

TEN

Imperial City.

I saw it as an alien would have seen it walking through its streets in the white glare of the morning sun. It was a city pitilessly exposed, a city washed free of color, naked to the eye in stark whites and black shadows.

It was a city of decay. The rot of time was everywhere.

I walked through the city slowly, my eyes watchful. I walked through miles of warrens: ramshackle stone buildings which had been repaired endlessly with crumbling mortar; plastic hovels, cracked, patched, and leaky; dirty warehouses, stained by smoke, weather, and seepage.

I saw its inhabitants: serfs returning to their fields from the market; freedmen scurrying on errands; a skilled laborer or two, his craft badge proudly displayed on his jacket for deference. And if his badge was white, the deference was close to fear. White is for the worker in radioactives. His companion is death.

But they all stepped aside for me. Their eyes spoke to me before they were hastily averted. They said, "I am poor and miserable and insignificant. You can kill me, but you wouldn't want to waste your efforts on someone as small and worthless as I am. I know nothing, I have nothing, I am nothing." And sometimes, "If we were alone, if I found you in an alley some night, asleep or wounded. . . ."

They passed, falling silent as they approached. Fragments of conversation reached me, cut short—

—best to live directly under the Emperor. Then there is only one lord to appease—

—the Baron summoned my eldest. She returned in tears, but tears are soon dried, and the Baron has promised—

—the crop is poor, and my lord demands more, always more. There is nothing to eat. My second youngest died today—

—only one died today of the dust—

—tonight they give "The Noble Serf." It is my favorite—

—no, no. "The Freedman's Daughter."

Laughter, quickly stilled.

Passing, passing, eternally passing, lives, precious lives, each with its dream without words to express it, each with its struggle without knowledge by which to judge it. Lives, lives, millions of futile lives. Add them, multiply them by the countless inhabited worlds: the leaden total of misery should shift the stars from their infinite rounds.

I felt a little sick.

—my poor daughter. She was always my pet, but we had no money, and she does what she must—

—we were saving for a shop of our own, and then—a special assessment—

—I petitioned the Baron, and after him the Emperor—our blessed Emperor—

—were it not for his constant vigilance, we would soon be conquered and ravaged—

—ten children, my friend, all dead—all dead—

Gradually the surroundings changed. Here, there was a public theater, there, a shop with meager wares. The serfs and freedmen began to thin out. A few mercenaries appeared, most of them idling, always in groups, but I saw no Agents. The shops slowly grew more prosperous, the theaters more ornate.

I had never seen a Peddler before, but I recognized them now. They blazed with fancy clothes that had a foreign cut to them; they spangled with strange ornaments. A sprinkling of them and their women eyed the shops or passed in sleek, slim cars. Once a helicopter settled on a low roof nearby. Nobles got out, men and women. They were dressed simply but in fine cloth. They stood on the roof for a moment, gazing down into the street before descending into the store.

I leaned against the front of a shop to orient myself. There were more mercenaries here, swaggering, boasting, laughing coarsely, carrying their weapons on their hips. Once I thought I caught a glimpse of black cloth disappearing around a corner, but it could have been a spaceman.

The shop I leaned against specialized in imported clothing. Across the street was a tavern, like the one I had entered last night. Beyond, as I lifted my eyes, was the tall, splendid dome of the Imperial palace, miles away but shimmering in the morning sunlight with shifting jewel tones. It dominated the city easily, a symbol of magnificence in a shabby world.

I squared my shoulders. I had the uneasy feeling that I was

being watched. Casually I swung my head to the left and then to the right. Everyone seemed innocuous. They walked by, chattering, and disappeared. Brilliant, magnificent, and hollow. I relaxed.

The port was beyond the palace, at the edge of the city—

Beside me someone coughed. I looked around. A little man in shopkeeper's clothes stood there, trying to make himself look smaller than he was. His little eyes were shifty and frightened.

"Sir," he said hesitantly, "noble sir, would you—would you like to come in?"

I shook my head.

"Select anything," the man went on desperately, "anything in the shop. It would be our pleasure. If only you would not continue to stand here. You are frightening our customers. The ones who are outside are afraid to come in; the ones inside are afraid to come out—"

I stared at him. He seemed to shrivel, to shrink away. I turned to watch him go back into the store and looked into the building's mirror front. A stranger stared back at me. For the first time since I had left the monastery, I saw myself with unveiled eyes.

My hair, which had been cropped close to my scalp in the monastery, had sprouted into a rough, dark, bristly thatch. The face, with its broad forehead, prominent cheekbones, and blunt chin, had darkened into swarthinness from the flash gun burn—except for a strange, pale band across my eyes. The eyebrows were short; the eyelashes stubby. The eyes were still brown, but they seemed to be an oddly darker brown, with a curious look to them. No longer were they calm and trustful and open; they seemed hard and restless.

In a way, I was pleased. I would be difficult to recognize.

The whole face, leaner and harder, scarcely seemed even the same shape. It looked like the face of a survivor, one who has survived, who will survive. And yet—around the eyes—was it entirely the paleness from which they gazed?—I thought I saw an expression of insecurity, of something close to fear. And the mouth, mobile and full, gave me an impression of weakness.

I realized, suddenly, that my palms were sweating. I wiped them quickly on the thighs of my pants, turned, and started toward the palace.

I hugged the shadows of the close-ranked trees in the park,

looking up at the ceaseless, shifting beauty of the tall, domed buildings. I watched the nobles come and go in ground cars and helicopters, casual, purposeless, courtly, glittering. They walked in the fountain-jetting gardens—men and women—tall, slim, graceful, and useless. They bowed, they talked lazily, they laughed, and they did nothing. It was a jewel of unreal beauty in a poor, tarnished ring. It was all wrong. Who could blame the people, who had nothing, if someday they should storm the palace and tear it down and trample it flat under their feet? It wouldn't be very difficult.

And then I noticed the palace guards. Their casual alertness was so unobtrusive that it was only when I began to count them that I realized how many there were. And I saw the concealed snouts of giant guns pointing out from the gardens and the palace walls.

I shifted uneasily.

Long, low steps rose gradually to the huge palace doors. There were hundreds of steps, unmarred, glistening whitely in the morning sun. They led the eyes up, up, up to the ultimate authority, the palace that was never the same color twice, the source of all blessings. On either side of the tall doorway, a round, black eye peered down the steps. They could sweep the white steps with flame.

As I looked, I had a fantasy. I saw myself climbing the long steps, climbing toward the massive doors, watched by the two black eyes.

I walked steadily, my eyes fixed unwavering on the doors, my back straight, my head held high. Other eyes were watching, human eyes but just as deadly. I ignored them. Guards moved toward me. They formed a semicircle that left me only one direction to go, up to the palace doors. There was no sound, and in the silence I climbed and the people followed, wondering. I neared the doors. They swung open before me, the palace opened a giant mouth to me, dark and cavernous.

Now one of the guards darted forward, his gun in his hand. "What do you want?" he said. "Why are you here?"

I looked at him coldly. "The crystal pebble," I said.

His eyes were awed. He drew aside. I started forward again but someone was standing in the doorway, barring the way. It was Sabatini, smiling. His hand was stretched out to me, palm up. . . .

I shifted again, nervously. Was someone watching? Nobody

was near, but the feeling continued. I wiggled my shoulders, but it didn't help. There was a spot of irritation between my shoulder blades. I slipped cautiously through the trees, skirting the palace. It was a mile behind before I stopped looking back over my shoulder.

I was in the slums again. I could not escape them. I walked slowly, stopping in alleys to watch the people who passed. None of them hesitated; none of them loitered behind to stare in a shop window or to refasten a shoe. None of them was dressed in black.

In another place I stopped in front of a dismal food store and studied the reflections in the glass window. I looked into a different world, a flat, dusty world, where people slipped in and wavered across it, flat, and disappeared from it, and it was filled up with flat unrealities again, and in that world the air began to whine. . . .

It was not in the flat world but in my world. Before I could turn around the flat world brightened intolerably. An instant later something struck me a vicious blow on the back, and the flat world disintegrated in front of my eyes. I caught myself just before I stumbled through the shop window after the shattered glass.

I spun around. Far off over the rooftops, smoke and flame spouted into the air. Near me flattened pedestrians picked themselves up and turned with the rest, their faces lifted, to stare at the mushrooming cloud. They began to run toward it. I ran, too. We ran, and we didn't know why we ran, except that somewhere something had happened, was happening, something different, something that involved us all.

We never got to the smoke and the flames and the cloud. Before we got close, helicopters dropped from the sky. Uniformed mercenaries poured out of them, gun drawn and ready. They formed a line across the street, damming the human tide. Beyond them the buildings were flaming where they had not been flattened or disintegrated. A huge hole had been scooped out of the city as if by a giant flame hand from the sky.

To the crackling of fire and the roar of falling houses, a new note was added. It was a wailing, human note made up of screams of pain and cries for help and the sobbing of children. Survivors stumbled through the cordon, bleeding, maimed, mindless. Some of them collapsed in the street. Others were led off by friends in the crowd.

Standing there, helpless, we moaned together, a vast, pitying, sorrowful sigh. It had happened to us, the people.

Helicopters circled above us. They spoke to us.

"Do not be alarmed. This is not an attack. The explosion was only a defective rocket. In the name of the Emperor, disperse! This was merely a defective rocket. Go to your homes or to your work. Do not block the streets. The Emperor is watching over you. He commands you to return home or to work. In the name of the Emperor, disperse. . . .!"

Only. Merely. The flames roared, the injured screamed and moaned, the children wailed. Motionless and stolid, the crowd stood watching. This was their drama; they must play it out.

But tonight, I thought, the cathedrals will be busy.

I withdrew from the crowd slowly, looking at everyone I passed. I had been careless; they might have caught me here. But there were no Agents in the crowd, and the mercenaries in their orange-and-blue uniforms were all on the other side. No one noticed me. For the first time, people did not draw aside as I passed them.

I had to go a long way to avoid the giant hole in the city. A mile or so beyond it, I reached the outskirts. Houses dwindled away. Far off to the right, against the horizon, was a massive black pile, like a squat sentinel over the tilled fields surrounding it. Closer, but still miles away, and straight ahead was the port with its tall ships reaching, a half dozen of them gleaming in the sun, outlined by a nimbus against the blue sky. They were poised bullets awaiting the impulse which would send them battering against the heavens to shatter the blueness like colored glass and leave only the endless night in its place. There was something male and potent about them that sent the blood tingling through my body to the ends of my fingers and the soles of my feet.

I walked briskly along the smooth, wide road. No one else was in sight, behind me or in front. I was alone, moving toward a rendezvous with the stars.

Broad fields surrounded the road. Some of them were turned up in black, fertile folds. Some were faintly green and uneven. After a little, I saw men working, far off at first, forked dots in the distance, and then closer. In one field a stooped, sweating serf was shoving a rusted, old, metal plow through the stubborn sod. On the next a gleaming plastic plow was pulled by a serf and guided by his wife. I knew it was not another man behind the

plow only because the sun-blackened face had the tattered remnants of a tunic beneath it. On one vast farm I saw powerful machines pulling other machines. Better-dressed, happier men guided the machines. I saw them smile occasionally. One waved as I passed.

Slavery was preferable to freedom. Soon there would be no serfs left to till their small fields and reap their pitiful harvests; they would give up their freedom to fill their stomachs. The farms would grow bigger and bigger until just a few men owned Brancusi, or one.

The port grew in front of me. The ships speared upward. The tops of low buildings sprouted like mushrooms under the feet of the sky-reaching giants.

And then I topped a low ridge and saw the fence that encircled the port.

My legs were suddenly weary. I stopped and sat down by the edge of the road. As far as I could see, the fence went on and on. It was a stout fence made of linked metal, tall and formidable. Every few yards it was guarded by mercenaries. I had as much chance of getting inside as I had of reaching another world without a ship.

I sat there for a long time, trying to think of a way to sneak in. The nearest tree was at least half a mile from the fence. I might have a better chance after dark, but I had a suspicion that the fence would be lighted. The whole port would be as bright as day.

And yet people did board these ships. They got on them and traveled to other worlds. They got inside the fence.

I stood up and walked steadily down the road. I walked up to the gate house and through the open gate. The mercenary on guard looked at my face and my black suit and curled his lips.

"Where do you think you're going?" he said.

I looked at him coldly. "I'll tell you if you really want to know. But people who know too much have short lives."

His face tightened. He wanted to say something more, but he didn't dare. He jerked his head toward the open field.

I walked into the port and toward the clustered buildings. The pavement was pitted and uneven.

Some of the buildings had doors in them. I didn't want them. They would be offices. Some of them were orange and blue; some were silver and black. I circled them. I walked across endless pavement, discolored, cracked, heaved up occasionally

in huge slabs. The ships got closer. They seemed to be leaning toward me, off balance. I had an uneasy, choked feeling that they were toppling.

I walked past them toward other buildings. These were open-ended. As I walked, trucks passed me, piled high with bales, crates, and boxes. They vanished into one of the buildings. As I drew abreast of it, I saw that it was a warehouse. Men swarmed inside it. They marked things down in large ledgers as the goods were unloaded from the trucks. They stacked the boxes and crates and bales, they opened others, they repacked some, and they loaded some on other trucks. I looked back. The trucks were streaming from the base of one of the ships. The goods were lowered by a swaying cable from a gaping hole high in the side.

A huge, low-slung vehicle on treads waddled slowly past me. On its groaning back was a long, flaring cylinder, blackened at the flared end, swelling to a bulbous growth at the other. It turned ponderously into a building beyond the warehouse.

I walked to the building and stopped by the wide entrance, looking in. Here men were busy with tools and flames and machines. They worked and shaped intricate bits of metal and huge cylinders like the one that had just been brought in.

I leaned against the corner of the wide entrance and watched. They had been to the stars, these machines, or they were going to the stars. These cylinders pushed those giant spears skyward, hurling defiance at time and distance, roaring disdain at the world that tried to hold them back.

To the cylinder brought in by the crawling truck, men linked great chains. Motors whirled. The cylinder inched into the air, hesitated, and descended gently into a cradle. Men moved into place around it and went swiftly to work.

Time passed. Once thunder came down from the sky, shaking the ground, tearing at it with a tongue of flame. The building quivered. I grabbed the wall to keep from being knocked to the ground, but the men worked on unconcerned.

Far across the field, the ship came to rest, and I turned to watch it. In a few minutes, a black circle opened in the shining side. Something snaked out of it, uncoiling, dropping to the ground. Little manikins climbed down the swaying ladder, bright orange-and-blue dolls.

They assembled on the ground and marched mechanically across the field to one of the office buildings. They kept coming down the ladder and forming and marching, endlessly.

"What you want?" It was a hoarse voice close to my elbow.

I turned, startled. Standing in front of me was a big man with a big belly, bristle-faced, dressed in dirty, sweat-stained working clothes.

"You want something?" he asked sourly. "If you do, I'll help you. If not, move on. You're disturbing the men."

I reached into my pocket and brought out the note. I had folded it once. I handed it to him that way.

He opened it, looked at it for a moment, turned it over, looked at it again, and handed it back. "You've had your joke. What's it say?"

"George," I said. "I want George Falescu."

His eyes narrowed. He looked to the right and the left, furtively. He jerked his head toward the rear of the building and walked away from me. I followed him, puzzled. He stopped in a dark corner, far from the other workers.

"He ain't here," the man whispered.

"Where is he?"

"You oughta know."

"What do you mean?"

"Your buddies came and got him this morning. Agents, like you. They took him away. You know what that means."

ELEVEN

I stared at him, hard-eyed and unmoved. But inside I was chilled and shaking. I didn't know what it meant. It could mean too many things, and I wasn't sure of any of them. Only one thing was certain. My one good chance of getting off Brancusi was gone, if it had been a good chance, and I had to believe in that. I had to believe in Laurie. There was nothing left if I couldn't believe in Laurie.

"Of course," I said. "And your help will be rewarded—in time."

I was stabbing around in the dark, but I couldn't just say, "Oh?" and walk away. He had good grounds for suspicion already.

He glowered at me. "It better."

Unconsciously I licked my dry lips and found myself doing it and stopped. "Was Sabatini with them?"

"Who's that?" he growled.

"The dark-faced Agent with a big nose."

He glared at me suspiciously. "Naw. There was nobody like that."

I nodded. "He must have been busy on another job." I wasn't doing it right; I was making the wrong guesses, and making them the wrong way. But I had to try. "I've got something else for you. It'll pay you more than the other, if you can do it."

"How much?"

"As much as it's worth, and it's worth a lot."

"No promises!" he said darkly.

"Hard cash."

He nodded. "What is it?"

"It's important that I get away from here secretly. I've got to get passage on a ship."

"What ship?"

"The next."

"The Phoenix, to MacLeod?"

I nodded. "That's it."

He sneered. "What you think I am, a magician? Nobody can

get you on a ship except a Peddler. You know that."

"Good!" I nodded decisively. "Then our man won't slip through our fingers that way." I stared at him, my eyes narrowed. "You're a lucky man to be alive."

He looked bewildered now and afraid. I turned abruptly and strode out of the shop before he could ask any questions. The sun was hot outside, but it didn't warm me any. Inside I was colder than deep space.

Falescu had been picked up by Agents. What did it mean? They couldn't have known that I was going to contact him. I hadn't known myself until this morning. He must have been mixed up in something else, something not connected with me at all. There was no point in jumping at shadows. Because of me, the world didn't stop. It kept on turning, people lived and loved and died who did not know my name and didn't know or care that a mysterious pebble was missing. I was not the center of the universe; my existence had meant nothing; my extinction would mean less. Perhaps I was forgotten already.

But I was still cold. I knew that I was not forgotten. Sabatini would not forget.

I walked back toward the office buildings. Two of them were blue with orange trim. The imperial colors. I would not go there. Another was black with silver trim. The colors of space, the colors of the Peddlers. They shipped goods and tools and people. They were interested in profits, not intrigue. There was no reason they wouldn't take me. Around my waist was five thousand imperial chronors in one hundred chronor pieces.

I stepped into the office. After the sunlight, the room was cavernously dark, filled with the faint aroma of out-world spices. My eyes adjusted. It was only a small room, not luxurious but neat. Shelves along two sides of the room were filled with samples of merchandise. Across the rear of the room was a long, high counter. Behind it a middle-aged man with a bald, shining head was bending over a ledger. He looked up. His face was shiny, too.

"Something?" he asked, almost chirping. "The fabulous Arcadian black pepper, perhaps? Very scarce now that Arcadia has fallen. It will be some years before conditions are settled enough to permit another shipment."

He was the first man who didn't change when he saw my black uniform.

"No," I said.

"You wish to ship something? Reasonable rates to all parts of the galaxy. All inhabited worlds—"

"Myself," I said. "I want passage on the Phoenix."

"Ah," he said wisely. He leafed through the book until he came to a page he liked. He looked up sadly. "Passenger space on the Phoenix is extremely limited, and it has been reserved for months. Perhaps some other ship for a later date?"

"The Phoenix. Now."

He cocked his head and studied my face as if I were some strange and interesting kind of worm. "Perhaps it would be possible to squeeze you in. The Phoenix is shipping without the services of a second officer. Such emergency accommodations come high, however, and—"

"That doesn't matter." I felt relieved. He was after money; that was all right.

"Then we will fill out an application blank." He skipped happily to the floor, and I saw how short he was. He must have been sitting on a high stool, because his head came just above the top of the counter. He went to the back wall, opened a cabinet, and pulled out several sheets of paper. He climbed back onto his stool, laid the papers in front of me, and held out a pen.

"I can't write," I said. It was an impulse; it seemed to be a good one.

He nodded cheerfully, turned the papers around to face him, and poised the pen in the air. "Name?"

"John," I said. "John Michaelis."

He wrote it in a round, flourishing hand. "Identity card?"

I stared at him. "That won't be necessary."

He looked up, one eyebrow raised, and shrugged. "Very well. Destination?"

"MacLeod."

"You won't be transferring there to another ship?"

"No."

"Business?"

"Personal."

He looked up quickly and then wrote on the paper. I watched the word as he traced it out. Upside down, it was hard to read, but I recognized at once that it wasn't: "Personal." Then I deciphered it. It said: "Secret." I glanced away quickly.

The questioning went on endlessly. Birthplace? Date of birth? Race? Personal description? Identifying marks? Baggage? Would I sign a waiver relieving the company of responsibility in

case of accident? . . . Some of my answers seemed satisfactory. Others made his pen hesitate before it wrote.

"Master?" he said.

I caught my breath. There it was. That was what he had been waiting for. Master, master. I couldn't think. It would be so easy to make a mistake. "None," I said. I looked straight into his eyes as he raised his head.

He put down the pen with a gesture of finality. "Passage refused," he said quietly. Now he didn't sound birdlike at all.

"I won't accept that," I said, making my face hard.

"You have no choice. Passage is accepted or refused at the discretion of the company."

"That isn't very smart of you," I said pointedly. "Important things depend upon my reaching MacLeod. Powerful men are going to be displeased."

"By the terms of our charter with the Emperor, no masterless men can be given passage." He was immovable.

"Let me see your superior."

He smiled. "I have no superior."

I studied him. "It isn't smart to know too much about business that doesn't concern you."

"That may be true. I know it is unwise to know too little about your own business."

"Wiser men than you have lost their heads."

He shrugged. "If you have a master, tell me. If not, go away. I have work to do."

"My master," I said slowly, "is the Emperor. He will be displeased to know that this has become common knowledge."

"I can check on this, of course?"

"Of course."

He slid off his stool and started for a door in the rear, trotting. He pulled the door open. The room beyond was darker.

"You are a brave man," I said. "It's too bad such courage must vanish from Brancusi."

He smiled at me and closed the door behind him.

He had called my bluff. I wasn't sure that he wasn't bluffing, too, but if so, it was a better bluff. I was convinced that he would get in touch with the Palace. The little man had won, and I had lost. I hoped that it wouldn't be fatal.

I went quickly back into the sunshine and started across the field toward the tall ships. There was still a chance, a small one, but a chance.

The ships had insignia painted on them, high up toward the nose, but they were blistered, weathered, and indecipherable. The sun was getting low in the sky now, and the shiny ships reflected the white light dazzlingly into my eyes. I was in the long shadows before I saw anything.

The ship I had seen unloading deposited a final bale. On the truck a man unshackled the chain and waved a weary arm at the dark hole high in the side of the ship. Weaving snakily, the chain climbed into the air and disappeared. The hole closed. The man climbed down from the truck.

I went up to him. "Where's the Phoenix?"

He jerked his thumb across the field, yawned tiredly, and climbed into the cab of the truck. It rolled away toward the distant warehouse.

I looked the way he had pointed. I saw it now, half a mile farther across the field. Trucks streamed toward it as they had streamed away from this one. I followed them, hungry, tired, and a feeling in the pit of my stomach that was neither one. It was fear, and I had lived with it for a long time. I couldn't remember when I hadn't been afraid.

As I drew closer to the ship I saw that the blur of paint on the nose was a sun or a fire. Something was rising out of it, something with wings. The trucks passed me. I trudged on.

At the ship the goods were flowing up. The ship opened a giant mouth, and the bales and boxes vanished into it. I watched, silent. One man directed the operation with shouted orders and gestures, and he stood occasionally with folded arms when everything was moving smoothly. He was dressed in a black-and-silver uniform, but it had been new a long time ago. The black was a dirty gray; the silver was only a little brighter.

I moved closer to him. "Keep awake, there!" he shouted. "Keep those trucks moving!"

"Two thousand chronors for a passage," I said softly.

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "Go to the office."

"This is for you. No one else needs to know."

"And throw the ship out of balance?" he said, snorting. "Are you crazy? Hey, you!" he yelled. "The machinery goes first!"

A truck pulled out of line and waited.

"Make it legal," I said. "Sign me on as a crewman."

"Where's your card?"

"What card?" I asked warily.

"Your guild card, stupid. You can't get a berth without a card."

"Not even as an apprentice?"

He snorted again. "Apprentices spend six years on the ground before they get into space."

"Three thousand chronors," I said.

He looked at me narrowly. "Cash?"

"Cash."

The sun had gone down. His features were indistinct in the twilight. "Done."

I reached toward my waist.

"Not here, stupid. Get over by the truck. On the other side from the ship."

I slipped around the ship like a shadow in deeper shadows. The trucks had stopped coming. There were three waiting to be unloaded, and the drivers were gathered by the last one, talking. I slipped between the rear of one truck and the front of another and knelt beside the one being unloaded, my heart beating madly in my chest. Was it really happening? Was I really to get on board the ship?

"All right, Tom." It was the voice I knew. It came from the other side of the truck. "I'll spell you for a minute. I want to ride this load and check on the stowage."

Feet scuffling toward the rear of the truck, splatting on the ground. Other feet climbing. I stood up, caught the side of the truck, leaped, swinging my body, and rolled over the edge as the spaceman reached the top. He stood there, not looking at me, staring up along the dangling chain toward the black opening in the ship. There were no heads looking down.

The chain was attached to a load of boxes. He motioned to me impatiently. One box remained to be loaded, and there was a gap where it should go. I crawled into the space and heard the box lowered on top of me. It was a tight squeeze; I couldn't take a full breath. Out of one end of the hole I was in I could see the darkening sky. Directly over the place where the sun had gone down, the sky was still a light blue. It reminded me of the color of a flash gun bolt. I shivered. Feet clumped up on the load, stood over my body.

"Hoist!"

The load jerked and began a slow climb. The world swayed, spun gently. I looked far out over the field. At the fence the lights came on, turning around me like a tremendous wheel. I went up

and up, breathless, tingling.

We stopped and swung back and forth in short arcs. Then we began to move sideways. Slowly the world disappeared until it was only a circle of dark blue surrounded by darkness. We dropped a few feet. The swaying stopped. Feet jumped off the load. The chain rattled.

"I'll take care of this one."

Feet walked away. The box was lifted off. I saw the face of the officer, lined and heavily tanned. He gestured me back. I slid out of the hole, backwards, and lowered my feet gently to the floor. Metal struck lightly against metal. In a moment the officer knelt beside me, fastening wire ropes to cleats in the deck.

"The money," he whispered.

I opened the belt at my waist and counted out thirty coins into his hand. He held them up to make certain that they were one hundred chronor pieces. They were. He grunted and slipped them into a pocket. He started to leave. I grabbed his arm.

"Where do I stay?" I whispered.

He jerked his head back toward the stacks of boxes. Before I could say anything more he pulled himself loose and disappeared around the nearest stack.

I stared in the direction he had pointed. The stacks of boxes stretched interminably. I looked up. The ceiling was low, and the stacks reached almost to the top. I started moving back silently. There was barely enough room for me to slip through sideways. Once I caught my foot on a cable and almost stumbled but I grabbed the edge of a box and pulled myself up.

The stacks grew steadily darker. Behind me chains clanked, boxes thumped, motors whirled. I hadn't found anything like a place in which I could survive a trip through space. And then the noises stopped. I halted to listen. Another motor began, a more powerful one. Slowly the darkness deepened until, with a final clank, night fell, deepest night without a glimmer of light. Footsteps faded in the distance. Something else clanked, and I was in silence as complete as the night.

Fear coursed icily through my veins. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be.

I took a few steps more, almost running, tripping over wires. And suddenly I was in a space where there were no boxes. There was nothing. I felt my way back to the narrow aisle and then slowly along the stack. It turned a right angle. Half a dozen steps brought me to another right angle. Half a dozen steps. Another

right angle. When I came back to the aisle, I had a mental picture of the empty space. It was a square, half a dozen paces to a side.

I knelt down to feel the floor. It was smooth and warm, almost hot. I felt all over the floor, crawling on my hands and knees. There had to be more than this. A room wasn't enough. I needed food and light, one almost as bad as the other. I felt a scream growing inside me.

Something small and cylindrical rolled under my hand. I searched around for it, found it, and investigated it carefully. There was a button on the side. I pushed it in. Light sprang out of one end, disclosing a dusty floor and a cubicle walled in with boxes. They stared at me blankly, all except one. It gaped blackly.

I flashed the light into it. There were dozens of sealed, plastic flasks and stacks of small boxes. I tore open one of the boxes and shook the contents out into my hand. Four dry biscuits and eight colored pellets.

I ate the biscuits first. Then I put one of the brown pellets in my mouth and let it dissolve. It had a rich, meaty flavor. Two others were the same. The others were different. A light yellow one tasted like fresh fruit.

After the food was gone I broke the seal on a flask and squeezed the water into my mouth. I felt contented, almost happy. In a few minutes, or half an hour, or an hour, this ship would be lifting, pushing itself away from the stubbornly resisting world below, breaking through thinning air into the blackness of space, and I would be here, snug, well-fed, waiting for the moment when I would slip out into the purer air and the cleaner soil of another world. MacLeod. I wondered if it would be better or worse. I hoped it would be better, but it didn't matter, really. It would be a new world, where I could make a new start. That was enough.

I turned off the flashlight. It isn't so bad being in total darkness when you know you can have light if you want it. It's when there's no help for it that the dark closes in like something alive, clutching at your throat. There was no way of knowing how long the power for the light would last. I would save it.

The darkness was warm and friendly. A little too warm, really. It made me drowsy. The heat from the floor beneath me worked up into my body. . . .

Somewhere, far off, something whirred. Later, light poured through my eyelids, redly. Something fumbled at my chest,

shook my sleeve, and withdrew. I pried my eyes open.

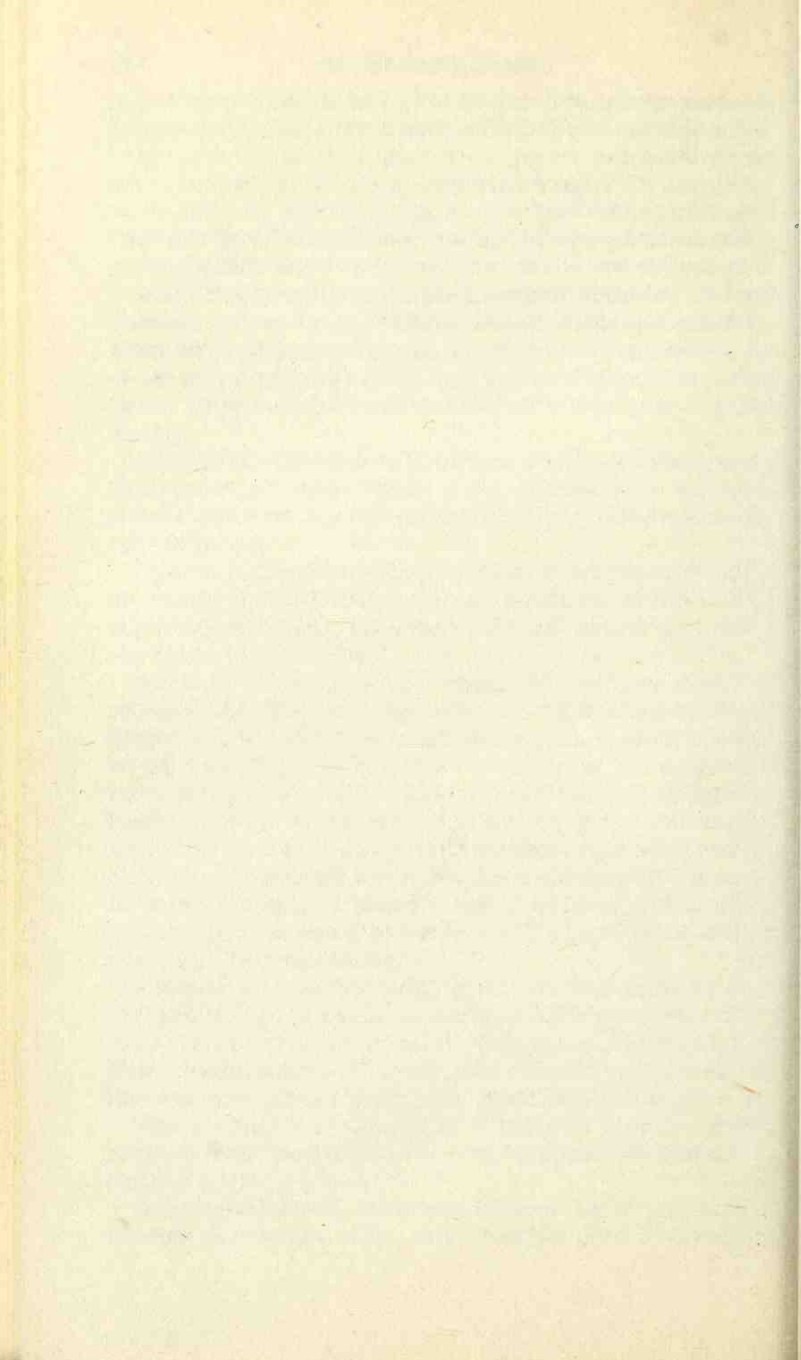
The light was blinding. There was a white spot of it; I couldn't see anything else.

"Who is it?" I asked sleepily.

Somebody chuckled.

The chase was over. I had run until I couldn't run any more. That chuckle was all that was necessary to end my flight when freedom was a few minutes away.

I knew that laugh. It was Sabatini.



TWELVE

There was no point in struggling. My gun was gone, and the knife in my sleeve was gone. Sabatini wasn't alone.

I was jerked to my feet. My jacket was stripped off. My hands were tied behind me. I accepted everything numbly. I was an automaton, without life of my own, without hope or fear or thought. I waited for them to cut off my feet.

Sabatini was chuckling again. "The old hot box. They never learn."

I waited. They led me out through the narrow lanes between the stacks. When I stumbled in the darkness, they jerked me up.

They're waiting until they get me out where they can carry me, I thought. But when we came out in the little cleared space in front of the open cargo door, they stopped me, but they didn't cut off my feet. Besides Sabatini there was a big one and a little one. In the dim starlight coming through the door, I saw that they were all dressed in real uniforms, orange and blue. It should have meant something to me, but it didn't.

"You caught him," someone said, vast relief in his voice. Silver gleamed dully, but I didn't recognize him. He was older than my venal friend. "Thank God! You'd never think, to look at him, that he had the Plague."

"At this stage," said Sabatini, "it hardly shows."

"What I can't figure out," the voice said, "is how he got in there."

"You can't?" Sabatini said. He sounded amused.

"We will always be grateful to the Emperor," the voice went on hurriedly. "You've saved us months of delay in quarantine and maybe even our lives."

"The Emperor lives to serve his people," Sabatini said drily. "Now, if you will operate the hoist, we'll take this man where he can't contaminate anyone."

Silver shrank back farther into the darkness. "Of course," he gasped.

I edged toward the doorway, but a hand reached out to hold me back. A motor whirled softly. Chains rattled. A platform

edged out into the starlight. Before it cleared the ship, Sabatini stepped onto it. One of his men handed me out to him. He held tightly to my arm with one hand, to the chain with the other. The other two mercenaries got on.

The platform swung out into the night air, swaying gently. It fell through the darkness, slowed, and thudded softly to the pavement. As soon as the Agents stepped off, pulling me after them, the platform swayed back up.

Across the field new lights sprang up. Someone shouted. The voice carried far through the night. A truck motor roared into life. Without haste but without wasting any time or motion, Sabatini pushed me to an orange-and-blue helicopter, through the door, and into a back seat. I sagged, unutterably weary of everything.

One of the mercenaries got in the back with me. He was a little man with a dark face and eyes that held glittering reflections of the distant lights. The other one who looked big and soft and laughed a lot climbed into the front with Sabatini. More motors roared, but they were a long way off. Lights began to string out across the field. Others probed the sky with searching fingers.

The helicopter motor coughed and was silent, coughed again and began muttering to itself. Vanes sighed above me. The helicopter lifted a few feet from the ground and moved sideways, drifting across the field.

A powerful light bored through the darkness above our heads and was reflected brilliantly from the hull of the Phoenix. The helicopter drifted on, rising a little higher. The lights around the distant buildings slid away.

In a few minutes we were close to the fence. It was a straight, bright line under us. And we left it behind, and it left us in darkness. We drifted on.

No one said anything. My mind had begun to work again, not quickly, not well, but at least it began to think. I wondered what Sabatini and his men were doing in Imperial uniforms. I wondered why there had been excitement at the port. I wondered why we fled through the night. But it didn't really matter.

Sabatini chuckled. "The old hot box. You haven't thanked me, Dane. I saved you from certain death." He chuckled again, and the big, soft one laughed.

I didn't move; I didn't say anything. Sabatini turned around in the seat to stare at me through the darkness; his nose was a

monstrous black shadow. "You know where they put you in that ship, don't you? Right over the motors. When the ship took off you'd have been cooked, inside and out. They've played that game for a long time, those spacers. I didn't think anyone still fell for it." He chuckled again, this time at humanity's eternal credulity.

I didn't answer. I was cold inside. *You'd have to trust someone, sometime*, I heard Laurie saying. *You'd be sure to trust the wrong person*. But there hadn't been any choice. It was the space officer or no one. What did it matter whether I died there in the ship or in Sabatini's hands? It would have been better to have died in the Phoenix, hoping for life, dreaming of another world.

The helicopter fell through the night, sighing, and landed gently in the darkness. They got out; they pulled me with them. Sabatini held my arms from behind while the other two stripped off their uniforms. Beneath the uniforms were the familiar black suits. Then the other two held me while Sabatini stripped. Then Sabatini held me again while the little Agent flipped on a small light. Three men were lying underneath some bushes. They were almost naked. They were dead.

The two agents slipped the discarded Imperial uniforms on the dead men. I stood still, watching them, feeling my arms grow numb. When they finished they led me through the bushes to a low, dark car. They pushed me into the back again. The motor made a raucous sound in the silent night before it gentled to a purr. We bumped out onto a smooth, dark road. We picked up speed and fled down it without a light. There was no way to measure time. The trip was endless.

The lights of the Imperial City got close, turning low clouds sullen red. We turned onto a road that seemed no better than a rutted track. We jounced along it for a long time, going a little slower; I had no idea how far we went. At the end of the track was a dark, massive pile that climbed against the sky, blotting out the stars. We stopped in front of it.

They pulled me out, and Sabatini disappeared into the blackness. I heard something clank and groan creakily. A door was opening, and it protested. Something gaped with a deeper darkness. The big, soft Agent pulled me forward by one arm. I hung back, taking a last look at the few stars that glimmered between the clouds.

A strong pull drew me stumbling into blackness. A light came

on, a single beam in the darkness. It roamed unsteadily. Before us was a broad corridor, dusty, dark-walled in stone. The light went ahead and we followed, interminably, along the corridor and down narrow steps and a few level paces and down more steps, down, always down. The walls began to sweat. Occasionally crystalline salt deposits glistened in the light. We went down into the ground following a dancing beam of light.

When we stopped, finally, we were in a dark room. I sensed that it was large; the darkness was close, but the walls didn't seem to press in upon me. Sabatini gestured with the light in his hand. The other Agents lighted wooden torches fixed in rusty metal brackets on the wall. They flickered and flared smokily. I looked around the room. It was big and cavelike and unfinished. Water dripped from the ceiling. Distributed haphazardly around the rough stone floor and against the walls were unrecognizable devices made of iron and wood and rope.

I looked slowly back at Sabatini. He was watching my face, and he was smiling.

"My little chamber has impressed you, I see," he said softly. "You are familiar with the work of your lay brothers. I, too, am a kind of scientist, and this is my laboratory. This is where I investigate the nature of truth—and how to find it. It's a fascinating search, and I think I have discovered some basic laws that the philosophers have missed."

He glanced around the room. "The old Baron who built this castle and equipped this room was an inventive fellow, but he didn't have the spirit of the philosopher, I understand. This was his hobby. These walls once rang with shrieks and screams and moans of pleasure. The moans of pleasure were his. But now the room is mine, and we seek the truth. Where is the pebble?"

It is difficult to shrug with your hands tied behind you, but I shrugged. There is only one way to be sure you don't say the wrong thing. That is to say nothing. No matter what happened, I would keep my mouth shut.

Smiling, Sabatini studied me and motioned to one of the Agents. The little, dark one with the glittering eyes shook a knife out of his sleeve and stepped behind me. Involuntarily my back tensed. Something swished through the air. My hands fell free. They dropped at my sides. I wanted to rub them, where the rope had bitten into the flesh, but I restrained myself.

"Pain is a strange thing," Sabatini said gently. "For some it is a stimulus that sets the tongue to wagging. All kinds of things

spill out, truth and falsehood, it doesn't matter which, anything that might please the questioner. It becomes difficult to seine out what you want. For others pain is a wedge that splits the soul so that other things can enter. For still others, pain is a gag; the teeth clench tight upon it and will not loosen for death itself. I wonder. Which kind are you?"

I wondered, too, but I didn't let him see that. I stared at his face impassively. In spite of the massive nose, the dark face was smiling and gentle. But the eyes were not smiling. They were hard and cold and piercing. They looked into me, seeing too much. But I would not look away.

"Come," he said. "Let's look around. I think you would be interested, being a man of curious spirit."

He led me through the cavern, describing the unending horrors that cluttered the floor and marred the walls. He told me how they worked and how they felt. His voice was tender; his words were rich and well chosen. They painted a picture of indescribable torment that sent sympathetic shivers up and down my spine.

Some of the devices had spikes, some had knife edges, some had ropes and pulleys. Some were little cages in which a man could not sit or stand. Some were metal boots or gloves with screws on the side that could be turned to make them fit.

"For they always fit," Sabatini said. "That is the beauty of them."

He pointed out the old dark stains that had been made long ago; he speculated about them, his eyes glowing. But there were too many devices, too many stains. Eventually his flexible, purring cat-voice lost all meaning; I stared and did not see.

"Ingenious, all," he said finally. "We admire the workmanship and the cleverness. We grease the wheels and the screws; we sharpen the points and blades; we renew the ropes. But in the final analysis these devices defeat their own purpose. They are too ingenious. The mind becomes bemused, contemplating them. There are too many parts; there is too much complexity. There isn't a single, dramatic facet for the mind to grasp as a symbol, to cling to in spite of itself. For that is the essence of learning the truth. We do not torture. We do not wish to torment the body. We apply only a gentle stimulus. It is the mind that tortures."

I could have turned on him at any time. I could have hit him and made a break for the door. But I knew I didn't have a

chance, and my attempt would be an admission of weakness. No, it was better to submit and say nothing. I was weak enough already without adding the weight of an unsuccessful escape.

He led me back to a table near the archway through which we had entered. On the table was a collection of needles and knives and pincers. Judiciously Sabatini looked them over, glancing at me and back at the table. He stretched his hand out over them. He picked up a pair of pincers. He toyed with them as he talked.

"Sit down, William," he said gently. He motioned to a heavy chair beside the table.

I sat down, my arms on the armrests. The little Agent flipped metal bands across my arms and fastened them. Two more bands encircled my legs. I sat still, unable to move even if I wanted to.

"No doubt you are curious," Sabatini said, "as to my right to possess the pebble. I'll tell you. Mine is the best right of all. I want it more than anybody, and I'm willing to do anything to get it, anything at all."

"Why?" I asked, and I regretted it. I had broken the promise I had made to myself.

Sabatini's eyes lighted up. "I don't know," he said reflectively. "I'll be as honest and truthful with you as I expect you to be with me, William. I'm fond of you, already, and you will grow fond of me. It may take time, but we have patience, haven't we, William? I will be close to you, closer than anything has ever been before, closer than anything will ever be again.

"And so I say, 'I don't know.' But I know it has a value, a great value, and it must be mine. Word spread throughout the galaxy that it was here, and I knew that it was what I had been looking for. I gave up a great deal to come and find it, more than you can imagine. But when I have it, the galaxy will be mine."

I laughed at him. I put back my head and laughed. Echoes bounced off the walls at us. His face got red, a dark red that made his dark eyes darker, and I knew that laughing was the right thing to do. But the color in his face slowly receded, and he smiled again.

"Clever, William," he said. "I am growing fonder of you all the time. It's going to hurt me a great deal to do what must be done. Save me the pain, William. Tell me where the pebble is."

I looked at him steadily.

He sighed, dangling the pincers. "Take off his shoes," he said sadly.

The little Agent took off my shoes. The stone floor felt cold and damp to my feet. Sabatini knelt down in front of me, like a worshipper at a shrine. He touched my left foot with one finger. I controlled an impulse to twitch it back.

"Such a fine, white foot," he said. "Such a pity to mar it." He lowered the pincers out of my sight. I felt them cold against my toes. "Ah, William," he sighed. "Good William, poor William."

His arm rippled. His shoulder lifted. A tongue of fire shot up my foot, up my leg, through my spinal column to my brain, and rocked it. I gasped. I couldn't help it. Waves of pain raced back and forth along my body as I clenched my teeth, blinked away tears that sprang into my eyes, tried to smile.

Pain! It was something that could not be imagined. We think we can stand anything. Torture cannot drag our secrets loose from our unwilling lips. We are strong and proud and brave. We will not talk. But our body turns upon us and twists our will and makes us weaklings. Unfair, unfair! To split a man in two and set one part against the other, fighting together, torturing each other. If the body is weak, the will should not be strong. But I would not tell. . . .

The pain died away as it localized itself in my foot and settled in a toe.

"There now," Sabatini said, "that wasn't so bad, was it? It didn't hurt too much, did it?"

He opened the pincers and let something thin and small drop to the floor. He stood up, looking down at my feet. "Poor little toe," he said. The big, soft Agent was laughing; it made his jowls shake. Sabatini looked into my eyes, dangling the pincers in his hand. My eyes were drawn to them irresistibly. They were held there by a kind of fascinated horror. I couldn't look away.

"Where is the pebble, William?" Sabatini pleaded. I looked at the pincers and said nothing. "Ah, well," he said. "Tomorrow we will take the next toe. The day after that, the next, until they all look alike. And then, if you will not be my friend, we will start upon the fingers. After that, we will think of something else. We have lots of time, William. All the time in the world. We will learn to be friends, you and I."

The clamps that held my arms and legs were released. I was pulled up. My legs shook. They took my clothes off, slitting the sleeves of the shirt and the legs of the pants. My clothes fell away. They unclasped the belt around my waist. I stood in front of them naked. I looked at my left foot out of the corner of my

eye, quickly, so that Sabatini would not catch me at it. Blood welled from the left little toe, where the nail had been. It was such a little thing to cause so much pain.

It was bad being naked, worse perhaps than the pain. It was not the cold or the dampness; it is hard to be strong and proud without clothes. When they take your clothes away, they take away your dignity. Without dignity, it is difficult to be anything.

"Good night, William," Sabatini said gently. "Until tomorrow."

He smiled. They led me away. I limped as they took me down a long corridor to a door made of wood with an insert of metal bars at the top as a little window. They unlocked the door with a key and pushed me in. I stumbled and fell on a pile of old straw. Things scampered over it and rustled in it, but I was too tired and weak to care. I sat on the straw, huddled up, my knees drawn close to my chest, and tried to forget the pain that had been and the ache that was and the pain that would come tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that until I couldn't stand it any longer and I would talk. I tried to forget about the pincers.

Why should I have to stand such pain? Life is not meant to be agony. Life should be free and proud and filled with love. I had nothing, not one of them. Why shouldn't I give them the pebble? Let them fight over it. Let them kill themselves for it. It was no concern of mine. It was only an egg-shaped crystal pebble and it had no meaning, and if it had a meaning, they would never be able to figure it out.

And yet I knew, despairingly, that I would never tell them where to find it. It was the only thing I had left. I would never tell them, and the pain would go on and on.

Something moved. It was in the room with me. It was larger than the things that scampered and rustled. I sat still, listening for it, trying to peer through the darkness, trying to see what was in the room with me. Slowly my eyes adjusted to the darkness. It was a person, lying in a corner of the cell. I could make out the outlines of a dark shape.

I crawled toward it, over the old straw that smelled damp and moldy and rotten as I stirred it. I got close enough to see that it was a woman, naked as I was. It was an old woman with a skinny, wrinkled body and a worn face and tangled, matted hair.

"Carlo," the woman mumbled toothlessly. "Carlo? Have you come back?" In her voice was a strange mixture of fear and

anticipation. "Don't hurt me, Carlo. Don't hurt me any more. I've told you everything. Carlo. Where are you, Carlo? I miss you. Only don't hurt me any more. I've told you where it is. You saw me. I dropped it in the offering plate. I left the pebble there in the Cathedral. . . ."

I stopped listening. I knew who the old woman was.

It was Frieda.

THIRTEEN

Running, running, running through the dark, only there is no reason to be running, and it is difficult for feet to run when the dark path is paved with knives and pain streaks through the darkness in jagged strokes that leaves the darkness even blacker.

The night is filled with voices asking, asking, but I cannot answer because my mouth is sealed tightly and I cannot move my lips, I cannot open them even to let out a scream, and I cannot stop running even though the path is paved with knives and the pain is great. . . .

It comes behind me, getting closer, because I can't run fast enough. It creeps up on me, its jaws gaping, ready to close, waiting to tear me with agony. And the jaws begin to close. . . .

I woke up. Always I woke up just before the jaws of the pincers closed upon me. How many times had I dreamed that dream? I had lost count. I didn't remember. I had been here forever. I looked over at the corner, where Frieda was, but the corner was empty. I remembered now. Frieda was gone. They had taken her away, how many days ago had it been? It was important to remember, but I couldn't remember. I tried to think. How many times had I been in the cavern room since they had taken Frieda away? Fifty times? A hundred? But that wasn't right. It couldn't be right.

I gave up. It didn't matter to me, and it didn't matter to Frieda. Nothing mattered to Frieda. Frieda was dead.

Soon I would be dead, too. No one could endure what I had endured and live for very long. I thought about it. I would be dead, and they would come for me and look down at me as they had looked down at Frieda and pick up my body and take it somewhere or else leave it here to rot and be eaten, and then Sabatini would be sorry. I looked forward to it happily, imagining the look of sorrow on Sabatini's face. Because I had not talked.

He had talked, oh, he had talked for hours, his furry cat-voice sliding in and around, weaving, lying still and leaping up to purr

again. Around and around, talking, until you began to nod sleepily and then would come the pain!

Frieda is gone, I told myself, and I have no one to talk to, not even a poor, mad woman who once was fair and slim and lovely, and I must sit alone, cold and naked, with no one to talk to because I must not talk to Sabatini.

Tears welled in my eyes. I could cry here in the dark where Sabatini could not see me. Things crawled over my legs, but I didn't brush them off any more. If they took a little nourishment from my body, they took no more than they needed. They were better than others, who ate because their appetites were insatiable, who could never get enough, not if they burst. These were friends who scurried about me on their small business, or maybe not friends, but not enemies either. But they were nothing to talk to.

Frieda had been better to talk to. I could close my eyes and remember her as she had been when I saw her first, proud and fearless and beautiful, when they had cut off her feet and she had smiled at them, and I would tell her things that I couldn't tell to anyone. And it had been good, it had kept me sane, even if she didn't answer. It had been better when she didn't answer, because when she spoke she thought I was Sabatini.

"Carlo," she would say, "oh, Carlo, good Carlo. Don't hurt me any more. Sweet Carlo. Where are you, Carlo? . . ."

And then it wouldn't help to keep my eyes closed, because I knew she was lying there with no teeth and no feet and the pitiful stumps would be struggling to walk again, mindlessly. And tears would fill my eyes, and I would weep because the flesh is such a poor weak thing. . . .

I sobbed in the darkness, remembering. . . .

Light, chasing the darkness. A monstrous black shadow thrown upon the cell, a shadow with a huge, beaked nose and a face that smiled and eyes that smiled never, never.

"Here, now, you're not speaking? You know each other, I'm sure. Frieda, you know Dane, the acolyte, the killer? And, William, you know Frieda, the Emperor's mistress. You should have much to talk about."

"Carlo—"

"You two should be good friends, you who have combined to cheat me. Think of the blood and torment that is on your souls."

"Sweet Carlo—"

"The Emperor's mistress! Who would suspect it? The Emperor would shudder to touch you now, wouldn't he, Frieda, even if you hadn't stolen his pretty, mysterious bauble. The white body he cherished, the face he imprisoned in a cube of pure diamond, they would turn his stomach now."

"Good Carlo—"

"Women are such fragile things it is a shame to waste subtlety upon them. They are like rare goblets, wonderful to look at and, upon occasion, filled with a wine that is old and delightful and thirst-quenching, but touch them a little roughly, speak to them harshly, and they shatter. Frieda!"

The thin wasted thing scrambling to its knees, trying to get up on the feet that aren't there. "Yes, Carlo, what is it, Carlo, I'll do it, I'll do anything you say, Carlo—"

A shadow hand, reaching down to pull back the hair and bare to the light the poor, ravaged face. Loose lips sucked in. Fear rattling in the throat. Pale eyes wide, staring.

"A strange thing, pain. I may have mentioned it to you before. Women can't stand pain. It destroys their will; it crushes their soul. They lose their identity. They are no longer beings in themselves; they are only an extension of their tormentors."

The fingers tightening; a wordless moan, like an animal. Hands that are more like claws reaching out to stroke a shadow arm.

"Carlo, good Carlo, sweet Carlo. . . ."

"You see? In her poor, mindless way, she loves me. She would do anything I asked her to do. If I asked her to kill you, she would do it, if she had to wait until you slept and claw your throat open with her fingers. But I wouldn't tell her to do that, because we are friends, you and I, William. And one day you will be as fond of me as she is. One day you will want to kiss my hand if I speak kindly to you, kiss the hand that gives you pain, not because it wants to, William, but because it seeks the truth, and your mind is twisted, William, and refuses to see that we are friends, and friends should never have secrets from each other, and so we must teach the mind, the stubborn mind, and hurt the body, the poor, unsinning body, because that is the only way we can reach the mind, and the mind is twisted, William . . . the mind is twisted. . . ."

I sobbed because I could not remember whether it had happened or whether it was a dream I had dreamed, and I

couldn't remember how long it had been since they took Frieda away. And it is a sad thing to be a man, naked and alone, because when they take away your clothes they take away part of your fortress. It is only a little thing, but it is a beginning. And then they try to lay the walls flat, they try to reach the secret place where you sit, impregnable, and view the world and know that no matter what happens no one can touch the real you, even if the real you is twisted and confused and can't remember even the littlest things, and you sit and cry in the darkness with the many-legged things crawling on your body. . . .

I sat up, suddenly happy, overjoyed because I knew, all at once, how I could figure out how long it had been since Frieda was taken away and how long I had been here in the cell.

There was no light, but I could count without the light. I could count the days with my fingers. I ran them gently over my toes, wincing a little at the pain, but that pain was nothing compared to the pain of not remembering. The little pain cleared my mind, so that I could count the toes, and there were nine of them that had no nails, and one of them was different, so I had been here nine days, and I was here five days when Frieda was taken away, because they hadn't started on the right foot when they took her away, and it had been four days since she died. Or five. Perhaps it had been five and they would come soon to carry me into the cavern room and Sabatini would talk and talk and then the pain would come, the toe that was different would be like the rest, and one of the inner walls would crumble. I whimpered.

There were not many walls left. The strong outer walls had gone when they stripped me of my clothes and I found Frieda and I realized how complete their power was. And they had battered down the inner walls one by one, and soon they would come upon the secret me, curled wormlike in my dark chamber, whimpering and alone. And then I would tell Sabatini what he wanted to know.

And yet I knew that when they took me to the other room, I would try to walk and I would look at Sabatini steadily and I wouldn't say a word. Here in this cell I could whimper and sob, but there I would be silent and strong until there was no more strength, and I would die. But it would take a long time, and the pain would go on and on and on. . . .

What was Sabatini really like? I would never know what lay behind the smiling face and the big nose and the cold eyes, and the world would never know, because he had built himself a

fortress that would outlast his life, as I hoped that mine would. No one would ever breach his fortress; no one would ever touch Sabatini. In all the world, perhaps in all the galaxy, he stood completely alone, unsupported. He loved nothing and feared nothing and wanted nothing except one thing. Not just the pebble, that was only a part of it, but if you knew what it was, that might be the undefended part of the fortress.

I sat there in the darkness, trying to think of what he wanted, but it was no good because all I could think of was the pebble, where it was, there inside the cornerstone of the Cathedral, and that was dangerous, and I must not think about it, ever.

And I heard a footstep in the corridor.

No! That wasn't fair. They were cheating. They had been cheating all along. It hadn't been a day since I had been in the other room. It had been only a few hours ago, because—because—

Every day, Sabatini had said. But it had been a trick. They waited only half a day or a few hours before they came for me again, and they thought I wouldn't know because there was no light here and I couldn't tell whether it was day or night because it was always night, but I could tell. They only fed me once between the times when they took me to the other room, and I was not hungry then, so it could not be a day between each one.

Tears sprang into my eyes. They were cheating again. It wasn't time to go into the other room, and it wasn't fair for them to come so soon, so soon, so soon. . . .

It was a trick to break me down. They thought they would find me sniveling in the dark, but I would fool them.

I wiped the tears away with the back of my hand. I tried to get up on one knee, but that was no good because my toes pressed against the straw and that was agony. I pushed myself backward toward the wall, until it felt cold and wet against my back.

The footsteps were closer. The footsteps were soft and cautious. They were trying to sneak up on me, but they didn't know that I had been in silence for so long that I could hear the many-legged things rustling the straw in the farthest corner.

I inched up the wall, my back pressed against it, my heels pushing against the floor. A little more. Please, a little more! My legs shook weakly, trembling under the strain. But I must be up when they came, standing to meet them, so that they would not lift me off the floor like something lifeless and limp and carry me to Sabatini. If I could get up, the victory would carry me through

another time in the cavern room.

They were fumbling at the lock of the door, but I was almost standing. I pushed hard. My back scraped against the wall, and I was up. I was standing, my arms folded across my chest. The light found me there. It flicked into my eyes from the door, and I heard someone gasp there and fumble more frantically with the lock as the light went away, and I was filled with a cold exultation. They had been surprised that I was up. They had not expected that. I had beaten them again.

The lock shrieked. It yielded with a metallic tinkling. The door swung open, creaking. Someone came in, running lightly, and stopped.

"Will. Are you all right?" The voice was different, soft and hesitant. It was not the voice I had expected. I had heard the voice before; someone had called me by that name before. I wrinkled my forehead, trying to remember.

"Will! It's me. I've come to help you. We're going to escape."

Surely it wouldn't be another trick. Surely they wouldn't do that to me.

"Oh, Will!"

The light came on again, but it was not in my eyes this time. The other person held it up so that it lit her face. Because it was *her* face, *her* blue eyes and arched dark eyebrows and straight short nose and generous red mouth, *her* head crowned by wound braids of dark-brown hair.

"Laurie!" I said, and it came out in a croak because I hadn't spoken for such a long time. And I took one step toward her and fell into a pit of night.

"So white, so white," someone was murmuring. There was something cold and biting in my mouth, and I swallowed, and it burned as it went down my throat, burning in my stomach, and burned pathways of strength through my arms and legs.

Laurie was sitting on the moldy straw, cradling my head in her arms, pouring something down my throat. I took another swallow and pushed the flask away.

"Get out of here," I said.

"Not without you."

"I can't go. I can't walk. I don't know how you got in here, but you've got to get away. Now! Before they come here and find you."

"No," she said. "I won't go unless you come with me."

"I can't." My voice shook. "Don't you understand. I can't walk, and I can't leave, and you can't carry me. And for God's sake, leave before they find you here!"

"No," she said. "If you won't try to walk, I'll stay here with you."

Burning tears of frustration sprang into my eyes. "All right," I sobbed. "I'll show you I can't walk. Then you'll go."

I sat up. Laurie got to her feet behind me and leaned down and put her hands under my armpits and lifted as I pushed hard with my feet. And suddenly I was up, swaying, the cell spinning gently in the dark.

She slipped around under my right arm, her left arm around my waist. "Now," she said gently, "take a step. Just one."

I lifted my right foot, leaning on Laurie, and moved it forward and put it down and almost fainted again. Slowly the blackness cleared away, and I was still standing. I took another step and I rested and I took another. In a few minutes we were standing outside the cell, looking up the long black corridor. And I remember the way they had brought me, miles through the ancient castle, down and down, and I knew I could never make it.

"It's too far," I said. "I can't walk that far. Go on, Laurie. Please leave me. Get away, if you can, and I'll be more grateful than you can imagine."

"No," she said. She said it soft and low, but I knew she would never say anything else. "Take another step," she said. "Just a little one."

I took a step and another one and another one, and it wasn't so bad, really, as long as it was only one step at a time and I didn't look ahead but concentrated only on taking this one step, this one step more. And the corridor was not paved with knives, exactly, as it had been in my dream. It was more like needles, and after a little they didn't jab into my toes every time I took a step and send their shivers of pain all through my body but only every few steps, and I could stand it. My feet seemed a long way down, and my head seemed a long way up so that I bent my head down to keep it from bumping against the ceiling. And Laurie was beside me, holding me up with her strength, and making little encouraging sounds.

The darkness inched past, and we went by the cavern room and it was dark, the machines in it like dark, crouching demons, and I wondered where Sabatini was, and the others, but it didn't

matter. Nothing mattered except taking one more step, and I took it, and I didn't step in the right place because there were needles there, but that was all right because I could stand it. As long as Laurie was beside me and the only way I could get her out of this place was to walk out with her, I would walk. I would walk all over Brancusi, if its crust was still smoking; I would walk up into space, I would climb to the stars, if there were only needles there to press my toes against, and we were climbing and there were needles there.

We climbed one step at a time. I counted them for a while, but I lost track after we got to a hundred, because the darkness was spinning, and it wouldn't stop no matter how steadily I held my head. It had grown a little lighter, too, and there were footsteps in the light, not ours I figured out at last, but somebody else's.

I felt something pressed into my right hand, and I looked down and it was a gun, a flash gun. I wondered where it had come from, and then I knew that Laurie must have brought it for me, and now I had it in my hand I felt stronger and more of a man, no longer naked, and it struck me as funny that I should be stumbling along the dark corridors of an old, old fortress with a beautiful girl. I laughed and the footsteps ahead stopped, and a light sprang up beside me, lighting the corridor, lighting the Agent who stood blinking in the light.

It wasn't Sabatini, nor the small, dark man with the glittering eyes, either, but the other one, the big, soft one who was hard and cruel underneath, the one who laughed. He wasn't laughing now. He had a gun in his hand, and I was laughing. I was laughing so hard that I could scarcely raise the gun in my hand, but I lifted it up and pulled the trigger while he was trying to peer against the light, and he smoked for a moment and melted to the floor.

I couldn't stop laughing, and I started to run. I ran through the dark corridor and feet pattered after me, calling. And I knew that I should stop running, I should stop laughing, and let the feet catch up, but I couldn't stop.

And I ran on numb feet through the night until it solidified around me, and I couldn't run any more.

FOURTEEN

I think I was unconscious for a long time, and the unconsciousness blended with sleep, and the sleep was plagued with dreams.

They were not ordinary dreams. Sometimes, I think, I was awake and thought that I was dreaming, and sometimes I was dreaming and thought I was awake, and I couldn't sort out the reality. I had a fever, and when I wasn't burning I was freezing, and I raved.

Sometimes I dreamed that I was back in Laurie's rooms, only I was not in the kitchen but in the bedroom that I had never seen, in Laurie's own bed. And I dreamed that Laurie would sit beside me on the bed and put her hand on my burning forehead, and her hand would be cool and healing, and her voice would be music. And I knew that was a dream, because I had fainted there in the castle. She could never have lifted my body, never have carried me out, and I dreaded the moment when I would wake up and learn whether she had escaped after she discovered that she couldn't bring me back to consciousness.

I dreamed, too, that I was back in the cell on the moldy straw, and I didn't know whether that was a dream or not. I hoped that it was a dream, not so much because of myself, but because Laurie was there, too. Sometimes she lay against the wall, where Frieda had lain, and sometimes she lay close beside me when I was shaken by chills, and she warmed me.

Sometimes we would talk, and I wasn't certain then where we were.

"I am a fortress," I would say. "Once I was not, a long time ago I was not, and evil entered my world unopposed. So I learned to build up my walls strong and thick. They will not break them down. They will shatter themselves against my walls, but they can never reach me where I sit in the secret place. This fortress world will stand against the onslaught of the galaxy."

"Shhh," she would say. "No one will hurt you any more."

"I love you, Laurie," I would say. "You are good and pure and beautiful, but I love you most because I have seen you inside

your fortress and you are beautiful there, too. There you are most beautiful of all. I love you. I love you."

"I know," she would say. "Shhh, now."

"But it isn't safe to love. I musn't love you, because love is the battering ram no walls can stand against."

"That's true," she would say softly.

"And if I let you in, will you laugh at me? Will you see the secret me and laugh? Because if you did I think I would be like Sabatini and build myself a wall that no one could ever pierce. I would disappear behind it, and no one would ever see me again. They would see only my fortress walls, cold and gray and impassably thick."

"Sleep, now," she would say. "No one will ever hurt you any more."

And one day I woke up, and I was cool, not cold with teeth-chattering chills, but healthfully cool. I lay there, afraid to open my eyes.

I took a deep breath with my eyes closed. The air was clean and fresh. I moved my feet. They didn't hurt much, a little but not much. There was something over them, something cool and crisp.

I opened my eyes. Sunlight streamed in a window. I was in a bedroom. It was simply decorated, but everything was clean. It was a woman's room. I could tell by the bright, frilly curtains at the window and the colorful, little rugs on the floor. I turned my head. A curtain in front of a clothes rack was half drawn back. I could see tunics and skirts hanging from the rack, not many, but they were hanging straight and clean. I thought I remembered one of them, a yellow one cut low in front.

I sat up. The room tilted for a moment and then straightened up. There was a closed door in front of me. It opened as I looked at it. Laurie came in.

Her face brightened as she saw me. She had a tray in her hand. The tray had a bowl and a glass on it. She hurried to the bed and set the tray down on a low table beside it.

"Will!" she said happily. "You're awake."

"I hope so," I said. I stared at her hungrily. She was wearing the white robe she had worn the morning I was here before, and her hair was loose around her shoulders. Her face was flushed, and she was even more beautiful than she had been in my dreams. "I was afraid that it would be different."

"Why, Will," she said, and her eyes dropped. "What a nice

thing to say."

It hadn't been a nice thing to say. It had come out, unpremeditated, because that was the way I felt. "I must have said a lot of things."

"You talked a lot," she said, "but it was mostly raving. It didn't make any sense." She wasn't looking at me.

"Some of it did," I said. "I can remember some of it, and some of it made sense."

But it wasn't any good. The freedom of delirium was gone, and the walls were back. I sighed. I leaned over and looked into the bowl on the tray. There was a thin soup in it, a broth that steamed an enticing odor up to my nostrils. I lifted the bowl like a cup and drank it down. It was hot and good, but it wasn't filling.

"Now for some real food," I said.

"I don't know," she said uncertainly. "You've been sick for a long time."

"How long?"

"Six days."

"It's about time," I said.

She got up and went into the other room, almost running. I lay back against the pillows, a little weak after sitting up for the first time in six days, and I listened to her moving around, humming happily, singing a few phrases. Pans clattered, food sputtered. It was all very wonderful, and I wished it could last forever.

The tray was heavy when she brought it back. In the middle, on a huge platter, was the biggest, thickest steak I've ever seen. It was still sizzling. On smaller plates were potatoes, a vegetable, and a green salad. There were two empty plates, stacked up.

I swallowed hungrily and picked up a knife and fork and cut thin slices from the steak. Inside, it was pink and juicy. I heaped up a plate with food and handed it to Laurie and heaped another plate for myself, and we started eating.

Laurie ate with me, heartily, but watching me, too, to see that I didn't eat too fast and get sick. So we ate slowly, both of us, but we ate for a long time, and when we finished I propped myself back against the head of the bed and felt happier and more contented than I had felt since I left the monastery.

"I haven't thanked you for rescuing me and for nursing me while I was sick," I said. "It's just like the other time. They don't make words big enough for things like this. Both times you put

yourself in danger. The last time it was such bad danger that I still shiver when I think about it. And you did it for a stranger. Why?"

"I was the only one who could do it," she said simply. "And it was something that needed to be done."

"That isn't why, but I suppose it will have to do. How did you find out I was being kept there?"

She looked away. "People talk to me."

"But how did you find the place? How did you get inside without anyone seeing you?"

"There's always a way to get into any place, no matter how well it's guarded."

"How did you get me away after I passed out that second time?"

"Please, Will," she said. "I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to think about it again."

I took a deep breath. "I won't ask any more questions, but I'm going to talk about it. You've risked a lot, and you can't be in any more danger than you are now. You should know what it's all about, or as much as I can tell you. I would have told you before if it hadn't been for the danger. Now—"

"You don't have to tell me anything," she said.

"I know," I said, "but I want to tell you." That was true. The desire to tell was almost a passion. What Sabatini hadn't been able to torture out of me, I wanted to give away, a gift of gratitude or of—of something else.

I made a long story out of it because I wanted her to know everything. I told her about the monastery and the Cathedral, how life was a long dream of peace and piety and reflection, and if the physical life was austere, the inner life was rich and full, and I had never wanted to leave.

Laurie listened and nodded. She understood.

I told her how that dream was shattered, there in the Cathedral, when Frieda entered, filled with life and fear, and of the Agents who waited outside for her. I told her about the gift Frieda left—"A pebble," Laurie mused—and how Frieda had gone out into the street, gone out to the black Agents, and Sabatini had smiled at her and cut off her feet.

Laurie's face twisted with horror.

I told her how I had doubted and hesitated, how I had gone to the Abbot hopefully, uncertainly, and what he had said, and what I had felt and done. I told her about the aliens in the

monastery, and the long chase through the corridors, and the strange and terrible fight in the Cathedral, and how I had finally escaped.

"Ah," Laurie sighed.

I told her about Siller and the bookshop and the escape to his surprising rooms and what he had taught me in the basement. I told her what I had learned about the physical and political and social situations in the galaxy and about life and about Siller. I told her how Siller died and how I had fled again, and as I told it, it seemed as if I had always been fleeing and never escaping, always running and never getting away from the real danger.

"You can't run away from yourself," Laurie said.

It was true. That was what I had been trying to do, and it was impossible. I had known it a long time, but I hadn't been able to face it until now. I was through running. I had stepped off the treadmill for good.

I told Laurie about the long chase through the streets of the Imperial City and of my escape. Her face was alive as she listened; her eyes watched me; she lived the experiences with me as I described them. She was concerned and relieved, apprehensive and hopeful, and she believed and understood, and it was surprising to me that I could repeat it all calmly, reliving the terrible things and they were not so terrible as they were sad, and my burden of guilt rolled away like a stone in front of the cave that imprisoned me.

I told Laurie about our meeting and how I had felt. I told her of my trip through the city after I left her and of reaching the port and finding Falescu gone. I described how I had gone to the office and tried to bluff my way aboard the Phoenix, and had my bluff called, how I had bribed my way aboard the ship, and the way I had been captured and what Sabatini had said about my hiding place.

Laurie shook her head. "He was right. You shouldn't have trusted one of the officers."

I told how Sabatini and his men had escaped with me from the port, how they had taken me to the old fortress. I described the cavern room. I told her what Sabatini had said and done and how I had decided not to speak at all. I told her about the nightmare night, the long, long night, in the cell, and of Frieda.

Tears glittered in Laurie's eyes. "You should have told him. Why didn't you tell him?"

I told her about the nightmares that were real and the reality

that was nightmare, about the many-legged things and the silence and the loneliness and the pain, and, at last, how she had come and I had thought she was Sabatini or the others, and I was being cheated. And it wasn't terrible any more, not any of it, but something that had happened to someone a long time ago.

When my voice died away, after I had told her almost everything, she shook her head sadly. "All for a pebble," she said. But she didn't ask why I had done what I had done and suffered what I had suffered. She seemed to know. I was grateful for that. I still wasn't sure. "And you never knew," she said, "what it was or why everyone wanted it so much."

I shook my head. "Maybe it wasn't anything except what men made of it. Maybe it was a kind of mirror in which men saw the reflections of their own desires. I think all the killing and the torment was for nothing. Maybe it always is."

"No," she said. "I think you're wrong. I think it must be the key to the fortress."

I looked at her quickly, wondering what she meant.

"Think of them, Siller and Sabatini and the others," she went on. "They weren't dreamers to chase a phantom, to pursue their own shadows. They were hard men, realistic men. They must have had some clue. The pebble must be the keystone of the crazy arch that spans the galaxy. Pull it out and the whole fantastic structure will crumble. Siller was right about that. The power situation keeps the galaxy divided, but one simple discovery could change it all. I think the pebble is that discovery, and they are afraid of it, those hard men, or they covet the power that control of it would mean. And if the pebble is that, it is the key to every fortress world in the galaxy."

"Maybe you're right," I said. "I'll tell you where it is. When I left the Cathedral, I hid it where no one can get it, not you or me or anyone. But if you know—"

"I don't want to know," Laurie said violently. "I don't want you to tell me."

"But if—but if you should be captured—" I stopped. The thought was like agony, worse than anything Sabatini had done. "If Sabatini should find you, you can tell him."

"I'd rather have nothing to tell," Laurie said. "You said yourself that it was better not to talk. Frieda had something to tell, and she told it, and it didn't help her. I'd rather not know."

I sighed. "All right. But if you're right about the pebble, something should be done with it. It should get into the right

hands, somehow, if there are any right hands—”

“But you said that no one could get it.”

“That’s right. None of us.”

The suspense of the memories and the reliving of them had kept me sitting up straight. Now I sank back again against the pillows propped at my back.

“Now you know all about me,” I said. It didn’t occur to me that I didn’t know anything about Laurie; if I had thought of it, I would have decided that it didn’t matter. I knew everything about Laurie I needed to know. “You know everything except one thing. And maybe you know that, too. I said a lot of things while I was out of my head.”

“Yes,” she said, looking away. “You were delirious. I knew it didn’t mean anything.”

“Some of it didn’t. Some of it was only the fever and my sick mind. But one thing I said was more true than anything I’ve ever said. You know what it is.”

“No,” she said.

It was hard to say again. When I was sick I had said it many times. I remembered saying it, and it had made me feel happy; even with walls crumbling around me I had felt happy. But now there were other walls to consider and someone else’s feelings, and I was afraid because it might not work out, and it might make Laurie unhappy, and I didn’t want to do anything, ever, that would make her unhappy. But I knew I could never rest until I said it. And so, selfishly, I said it.

“I love you, Laurie.” It came out cold and harsh; it frightened me. “Don’t say anything; I’m not asking for anything. I just wanted you to know.” But that wasn’t true; I knew it, and I had to go on. “You’ve seen me without my walls. Do you like what you’ve seen?”

She sighed. It was a happy sound. “Yes. Yes. . . .”

“Why do you sigh?”

“I was afraid the walls might be too strong, that you could never get the words through.” She leaned toward me until her face was so close I couldn’t make out her features.

Her lips touched mine, warm and full and sweet, moving gently as if to whisper secrets to my lips, and I was filled with a great exultation that choked my throat with joy. New strength flowed through me.

I pulled her close, and she came to me like dawn to the world, gladly, filled with light and joy and promise. . . .

"Will," she said softly. "Will—Will—Will." Or was it only a thought? It was a moment in which we might have shared our thoughts, if such a thing were possible.

"Tomorrow," I said, "I'll get the pebble."

FIFTEEN

I studied the Cathedral for a long time. There were guards, as I had known there would be. They were inconspicuous. They lounged in doorways in their black suits. They hid in the shadows. Sabatini didn't give up.

I watched them, and they didn't notice me. "Watch for a young man who limps," they had been told. "He may be dressed as an Agent and he may not, but he'll be big and young and he'll limp." To them an old, bent freedman in ragged clothes with a tattered cap pulled down over his forehead didn't exist.

People came and went, and the Agents looked at them and looked away. People passed through the flickering, golden translucence of the Barrier and came out, entered troubled and came out in peace, and the Agents glanced casually and forgot. I watched them, too, and I didn't forget. I saw one man enter with a box in his hand. He had the badge of the carpenter's guild on his chest, and he didn't come out.

I shuffled toward the long steps that led up to the Barrier. My toes were still tender, but I didn't limp. I was very careful not to limp. I fought the temptation. I shuffled up to the entrance, thinking.

Sanctuary, I thought. Sanctuary for the soul. Peace for the troubled spirit. There is no Barrier for those who seek peace.

But it was hard. I didn't want sanctuary and peace. It is difficult at best for a man to direct his thoughts effectively, for a man who has known happiness to think of sorrow, for a man determined on winning through incredible difficulties to a lost pebble to be hopeless and poor in spirit, and all the while to shuffle, bent over, when it was natural to straighten up and limp.

A delicate tingling warned me that the Barrier was not fooled.

Laurie has left me, I thought. I will never see her again. She is gone, and I am nothing. My eyes stung with tears. Peace, I thought. Peace. And I must go about a hopeless task, an impossible thing, and there is no help for me, no help except inside the Cathedral.

I shuffled forward, up the steps that were painful to climb

without limping, clinging to the synthetic emotions that welled up inside me, forgetting the Barrier; and the Barrier parted for me and let me through.

The Cathedral was peaceful and cool. Nostalgia swept over me like a breeze from a distant land. Here was real peace. Nowhere outside was there anything like it. Nowhere in the world was there peace but here, and I had left it, and I would never be a part of it again. -

I pressed my lips together firmly. *There are better things than peace. Peace is surrender. It is an unnatural state. It can't exist side by side with life; only with death comes true peace, when the struggle is ended and the ultimate surrender is made.*

Nostalgia ebbed and was replaced by purpose.

The service was going on. I watched, and it was good. Efficiency and sincerity were its strongest qualities. I wondered who was in the control room. Father Michaelis? Father Konek?

I knelt at a bench on one side, near the Portal, my head down. It would be fatal to be recognized now. I inspected the repairs out of the corner of my eye. The gaping hole in the forward wall had been filled in with cement. Whoever had patched it had worked carefully; the colors matched perfectly, and there was only a hairline division. Most of the shattered kneeling benches had been repaired. Only a few needed final touches. I noticed the carpenter kneeling at the rear, waiting for the service to end.

Now the miracles were taking place behind the altar. They were competently done, but they were more mechanical than inspired, and I suspected that Father Konek was at the controls. His mind would be elsewhere, back among his beloved relics, the machines of mystery and secret purpose that might yet work again for the Church. He would be wondering what Brother John had discovered while he was on duty.

I noticed the worshippers nearby. Their faces were upraised to the service, blindly, reverently, shining with awe and faith, and I envied them their ignorance, which was blessed. Because to know too much is to doubt, and I knew too much, and I could never share their blind faith again.

I closed my eyes and studied myself, and it was a strange mixture I saw of strength and weakness, knowledge and ignorance, courage and cowardice, and many other things that I saw more clearly now than I had ever seen. I remembered what I had been before I was cast out into the ravenous world. Would it have been better to stay as I was, innocent and unaware? Would

I have been happier if I had been guiltless and at peace?

And the belief came, from deep inside, that knowledge, though it is sorrow and pain, is worthwhile in spite of everything, and I could never have stayed in the monastery, even if the girl hadn't entered. She had precipitated what was inevitable. Eventually I would have turned away from the monastic life, or been turned from it, for life is purposeful, and the thinking man must seek its purpose, whether he wishes to seek or not.

Now the walls were down, and I could see with eyes that had been blinded by the darkness. I could live freely and love with all the power that was in me to love, and the liberation was worth whatever I had paid for it or would be called upon to pay.

And instead of blessing the one God, I blessed Laurie.

. . . there is one word for mankind, one word alone, and the word is—choose . . .

I had chosen.

The service was over. One by one, the worshippers left. The carpenter went to work quietly with his tools, softly, so as not to disturb the Cathedral peace, and soon we were alone. In a few minutes Father Konek would leave the control room, and it would be empty for an hour or so before the next service. That would be plenty of time for what I had to do.

Father Konek would have turned off the controls by now, but he would linger for a moment to inspect the machines lovingly. They were so ingeniously designed, so cleverly constructed; they were things of beauty beside which paintings and statues and music paled to insignificance, because these things worked. But now he would leave, glancing behind him once, and descend the stairs, slowly, because he was not a young man any more. He would slide back the panel at the foot of the stairs, step out into the corridor, and push it back into position, and he would walk away toward Brother John's workshop, anticipation quickening his steps.

I waited a moment more, preparing myself for the second and more dangerous plunge. The Portal was at my side, blue, opaque, and impenetrable.

I breathed deeply, slowing my pulse. I thought quiet thoughts of deep, green meadows where peace lay over the land like a gentle blanket, where nothing moved and the silence was complete. I thought of lying there, motionless upon the grass, breathing slowly and deeply, at peace with the universe. More

than that, I wanted to be one with the universe, quietly running with the streams down to the rivers, with the rivers down to the seas, there to lose myself in the oneness of the universal. I wanted to circle with the stars on their eternal rounds, flame with their exhaustible abundance, cool with them toward the final death.

Death and peace. Peace and death. The gentle, silent, eternal twins. I shall walk behind the Portal and find peace. I shall walk behind the Portal to—

Thinking these thoughts, feeling this resignation, I got up. Wearily I shuffled toward the Portal. Wearily I stepped through. Trembling, I stopped on the other side and leaned against the wall and sweated. Like everything else, thought and emotion control improve with practice. It hadn't been so difficult this time, but it had been bad enough. I had convinced myself that I wanted eternal peace, and I had convinced the Portal.

As I leaned against the wall, I heard footsteps in the wall opposite, descending. I frowned. Was time passing so slowly for me that I thought a few seconds was half an hour? I could step back through the Portal. That was no problem from this side. But I would have to come through again, and I didn't know whether I could face that torment again.

I glanced at the Portal, and the panel slid back. Father Konek stepped out into the corridor, looking up the steps he had descended. His face was troubled as he closed the panel and turned slowly away from me and started slowly up the corridor.

I let out a long, silent breath.

What troubles you, Father Konek? Why do you frown? Why do you walk so slow? Does the desecration of the monastery and the Cathedral still linger long after all evidence of it is gone? Was the peace and the calm shattered for good by the angry voices and the sound of gunfire? Do the shadows of violence and death hang gloomily in unsuspected places, leaping out at the unwary? Do you walk uneasily now, as unsure of your faith as you are unsure of your home?

It would be a sad thing if it were true, I thought, and felt responsible.

I slipped to the panel, pressed my ear against it, and listened. There was no sound from the control room above. Of course, there wouldn't be. Gently, silently, I slid the panel aside, took the first step up, and closed the panel behind me. And I stopped and listened, without knowing quite what I stopped for, what I listened to hear. And there was nothing.

I glided up the steps like a shadow, looking up. And I saw him.

The mirror had been replaced. I saw him in it. He was standing flat against the wall to the right side of the doorway, looking toward the opening expectantly, his gun ready in his hand. He didn't know that I could see him. He wasn't intending to capture me. His mouth was a straight line, as compressed and white as his hand on the gun he pointed at the doorway. I knew him. I had never seen him before, but I knew him. He was brother to all the other Agents I had seen, deadly in shadow black.

He waited there to kill me, for he had heard me coming, and I didn't know what I could do. He didn't care who I was. If I was Father Konek returning, he would kill me as soon as I stepped out into view. He had been ordered to kill, and that was a strange thing.

But I didn't have time to consider all the implications of that thought. He was growing impatient; he was wondering if his ears had tricked him or if the man on the stairs had suspected something. In a moment he would dart to the doorway, and he would fire, and there was nothing I could do, because I hadn't brought a gun. I hadn't wanted to carry a gun. I regretted it now.

He shifted, and in that moment of shifting, I took a whispering step upward and sideward. I brought my feet together just below the top of the steps and pressed myself against the right wall. I hugged the wall and, just around the corner, he hugged the wall, and we waited. I couldn't see him in the mirror any more, but he couldn't see me, either, and he couldn't be sure that I knew he was there.

We waited. Seconds passed, dragging their feet. Slowly the snout of a flash gun poked itself around the corner, sniffing toward me. I waited as it eased out and around, coming closer. The hole in the barrel got blacker and rounder, and I saw a patch of skin, and I struck, savagely, with the side of my hand.

The gun dropped. He made a sound that was half a grunt, half a scream, and whipped his hand back. I was around the corner while he was still nursing his right wrist in his left hand. I hit him low. As he doubled up, gasping, I swung the edge of my hand against the back of his neck. He crumpled to the floor.

I stood in the center of the room for a moment, struggling for breath. I hadn't realized until then that the suspense had sapped my strength so thoroughly. Then I stopped and tied him up securely and put a gag in his mouth. I straightened up and

looked around, and it was good to be back.

Everything was in place, all the familiar machines, but this time it gave me no sense of power. I felt a strange humility. Forgotten geniuses of the lost ages had created these things, and we used them now as legacies, without knowing why they worked or how, only that they worked if we did this and that. We had fallen a long way.

I sighed and sat in the chair facing the controls. I flipped on the power switch, fitted the skull cap to my head, and slipped my hands into the gauntlets. The last time I had sat here there had been four men below in the Cathedral, searching for me. But I was here now to search for something else, and I must hurry.

I probed the murky darkness of the walls; I slid down them and through them and swung past the thinner darkness and swung back. I searched it, fishing back and forth, tugging. Nothing. There was nothing at all in the cornerstone.

The pebble was gone.

I sat there for minutes, trying to absorb this fact and fit it together with all the other little pieces. All at once it made sense. I turned around. The Agent's eyes were open, staring at me, bright with malice. He had been told to kill. Of course. Because the pebble had been found, and I was worthless.

I was overwhelmed by a sense of relief. Sabatini would like me dead now, and he would place guards to kill me if I came back, but he wouldn't search me out, because he had what he wanted. I was free. I had been tied to the pebble for a long time, but now I was free. Free to live, free to love Laurie. And I hadn't given it to him. He had found it for himself, or someone had found it for him. But I hadn't told; my responsibility was over.

But shame crept in, as I thought of Laurie and what she would think, and what I would think of myself. For the pebble could be the key, as Laurie said, but in Sabatini's hands it would be a key to terror and destruction. Responsibility for that wasn't something I could shake off, like water from a wet dog. Maybe I had told him the hiding place. I didn't think I had, but I had been almost out of my mind, and there was that chance.

The Agent's eyes were watching me narrowly, and it gave me an uneasy feeling as if I had forgotten something or wasn't seeing something that was obvious. I looked around the room, but there wasn't anything unexpected in it.

And then I realized that I was jumping to the conclusion that

Sabatini had found the pebble days ago, that he was gone with it. It didn't have to be that way. It could still be in the monastery, and I had at my disposal the finest searching device on Brancusi. With it someone had found the pebble where I had hidden it. With it I could find the pebble again, if it was still within range.

I turned back to the controls and slipped through the back wall, lowered the scanner to eye level along the corridor and sped back through the monastery faster than a man could run.

The corridors were empty. But I didn't expect the pebble to be there. I wasn't sure where it would be, but I knew where to start. I didn't want to start there. I was afraid of what I would find.

I hesitated before the door, the Abbot's door, and then slipped through its brief darkness. They were there.

The Abbot was in his armchair, powerful and white-haired, impassive. Opposite him stood Sabatini, dark, big-nosed, smiling sardonically. Between them, on a small table, was the pebble, gleaming dully.

"... haven't learned anything in three days," Sabatini was saying. "Now I will see what I can do."

"And you think you can succeed where we have failed?" the Abbot's deep voice asked. "What facilities do you have to work with? What trained minds can you put on it?"

"At least," Sabatini said, "I won't be afraid to take a chance."

"And in the process, destroy it. No, Carlo, this is too subtle for your bluntness. You will leave it with us, and if the secret can be solved, Brother John will solve it. It's too valuable for you to tamper with."

"Valuable!" Sabatini exclaimed. "What do you know of value? Maybe you've forgotten whose money paid for it, paid *you* for it as well as others, and who told you to look for it in the Cathedral. Who kept saying, 'Put yourself in Dane's place. You're besieged in the control room. Where would you hide the—?' "

"And yet," the Abbot broke in casually, "it could be sold for more, much more than you've paid, especially when we discover its secret. And we will."

Sabatini's face got red. "Not another chronor!" he shouted, slapping the table. The pebble jumped.

"Now, now, Carlo," the Abbot cautioned, frowning. "There is no need for such a display of temper. It's very likely that the thing is worthless, that you would be getting nothing in any case. I think that it is probable that you have already given up too

much for too little."

"What I have given up, I can get back," Sabatini said coldly. "What I have paid for," he roared, "I take."

He reached for the pebble. It shifted away from his hand, but he didn't notice. The Abbot noticed.

"Really, Carlo," the Abbot said, "you can't expect to get away with theft in my monastery. Not when I have the control room at my disposal."

"And I have your future at my disposal," Sabatini said, smiling. "A word to the Archbishop about your activities—? And remember, I have my man in the control room—by your consent."

He reached for the pebble again. It slid off the table onto the floor. As he stooped for it, his gun slipped out of his inside jacket pocket and poised in the air. The pebble joined it. They hung there in two unseen hands.

Sabatini straightened, lunged for the pebble and the gun in a sudden rush of anger.

Ah! Ah! The gun waggled menacingly in the air as the words formed themselves in Sabatini's mind. He stopped.

"Who is it?" the Abbot asked. "Is it you there in the control room, Father Konek? Good work, Father! Now give the gun and the pebble to me!"

He got up from his chair and started forward.

Ah! Ah! The Abbot stopped, confused and alarmed, as the gun pointed at him.

It is I, Father. William Dane. An acolyte thrown out into the world to die, an innocent man sold to the torturers.

"William!" the Abbot said. "William, my son!"

Sabatini gathered himself. *Careful!*

I have come for what is not yours nor his, Father, but what is mine. One of you is a callous, hypocritical traitor and the other is a torturing killer, and I should kill you both where you stand!

The sudden passion of the thought rocked them both. Sabatini recovered first. He folded his arms across his chest and stared into the air where the pebble and pistol hung. The Abbot's ruddy face turned pale.

"No!" he said hoarsely. "You mustn't do that! You mustn't have my blood on your hands!"

The blood of a false Abbot? The blood of a breaker of vows, a cheat, a thief, a merchant of torment?

His face grew even whiter. "You would be spilling your own

blood," he said wildly. "You are my flesh, my blood. You are my real son."

GOD! The thought shook me like an earthquake. The gun trembled in the air as my hand clenched uncontrollably in the gauntlet. I had been surprised and shocked by the Abbot's falseness, but I wouldn't have shot them. Not before. Now the world reeled.

My father! My father! I could shoot them now. I could shoot them both, before they could move, shoot them down unarmed, in anger and horror. My father! The word was like blasphemy.

You are no father! It takes more than an act of passion to make a man a father!

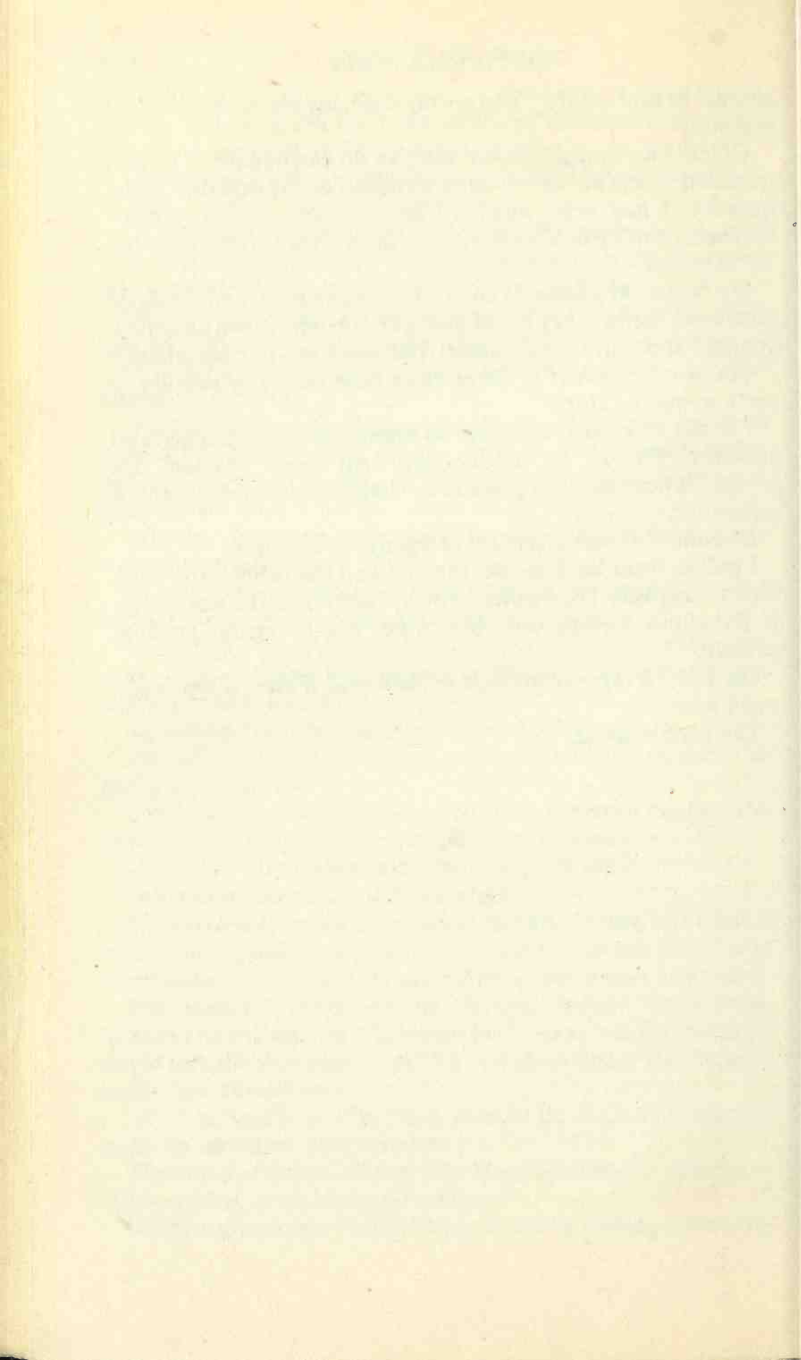
The old man sank down on his knees, his hand clenched and upraised. "Please," he said in a dry, tight voice. "My son." He bowed his head before a gun and a pebble and an unseen spirit of vengeance.

Live then! It was a scream of agony. And suffer!

I pulled them back to me, the gun and the pebble, suffering with an intensity I had never known, not even in the worst days in Sabatini's torture cell. My mind was a raging, probing torment.

Oh, God! If there is any help in the world, if there is any hope, speak now!

The pebble spoke.



SIXTEEN

I remember it still. I could not forget it if I wanted to. It is seared into my mind so deeply that time's leveling hand can never smooth it out, except with death. It is only when I try to put words to it that I have difficulty. Because it was not in words. The medium cannot be described. I could say pictures or images, but these are only approximations.

Perfect mental communication is an experience which cannot be explained, because there is nothing with which to compare it. And so the pebble spoke to my mind, saying everything in seconds which it takes me pages to repeat. Words are slow and stumbling; ordered thoughts are precise and time-cheating. If the words are awkward, then it is because there are no good words.

The pebble said:

To you (mental communicator—a word, a word) who come after, who are our children, from us (Terrans, mental communicators), who once lived and loved and died and now are dead, greetings.

This is the story of your fathers:

A small, green world circling a small, yellow sun (Earth and Sol). A vision of the galaxy, solid, packed tight with stars, one among them shining yellow and unmistakable, the world circling it green and bright (Sol and Earth located indelibly). Here Man was born and lived and died long ages before he spread to the stars.

Man's history on Earth was a cyclic thing, his civilizations rising and falling periodically (the history, complete), but at last Man broke through the cycles and climbed one peak higher than he had ever climbed before. He conquered space and colonized the galaxy, and secure on his height he thought he would never fall again.

The conquest was not an easy sweeping-out and overrunning and consolidation. It was a long, weary, extended effort that exhausted the resources of Earth and the Solar System and drained the vitality of those who stayed behind on Earth. The

colonies, held together by a slender strand of memory and affection for the mother world, grew lustily. And Terrans looked out upon the galaxy and the empire, and it was good, because men had done it.

But memory is a weak thing, and building a new world is a hard thing and begets realism. Realistically, Earth had no future; it had a past. It was a debtor world. It could export nothing but sentiment. But the out-worlds would not trade resources for sentiment, and no one argued that this was not right.

The Second Stage began. The Empire was only sentimental fiction, but Earth carved itself out another empire. Earth transformed itself into a vast university with all knowledge as its realm. Classified wisdom flowed outward from Earth in an endless stream: inventions, basic science, philosophy. The colonies had no time for such things; they were exploiting their inheritance, the stars. But they were willing to trade food for the prototype of a gadget, raw materials for a basic law of nature, and a little fuel for philosophic insight.

From all over the galaxy men came to Earth to learn, to sell, to buy. Earth was a marketplace for all things. But the galaxy was restless, and Terrans foresaw their world torn between contending forces. To possess the marketplace, the worlds would make it a battleground, and in so doing destroy it. Such is the wisdom of possession: to possess is to destroy.

Gradually Earth relinquished its role, ceased exporting, and simplified its existence. Men forgot. They thought that Earth was dying. And when the First Empire exploded, Earth was overlooked. While other worlds were dying in flames, Earth survived, green and peaceful, thoughtful and quiet, watching with a great sorrow the death throes of a galaxy.

In that peace a unique thing happened. On Earth men began to think clearly for the first time, and that was the Third Stage. It is a strange and terrible thing that what is needed for survival is clear thinking, and what is needed for clear thinking is the peace and quiet which can only come when there is no immediate question of survival. As understanding of how men think developed, control of the thought processes grew, and out of that control came mental communication.

And out of the peace and the quiet, Terrans went forth again into the galaxy, not as at first, with thunder and flame and great joy, but silently, unnoticed, recognizing the danger but even

more aware of their responsibility. Into the galaxy came a breath of reason, a subtle sense of unity, a mute hope. Slowly at first and then more rapidly, the worlds stopped fighting among themselves, the galaxy cooled, the flames died away, and humanity gave thanks to the gods of peace.

Unthanked, unknown, we worked throughout the galaxy, shifting a force here, adjusting one there, one hand upon the pulse of empire while the other led upward. Always upward. The Second Empire was born, the golden time of humanity, abundant, rewarding, fruitful. The peaks Man climbed now, he had never suspected. The view he saw, he had never dreamed of.

And it was a long rich summer, but the winter, no matter how long delayed, must come at last.

Out of our labors came our own destruction. A machine was invented; we were detected. Savage and untamed, the galaxy turned upon us. This is the wisdom of difference: to be different is to be hated. We were different; we were hated. It did not matter what we had done or why.

We slipped away, fleeing before the stinging winds of winter. We fled down the galaxy, unseen, hoping to hide ourselves away for another season and knowing, while we hoped, that hope was futile. They did not follow us. We lost them. But they analyzed and thought and deduced with the minds we had helped to educate in the peace we had nurtured, and they picked Earth out of a billion worlds.

We saw the first scout today. Tonight or tomorrow they will come, united one last time in vengeance before the galaxy explodes into a million burning brands. They seek their revenge against those who gave them what they did not ask for. They will sear the soil of their ancient home with flame. They will kill every living thing upon it so that nothing will ever grow again upon the world that gave birth to them and to their benefactors. Before they turn upon each other, we will die, but Earth will grow green again. The Earth will heal its wounds and wait endlessly for men to walk upon her bosom once more. With a mother's understanding, Earth will forgive her children for their childishness, and Earth will wait.

The galaxy will grow cold and dark, chilled by the winter of a new Dark Ages, and Earth will wait. Men will forget and remember until remembering is like forgetting and forgetting is like remembering, and myths will grow. And Earth will wait. This message will rest upon it, and hidden away (here and here

and here) are other secrets for you who come after. Find them. Use them with wisdom. They are your inheritance.

Someday man will set foot again upon the Earth, and it does not matter if it is not one of you, because this pebble is imprinted with desire. Men will want it more than life itself, and it will pass from hand to hand until it comes to you who can read it.

And you will be there to read it, for we have sowed our seed across the galaxy, and though we die today or tomorrow, we can never be destroyed. Someday we will live again in you, our children, when the seed reunites and conditions are favorable.

Be strong. Be wise. Be kind.

Earth is waiting.

I sat there with the pebble in my hand, dazed, emotion drained from me. I had read a letter, and the letter was not for me. I wasn't one of their children. I felt a sweep of pity and shame. It was a thing of beauty and sorrow, and I was a poor, weak mortal who couldn't help to build again the Empire they had built.

Slowly I lifted the cap from my head and put it down and looked at the Agent in the corner. His eyes glared at me, filled with hate. I stood up, leaving the gun behind. I didn't want it.

They weren't here yet. How long had it been since I brought the pebble back to the control room, since I had probed at it with my torment? Eternity? I had known the great sweep of history through the long ages; I had lived it grandly and minutely. It was mine, forever; I knew more about Man's forgotten past than anyone had known since the Second Empire disintegrated. But I knew that it had taken only a few seconds. They were, I thought with sudden sureness, still minutes away.

I walked to the man in the corner and stood above him. "Tell your master," I said, "not to follow me. He won't listen, but tell him. Tell him I spared him this time, and I may spare him again, but some time he may force me to kill."

I walked down the steps deliberately and stepped out into the corridor and slid the panel shut. That might delay them for a few moments. I walked through the Portal, which was no trick at all from the monastery side, and stood inside the Cathedral. It was dark and deserted. The carpenter was gone, although his work wasn't finished.

I looked down at my hand. The pebble was still there, no longer mysterious but invested with something else, meaning perhaps, which made it even more precious. I slipped it into the

pouch at my waist, feeling strong and unafraid. I sniffed at the room with sharpened senses.

The Agents outside might have been warned. They might be watching for someone to come out of the Cathedral, but there would be some way to evade them without violence. There was, of course. They couldn't stop everybody.

I walked to where the carpenter had been working. His tools were there in a wooden case. I picked them up; they were light in my hand. I shuffled toward the Barrier, my shoulders bent, my head down. I shuffled through the Barrier and down the long steps into the street. It was getting dark outside.

Shuffling, I made my way down the street carrying the wooden case. I passed a doorway. A hand reached out to grab my arm. I cocked my head to look at them, my face haggard and old.

"Wait a minute," one of the Agents said.

"Let him alone," said the other. "You're giving our position away."

"But I saw the carpenter leave a few minutes ago."

"So there's two of them! Look at the old fellow. That isn't Dane."

Slowly the hand relaxed on my arm. When it fell away, I moved again. I shuffled down the street, an old man with a few tools. I was sorry that the carpenter had to be deprived of his precious saws and hammers and planes so that I could escape with the pebble, but it was important. Not because the pebble was worth anything, but to save it from men like Sabatini who might destroy it before it reached those to whom it was addressed.

I stopped at an alley entrance and put down the case, hoping that it would be found and returned to its owner. I walked briskly away. And just as I thought I was safe, I saw the helicopters dropping like falling leaves.

I looked behind me. Far off in a vast circle, they were swarming down, all around. I knew what their plan would be. Given enough men, it was simple and foolproof. Throw a ring of men around a given area and let them work inward, questioning everyone as they come to them, searching them carefully—they would find even the smallest object. The pebble burned in my pouch.

I walked swiftly toward the line of falling planes. There was a bare possibility that I could get outside the line before it formed.

When I was a hundred feet away, the chance disappeared.

"Stay where you are!" the loudspeakers thundered. "Do not pass beneath the planes! Stay where you are! . . ."

Ahead of me the pedestrians thickened, clotted, forming a living barricade. I had to obey.

If one direction was barred to me, I could still move in the other. I turned, inconspicuously, and walked back the way I had come. I wasn't alone. Others were still walking; some of them broke into a hysterical run.

"Stay where you are! . . ." the loudspeakers thundered, but the thunder was more distant.

I looked behind once. The helicopters were disgorging orange-and-blue mercenaries. They formed lines across the street and began screening the waiting crowd.

All around. All around, I thought. But there is an answer to everything; it is usually implicit in the conditions of the statement. *Given enough men*. . . And the answer was that they didn't have enough men. They couldn't have enough men to search as thoroughly as was necessary.

I slid into the alley. Beside me rose the ruins of a warehouse, ruins that can be found everywhere, since trade shifts as conditions change and cities grow, and it is cheaper to build a new one than to rebuild an old one. Somewhere here or there would be a window or a door, broken, sagging, decayed. There was. A window gaped blackly. I looked quickly to the right and left and up. I was not observed. I stepped through the window and waited for my eyes to grow used to the darkness. Soon, with the fading light of evening behind me, I could make out the blurred outlines of old crates and discarded materials, rotting, moldering away, forgotten.

I picked my way among them, careful not to stumble. Here and there the floor sagged dangerously beneath me before I leaped to a safer footing. Far back in the darkness I found what I wanted. I felt carefully around it. It was a large packing case from which one side was missing. I turned that side toward the back wall and pulled other boxes close around me, piling them up haphazardly until they teetered, ready to topple at the slightest touch. By that time I was inside the pile, inside the hidden packing case, sitting, my knees hugged up to my chest, waiting, waiting and thinking.

The problem was like trying to analyze the random movements of air molecules. Even in a closed room, there are

too many forces. The mercenaries of the Emperor, now. Who had summoned them? Sabatini? No. They had tried to stop him at the port. He was working for himself or someone other than the Emperor. By someone else, then, who was working for the Emperor inside the monastery.

I knew who it had to be. If not Sabatini, then the Abbot. It had to be the Abbot, because he was the only other person who had known that I had the pebble and had known it soon enough to notify the Emperor before I escaped.

Siller had been right about him, probably. And probably he was my father. He could have said it as a trick to save his life, but it wasn't the sort of thing one thought of on the spur of the moment. It had the ring of truth. I thought about him; it didn't hurt. He had sacrificed the right to hurt me. There were more important things. I wouldn't think about him any more.

There were other forces, too, moving blindly through the long night. The Citizens. Struggling for an ideal, perhaps, but shot through with corruption, like the rest. The Peddlers. They were concerned with only one thing. Profits. And yet where did profits lie?

Feet clumping. Distant but approaching.

"Watch out! This place will fall in on you." The voice was deep and commanding.

"What a rotting heap!" Querulous, disgruntled. "No one's been in here for years."

"That's what he wants you to think. This is the kind of place I'd pick if I wanted to hide." It was the first voice.

I cursed him silently.

"Let's get it over with." A third one.

How many did they have? Could I have been wrong? But I knew that I wasn't.

The crash of wood, endlessly repeated, drawing slowly closer.

"Can't you see there's nothing here?" The second one again, complaining.

There was no answer except the overturning of crates.

"Careful! He may be armed." The first one. He was much too close.

"What a rat's nest!"

"Grab that top box. Clear them away."

A thunder of boxes, tottering, falling. A splintering of wood. A yell. They echoed in my box, back and forth, as if they were inside with me.

"Pull him out."

"Take it easy!" The second one, close to tears. "Those splinters are tearing my leg. Don't pull so hard!"

A ripping of cloth. A scream of pain.

"Oh, my God! Look at that! Stop it, somebody!"

"Oh, let's get him out of here before we all fall through the floor. There's nobody here." It was the first voice.

The feet went away, taking the screams with them.

I waited in the darkness for a long time, thinking. After a few hours I uncurled myself and picked my way out of the shambles and started back to Laurie. It had been a long time, longer than I had expected, and she would be worried about me.

I climbed the rickety, outside stairs eagerly. In a moment I would be with Laurie. I would give her the pebble, and she would listen to the story of my adventures. But most of all I would be with her. Maybe she wouldn't be worried. Maybe, confident of my skill and courage, she would be asleep, waiting for my return.

I would wake her up. She would look up at me drowsily, and then her blue eyes would open wide, and she would draw me down, down. . . .

There was no one in the kitchen. I smiled; she was asleep. I took the pebble out of the waist pouch and held it in my hand as I tiptoed to her bedroom door and stopped—

Someone was breathing inside the room, hoarsely, deeply. Someone's voice mumbled harsh, indistinguishable words. I couldn't move. Then I heard the terrible words that would shatter my sleep for endless nights, words as soft as a sigh, too soft to be heard as clearly as I heard them.

"Mike," Laurie said. "Mike. Mike. Mike."

I turned away from the door, sickened. Everything had fallen into place.

I knew why she had rescued me and why she had nursed me back to health and why she had— But I wouldn't think about that. She had wanted the pebble; it didn't matter who she was working for. I tossed the pebble in my hand. She could have it. It wouldn't do her any good, but she had earned it.

"An entertainer," she had called herself.

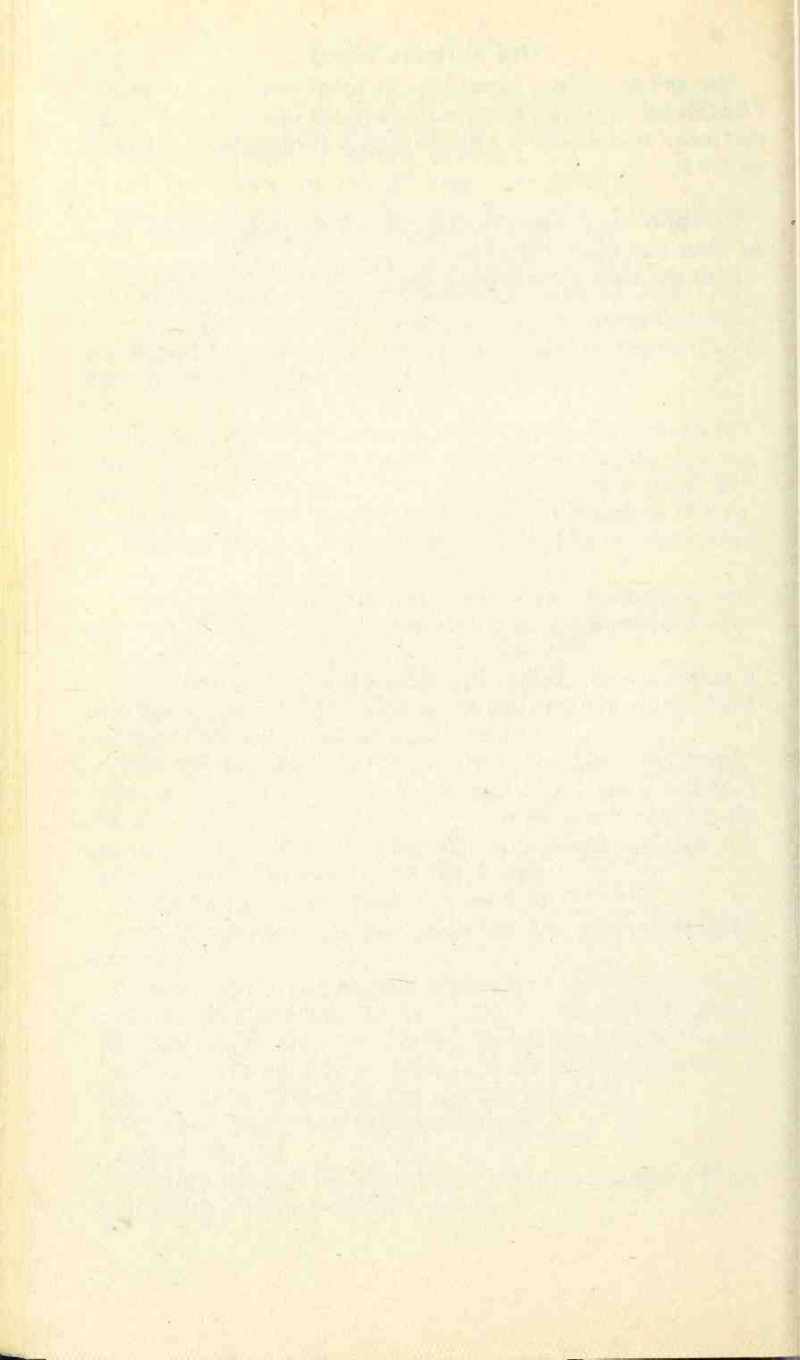
Laurie! Laurie!

I found a piece of wrapping paper in the trash and scribbled on it with the burnt head of a match.

I haven't any money to pay you. Sabatini took that. I thought I had found something much more valuable, but somebody took that away, too. I'm sorry I was so stupid. Perhaps this will make up for it.

I wrapped the pebble in it and put it on the table and went out the door and down the steps.

I felt the walls close around me.



SEVENTEEN

There are many patterns for survival, but basically they boil down to three: attack, defense, and concealment.

Attack depends on skill, agility, and weapons. Defense is the fortress system. There are two kinds of concealment: a man can camouflage himself by fading into his surroundings, or he can hide, like the mole.

In the days that followed, I used all of these to stay alive, although why I wanted to stay alive was a question I couldn't answer. At first I went about the business numbly, automatically; later it became a game that was played for the sake of the game.

Camouflage came first. I was already dressed as a ragged freedman. I was part of the city, like the tenements and the warehouses and the dingy stores. But it wasn't good enough. I had no money. I couldn't eat, therefore, without begging, and to beg would be to discard the camouflage. The disguise, moreover, was imperfect; I was known to be dressed as a freedman. Although there were many like me, it wasn't wise to have the field narrowed so small.

I needed money first. There was only one place to get it; I couldn't take it from those who needed it worse than I did. I hunted the hunters. I hunted them with my bare hands, because I didn't want to hold a gun again. I was sick of killing.

I waited patiently near the entertainment district for the hunters to appear. I waited in an alley, unseen, watching, and perhaps I waited also for a glimpse of Laurie, so that I might see her with new eyes and know her for what she was, but she didn't appear. But the hunters came. I saw them coming down the street, the Agents, two of them because they did not go out alone. They were determinedly inconspicuous in their black suits. I didn't know them, but it didn't matter. They were a breed, all guilty, hunters all.

They came by the alley, and I turned and scuffled back through the dark. But when I stopped, I was only a little ways from them, pulled back into a doorway. They hesitated at the

mouth of the alley, looking into it, and then, in unison, guns appeared in their hands, and they ran after me.

I stuck out my foot as the one on the left passed me. He tripped. As he fell I clubbed him on the back of the neck. He hit the ground and lay still. A few yards past, the other one stopped, turned, peered blindly into the darkness.

"Sam?" he said. "Sam?"

Silence answered him. Cautiously he came back, his gun probing into the night. When he was close enough, I grabbed his wrist with one hand and hit him in the belly with the other. He doubled up, gasping. As his head came down, my knee came up savagely. It caught him in the face. He flew backward until his head bounced off the wall and collapsed in a huddled heap.

Quickly and efficiently, I stripped them of their clothing. I emptied their money belts into my waist pouch, estimating that I had gained about five hundred chronors. I also pocketed two identity cards which I wanted to inspect later.

I bundled their guns inside their clothes and walked out of the alley, leaving them whitely naked. Two blocks away I dropped the bundle into a trash can.

The bolt of the door yielded to a steady pressure. It squealed once as the screws pulled out of the frame, and then the squalid shop was as silent as it was dark. I listened for a moment. The noise had disturbed no one, or else the owner was afraid to investigate. I walked into the shop.

The light that fought its way through the dirty front window was little more than a slightly grayer shadow, but it was enough for eyes that lived in the night. I pawed through the heaps of used clothing until I found what I wanted. I had already decided on my next disguise.

I pulled a pair of clean, patched pants out of the pile and a shirt to match. On the shirt was the red craft badge of the mechanic. One of the two identity cards had been red. I found a pile of caps and tried them on until I found one that fit.

I picked up the clothes, left ten chronors on the shabby counter to pay for the clothes and the damage to the door, and I went out into the night and closed the door gently behind me.

Abandoned warehouses are friendly places, if you don't mind the company of the things that scurry and the things that crawl. I didn't. The warehouse I found was in a little better shape than the one I had hidden in before. There was no danger, at least, of

falling through the floor. I built a nest of boxes in one corner, with a hidden mole-tunnel to crawl through, rolled up my discarded freedman's clothes for a pillow, and slept. My sleep was uneasy and troubled, but it was sleep, and I was thankful for that.

I ate in the small cheap restaurants for the laborers. I ate thin soup and stale bread and almost-rotten fish and paid for them with small coins, grudgingly handed over. But I never ate in the same place twice, and sometimes I would buy bread and cheese and take them back to my hiding place. What the rats didn't eat during the night, I finished for breakfast.

It wasn't much of a life, the mole-life, but it was life. And the game went on.

To be a mole, you have to know the tunnels and diggings of your territory. I learned the city, its main thoroughfares driven through marketplace and slum, straight and wide; its crooked, winding bystreets, wandering where chance and whim had located them; its dark, unexpected alleys, filthy, haphazard, unpredictable. Day after day, night after night, I walked the city, unsuspected, unwatched, until I had it all in my head. I could unroll it like a map.

I would happen upon an Agent, and I would follow him, casually, and he wouldn't know I was there. Sometimes I would learn something vaguely interesting, but mostly it was only exercise and experience. I followed a few of them to a side door of the great palace. Others disappeared into mean houses or lingered in alleys until someone met them. From one of these last encounters I learned that people were still looking for me. I stopped around the corner from the alley and knelt to fasten my shoe and listened.

"What luck?"

"No luck."

"Siller?"

"Dead. Stinking."

"The fool."

"We let him in."

"Are you questioning the Congress?"

"No."

"We can't be too particular. But to let the answer slip away when he had it in his hands!"

"The answer turned out to be rather deadly."

"It usually does. But this fellow Dane is somewhere. Find him. Bring him in."

"Ha!"

"All right. Do your best."

I crept away. The Citizens were still at work.

One day I saw the little, dark Agent with the glittering eyes, Sabatini's man. He didn't recognize me, although I followed him for blocks. He slipped into an alley; as I passed by, he looked around and then went through a narrow door. I made a mental note of the location of the place. One day I might have use for that information.

I trailed one Agent beyond the edge of the city. I knelt in the brush while he waited there, looking off occasionally toward the horizon. At last he stood up, shading his eyes, and then I saw it too. It was a black dot in the sky that slowly drew close, its top misty, and became a helicopter and dropped in the clearing. Out of it climbed the little, middle-aged man with the bald, shining head, my friend, the Peddler from the port.

I snaked silently through the brush to the other side of the helicopter. The first word I heard was of murder.

"Kill him?" It wasn't the Peddler.

"Yes," the Peddler chirped. "Once he might have been useful to us, but no more. He has been loose too long. He knows too much. It is better for him to die than to help any of the others."

"First he must be found. That is, if one of the others doesn't have him already."

"They had him. First one and then another. They couldn't hold him, not one of them. I don't think he will be captured again. He must die before he decides to use it himself."

"Use what?"

I felt the little man shrugging.

"Someone has been watching me," the Agent said uneasily.

"Who?"

"I don't know. That's the funny part. I would have known if it had been any of the others."

"It must have been Dane." The Peddler's tone was decisive. "He has learned to be more clever than the others. If you get this feeling again, stop and watch everybody who passes, even the ones you would never suspect, most of all the ones you would never suspect. You will recognize him by his face. It has a light band across the eyes."

I shivered. The Peddler was too shrewd. I must be very careful

in leaving this place.

They were whispering now, so low that I couldn't hear, but somehow I knew that they were laying a trap. Was it for now or later? I couldn't take a chance.

Noiselessly I crawled into the back of the helicopter, crouching low to keep below the sides. I waited. The ominous whispering went on and on.

"All right," the Peddler said loudly. "Don't get in touch with me unless you have the news I want to hear."

The brush rustled. The little man climbed into the front seat of the helicopter and waited. Minutes passed. They passed for me in an agony of suspense.

"Nothing," someone called from outside.

I saw the Peddler shrug. "It was a guess. You have your orders."

The rotors started spinning overhead. Slowly the airship climbed. I waited until it was several hundred feet above the ground.

"Don't look around," I said. He knew my face, but I'd rather not be put to the trouble of changing my disguise.

His head jerked. His shiny scalp got white.

"I can kill you very easily," I said. "But I won't unless I have to. Why do you want to kill me?"

"If you were there, you heard," he said, looking straight ahead. "You're dangerous."

"Do you always kill what is dangerous? Perhaps I could be useful to you."

"You're an unknown quantity. We can't take a chance."

"Who?"

He was silent. "I won't answer any questions," he said after a moment. "You can't fly this ship."

It was a statement, but I answered it anyway. "No."

"If you keep asking me questions, if you threaten me, I'll crash the ship."

I chuckled. "Go ahead."

The ship flew steadily.

"Turn toward the city," I told him.

He sighed and turned the ship.

"What do you want?" I asked him.

He knew what I wanted to know. "A galaxy in which we can trade freely."

"A free galaxy?"

"Not necessarily. There's a difference. A free galaxy would be fine if it were possible. It isn't. A balance of power is possible. We must make certain that the power stays balanced."

"And I am the possible unbalancing factor," I said. "And yet you gave me to Sabatini."

"I didn't know who you were. If I had, I would have helped you get away. I still can."

I chuckled again. "No thanks." And quickly, "Don't look back."

His head jerked back to the front.

"Land there, next to the outskirts of the city," I told him.

The ship began to descend.

"Who is 'we'?" I asked. "The Peddlers?"

"Yes."

"You're organized, then."

He was silent. The ship sighed to the ground.

"Put your hands behind you," I said. He thrust them behind the seat. With a piece of rope which was coiled in the seat beside me, I tied his hands together, tightly enough to hold him, loose enough for him to escape within a few minutes. And I was thinking that it would be a great relief to have someone like him on my side, but it was impossible. I ripped a piece of fabric loose from the inside of the ship, folded it, and tied it over his eyes.

I started to get out of the ship and stopped. "I'll tell you something," I said. "Forget about the pebble. I haven't got it, and I don't know where it is. Even if you had it, you couldn't read it. Even if you could read it, it wouldn't help you. In practical value, it's worthless."

He was silent. With his eyes concealed, his face was unreadable. "I believe you," he said. He was telling the truth. I got out of the ship and stood on the ground outside.

"A word of advice," he said. "Don't overlook the obvious."

I walked away from the ship quickly and disappeared into the city, puzzling over his final statement, wondering what that bit of wisdom had meant. I had decided some time ago that one force in this internecine world had been hiding its hand; I had felt it subtly, now and then, but I couldn't identify it. Something had happened, somewhere, that should have given me a clue, but I couldn't remember what it was. "Don't overlook the obvious," the Peddler had said.

I thought about it all the way across the city and reached no conclusion. And even though my mind was busy, my senses were

watchful. They recognized, finally, a familiar neighborhood. I looked up. In front of me was a flight of rickety wooden steps ascending the side of a building. They led to Laurie's apartment.

Something turned over inside me, something I thought had died a long time ago. But it was still alive. It fluttered hopefully in my stomach.

I had wanted the Peddler on my side, but I had realized it was impossible. Now I understood why. Ever since Frieda came into the Cathedral I had been seeking help; I had looked for it everywhere, and I hadn't found it. The reason for that was simple: there wasn't any help. From the beginning I'd been all alone, and the only help I could expect was the kind that came from inside. It was a hard lesson to learn, but I had learned it.

The implications of the thought were interesting. If you're alone, it doesn't matter if you swallow your pride. It doesn't matter to anyone else how you feel, and if there are two hurts and you choose the lesser one, it doesn't matter to anybody but you.

I started to climb the steps. I was a fool, and I knew it, but it didn't make any difference. Even if it was a trap, I would walk into it. Even if she hated me, I had to see her again. I could never forget what she had done, but if I could see her and tell her I was sorry for what I had written and it was too bad that it had happened this way and say good-by, maybe I could forget about her, maybe the pain would go away.

I tried the door and it was unbolted, and I opened it and went in, and the dust lay thick on the floor.

"Laurie?" I said. The room echoed empty.

I took another step into the room, and mine were the only footprints in the dust. "Laurie?" I said again, but without hope.

I walked to the bedroom door and opened it, and I looked in. The bed was unmade. Her dresses hung limply in the clothes rack. On the little table beside the bed was a five-chronor piece. I shut the door and walked to the little kitchen alcove. I opened the cooler. The stench of rotting food poured out into the room. I closed the door quickly.

I looked on the table and on the floor. I got down on my hands and knees to look under the shabby furniture, but there was nothing. Laurie was gone, and there was nothing to show when she had gone or why she had gone or where, but she hadn't taken her clothes with her. She had just walked out, taking the pebble, as if that was all she wanted and when she had it nothing else

mattered.

I shut the door gently behind me and walked down the stairs and went around to the front door of the rooms below. I knocked. No one appeared. I knocked again, loudly.

Finally the door swung open, just a crack, and a woman's haggard, unfriendly face peered out. Her small, suspicious, black eyes stared at me. I waited. Suddenly the door started to close. I pressed my foot against it.

"Well?" the woman said sullenly.

"Where's Laurie?" I asked.

"Who's Laurie?"

"The girl upstairs."

"Ain't no girl upstairs."

"I know that. I want to know where she's gone."

"Don't know. Ain't seen her. Ain't seen her for a long time. Her rent's paid. That's all I know."

"I'm a friend of hers."

She cackled suddenly and stopped just as quickly. "That's what they all say." Her voice was hard. "Don't make no difference. I ain't seen her."

"Others have been here?"

"All men. All friends of hers. All kinds. She had a lot of friends. Get your foot out of the door."

"How long has she been gone?"

"Don't know. Go away."

"I'll go away when you tell me how long she's been gone."

There was a long silence. All I could see was her black eyes, slitted.

"Last time I saw her," she said finally, "was the last time you was here."

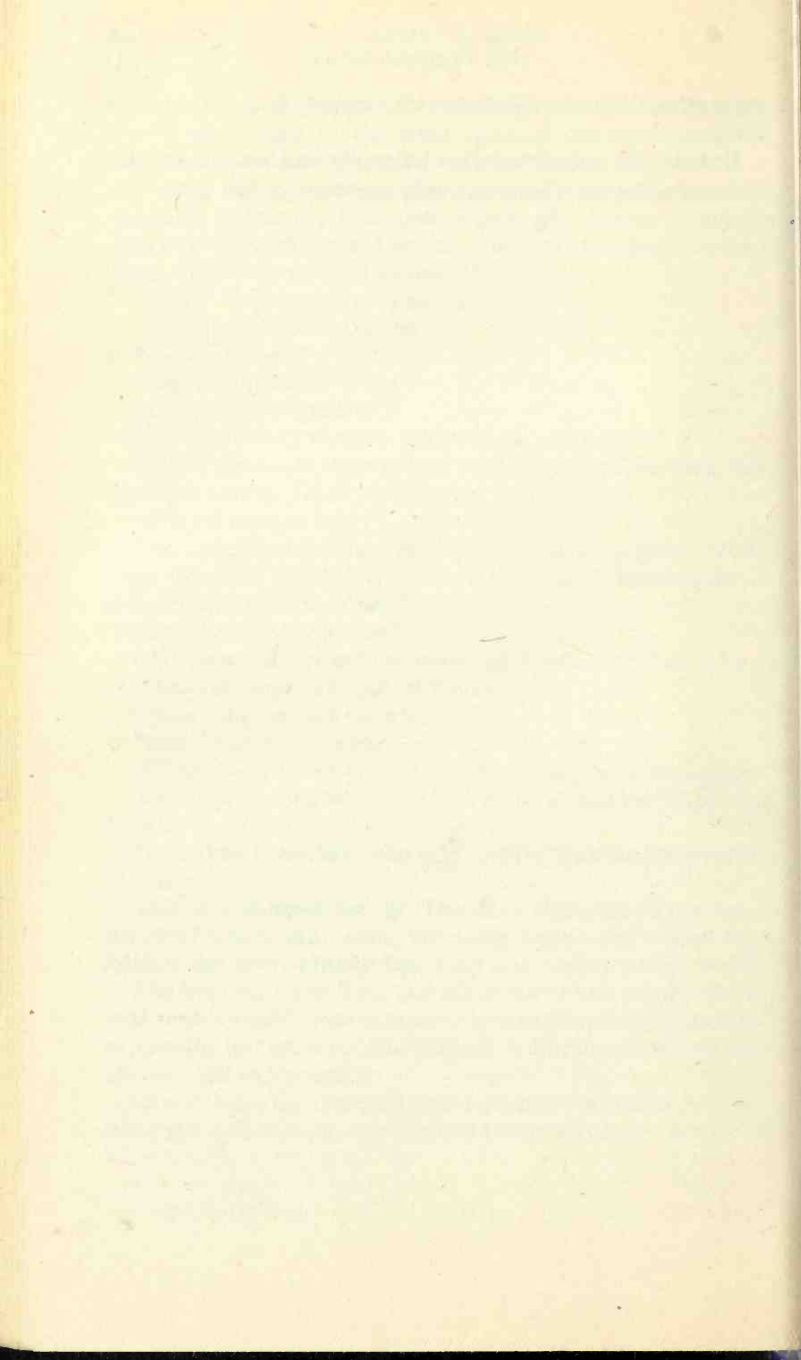
That straightened me up. The door slammed in my face. I knocked again and again, but there wasn't any sound from behind the door. Finally I gave up and walked away, slowly.

The last time I was here. Did she know or was it only a lucky, malicious guess? It would be an easy guess, knowing Laurie and my asking for her, and it had succeeded. But somehow I thought she was telling the truth.

Laurie had gone, then, as soon as she had the pebble. That was what she had wanted, and she had taken it and left. With only

the clothes she had on. But even with the pebble, she would need clothes.

Unless—the suspicion grew—unless she had been taken away. I had to know. There was only one way to find out.



EIGHTEEN

I waited outside the alley. There was a little restaurant across the street where I ate when hunger got too great. I waited until the table by the window was empty, and I ate without looking at my food, without tasting it, so that I could watch the alley. I gave up only in the early hours of the morning, just before the dawn. I retreated then to my warehouse hiding place and tried to sleep, but I could never manage more than an uneasy hour or two. I would wake up, staring into the rustling darkness, and I would creep quickly out of my nest and walk swiftly to the alley, cursing the time I had wasted. The one I was watching for might have come and gone.

And I would wait some more, hollow-eyed and feverish.

After three days, he came out. The little one with the dark face and the glittering eyes. He came out of the alley and walked away quickly. I was eating, and I dropped a coin on the table, not caring what it was, and picked up my cap, pulling it down over my forehead as I went out the door.

The Agent took a tortuous path through the city. He stopped in a shop for a moment. He went into a tavern and stayed for fifteen minutes. Once he went into a tenement. I waited and he didn't come out. I thought I had lost him. But after an hour he stepped back into the street. Once more I took up my position behind him.

A few minutes later I noticed that I was being followed.

I made a mental note to go along with "Don't overlook the obvious." This one said: "Don't underestimate the enemy." I hoped that I would have a chance to take the advice to heart. Two black Agents strolled along the street half a block behind me, and I didn't know whether they had picked me out or whether they were trailing behind only on suspicion.

When I passed the next alley, I turned off. In three giant strides I reached the end of the narrow lane. I leaped, caught the edge of a low roof, and raised myself over the top. From the mouth of the alley to the roof had taken only a few seconds. Now I jumped again, and in another second I was on the two-story

building that looked out over the street I had just left.

They marched along beneath me, casually alert, watchful, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I ran along the roof top, jumped to a lower roof, dropped to an alley that paralleled the street, and raced to the end of it. An alley opening was opposite. I crossed the street, ran down the alley, and turned into the alley that met it at right angles. Close to the street along which came the Agents, I waited in the shadows and breathed deeply.

In a moment the little dark one would appear. I would have only a few seconds to do what was necessary.

"Pssst."

The Agent hesitated, glanced back at his men, and stepped into the alley. He never saw me. Before he could move, I pinned his arms behind him, held them with one hand, and ripped the gun out of his jacket with the other.

"Don't say anything!" I whispered. "Don't move! Don't make a noise! Listen, and you won't get hurt."

He waited. I could feel the tension in his thin arms.

"Tell your master—tell Sabatini—that Dane wants to see him. Tell him to come alone to the street of taverns closest to the Slave Cathedral. Tonight. Alone. If he brings anybody else, he won't see Dane. He will wait until somebody brushes past him and says, 'Follow me.' He will follow. At the end of the trip, he will find Dane. If you understand, nod your head."

He nodded.

"If Sabatini isn't there tonight, you die tomorrow. You know now how easily it can be done. Now go back to the street, and don't look behind you."

I let him go, with a shove. He stumbled, straightened, and walked quickly on the way he had been going, not turning his head. The back of his neck was an angry red. As I turned and ran down the alley, I heard him shout.

Within two winding blocks, I had lost them. I waited for the night.

I watched him for almost an hour. He leaned against the corner of the building with infinite patience. It was a dark corner, but I couldn't mistake the huge nose. I studied the painted motley of the street, and there were no Agents. Nobody loitered except Sabatini. Mercenaries and freedmen came and went, and Sabatini waited. Knowing Sabatini, I sensed something wrong.

"Don't underestimate the enemy," I told myself. And it turned out to be so simple that I almost didn't think of it.

I walked around the corner and found them almost immediately. They waited in the dark to follow Sabatini when he passed them. They waited on the side streets, one on each side. I walked past one of them, and he didn't notice me. From the dark doorway, his eyes gleamed whitely toward the street. I don't think he even saw the fist that hit him. He sighed; I caught him as he collapsed.

The other one was lurking in an alley. I caught him from behind. I clubbed him down with a cobblestone against the base of his skull.

A moment later I brushed past Sabatini, my head averted. Against my shoulder I felt the gun that nestled inside his jacket. "Follow me," I whispered.

I walked on swiftly, down the street I had cleared, not looking back to see if he was following. He had made his preparations. He would follow.

I led the way toward the Cathedral. As the streets grew darker and deserted, I heard his footsteps echoing behind me when I slowed up. I turned off, down a side street, catching a glimpse of him when I turned. He was black and shadowy. It sent shivers down my back.

I waited for him halfway down the block, and he was a long time turning the corner. He was giving his men plenty of time to follow. But he wouldn't expect to see them. They would have orders to slink along in the shadows, staying well back, keeping out of sight.

And he turned, and I began walking again. I went into an alley, and I stopped in the shadows. He stopped at the black mouth, trying to peer in. But this was not the place.

"This way," I whispered.

He waited a moment longer, looking back the way he had come, unobtrusively, and I wouldn't have known what he was looking for if I hadn't seen the others.

Come, Sabatini. Don't be afraid, Sabatini. This isn't the place. You are afraid of nothing, smiling there with your cold eyes, and your desire is great. Come, Sabatini. Follow me.

I walked away, crisply, so that he could hear my footsteps, and I felt his hesitation diminish, and he followed. I swung open the dark door, and I went into the warehouse. I took ten measured paces, swung around, and watched the square of

grayer darkness. It blackened. A shadow hesitated there.

"Here," I whispered, and I picked up the cords and held them in my hand. One of the cords had a knot in it. For this was the place.

Slowly, catlike, he stepped through the doorway. The shadow grew darker and less distinguishable. A part of it moved, close to the floor. There was a whisper of sound, and the door slammed, echoing through the night. I couldn't see him any more, but I knew where he was. I could sense him there in the darkness, unwilling to move because the sound would give him away, poised, waiting, his breathing almost stilled.

Gently I pulled the cord with the knot in it. Two lights sprang to life. One of them held Sabatini in a blinding glare. His gun was in his hand, ready, swinging toward the spotlight as he blinked once and slitted his eyes.

"Don't!" I whispered, because a whisper is almost without direction. "Look at the other light!"

He stopped. He stood there motionless, weighing the decision, and slowly his head turned, lifted. He saw the gun, high up in the rafters, pointed toward the spot where he stood. It was the gun I had taken from his man this morning. He saw the cord, trailing away from the trigger through the darkness. He knew what it meant.

"Don't move!" I whispered. "Drop your gun."

His face was immobile. He didn't move a muscle. But I could sense his mind churning. He dropped the gun. It clunked solidly on the floor.

"Kick it away from you."

He kicked it. It slithered into the darkness. I took one step and kicked it farther away, far into the maze of rubbish and boxes where it would never be found. But my eyes never left him, and the cord never slackened in my hand. I waited. I let him wait and wonder. He broke the silence.

"Dane?" he said softly, peering through the screen of light. "I've walked into your trap. You've got the pebble. What else do you want besides revenge?"

"Not revenge," I said, no longer whispering. "The girl."

He frowned. "Frieda? She's dead. You know that."

"Not Frieda. The dark-haired one. The one called Laurie."

"I don't know what you're talking about." His voice was louder. "I haven't got any girls."

"One. Just one. I want her, Sabatini. It's been a long time, but

I want her. If you've killed her, you die here. If she's still alive, tell me where to find her, and I'll let you go."

He chuckled. It was unexpectedly loud in the echoing silence. "You always were a fool, Dane. If I had the girl, which I don't, you couldn't trust me to tell you the truth, and I couldn't trust you not to kill me when I had told you something—the truth or something else, anything to let me get away."

"I could tell," I said. It was true. "And you'll have to trust me because you haven't any choice. It's either that or death."

"It should be obvious," he said loudly, "that my inability to tell you anything, even to save my life, is the best proof that I'm telling the truth."

"If," I pointed out, "that argument isn't a subtler and more convincing lie."

"You overestimate me," he said wryly.

The discussion went on for a moment, my voice floating softly out of the darkness to Sabatini in the spot of light. When I spoke Sabatini listened too intently.

"They aren't coming," I said.

He jumped, and relaxed. "You're too clever, Dane. You always have been. From the start. You could rule a world, if you weren't so soft in the guts. We could go far together, you and I. Let's pool our knowledge, Dane. Who knows what we might do together. We might conquer the galaxy. Give me the pebble and what you know about it, and I'll tell you everything I know, and I might even be able to find the girl you want. Or if she's gone—and I swear I haven't got her and I don't know anything about her—I'll get you a dozen who'll make you forget you ever knew her."

He leaned forward eagerly. I let his words filter through my mind, and I knew he was speaking the truth. He meant what he said, but there was something else mixed up with it. And while I was trying to figure it out, he leaped, and that was it, and it was too late.

He came sailing out of the light into the darkness, a shadow swooping at me now, and I dropped the cord. I stepped to one side, smashing at him with my fist as he passed, his eyes blinded by the light while mine were better adjusted, and I knew that I would have to take care of him quickly before we were more evenly matched.

He grunted and staggered, but he kept his feet and came swinging back toward me, a shadow among shadows, and I

realized that now I was outlined against the lights. I stooped and jerked. The lights went out, but Sabatini hit me with his shoulder while I was bent over, and I tumbled backward, rolling, crashing finally into a box which splintered into kindling.

I got cautiously to my feet. The warehouse, where spices from the spice worlds and fabrics and exotic foods had once been stored, was a stinking pool of darkness, and somewhere in that darkness was Sabatini, waiting like I was. And every second he waited, I was losing my advantage. He was getting back his night vision.

"Dane!" he shouted, and it was no help, because the warehouse echoed, "DANE! Dane! danedanedane. . . . I'm going to kill you. KILL YOU. Kill you. killyoukillyoukill-you. . . ."

It was strangely fitting that we should meet here, where the wealth of the galaxy had been brought together, and fight like animals with our bare hands, fight to the death, because I knew that one of us would not leave the warehouse alive. I knew where he was now. I had located him by his hate, which poured out to me. I wondered at it. It was odd, I thought, as I slipped my feet out of my shoes, that the hate should be mixed with fear. Sabatini was afraid of me. Me, Dane, the acolyte. The fearless, smiling Agent with the big nose and the cold eyes was afraid of me, and I slipped toward him through the darkness, silent on stocking feet.

A board creaked under my foot. I stood still, waiting. He shifted uneasily, and I saw him, black against blackness. I leaped, swinging. He ducked instinctively, and my fist smacked solidly against his shoulder instead of his chin. He reeled backward, and I followed him, hitting him again and again, sledgehammer blows that shook him as they landed on his chest and the side of his head. But never quite squarely. And then he was fighting back, standing up to me, trading blow for blow, and his fists got inside against my body, and my body went suddenly weak. My arms dropped. He leaped away and was gone again in the darkness.

I fought for breath, fought to breathe quietly, and my heart slowed, and I listened again. The warehouse was silent. He crouched somewhere, recovering, and his eyesight would be as good as mine, now. I probed into the darkness, but I couldn't hear him and I couldn't sense him.

I heard a whisper along the floor. He was crawling

somewhere, but I couldn't locate it. Something crashed, far back in the warehouse, but it wasn't Sabatini. He had thrown something to draw me away, and I knew now where he was. He was trying to get out the door, and I ran silently and threw myself toward the spot I thought he would be.

The breath whistled out of him as I landed squarely on his back, flattening him to the floor, but he twisted under me like a snake, fists and feet flailing at me. And inexplicably he was on top, striking down. I threw a fist at him, knocking him back, leaped at him again, and caught him in my arms. His knees flashed up toward my groin, and I twisted my body away, one arm across his chest, bending him over my knee, arching him like a limber piece of wood. His muscles corded and bulged as he strained against me.

Then his body went limp as something cracked. "Ahhnhh!" he said in a strange, broken voice.

I got up wearily. I went to the cords and searched along the dusty floor for a moment and found them. I pulled the one with the knot in it, and the lights came on. His head and shoulders lay just inside the spot. His feet and legs and hips were in the darkness. I thought he was dead, but his eyes flickered open, dark and cold, and he tried to raise himself on one elbow. His face jerked, and his teeth slowly turned red as they bit into his lower lip. He closed his eyes and fell back to the floor.

I found my shoes in the darkness and put them on.

"Dane." The voice was twisted, like his back; it was only a whisper. "Are you there, Dane?"

"Yes."

"What are you, Dane?" I looked toward him; his eyes were peering blindly into the darkness. "You aren't human. I fought my way up from the bottom. I was nothing, and I became dictator of the largest of the United Worlds where the competition was terrific, where Agents come up like bubbles in a cesspool. But I did it, Dane, and I did it alone. Then I gave it all up. I gave it up to come here, knowing that the man I left in my place would seize control the minute I was gone, because I wanted the pebble and with it I could conquer the sister worlds and after that the galaxy."

It was a long speech, and it ended in a gasp of pain. He rested a moment before he went on.

"You were the only one in my way, a sniveling acolyte, and you beat me every time. It was a miracle, Dane. What are you?"

It was true. I had beaten him, even when he had me in the cavern room I had beaten him, and it hadn't really mattered that someone else had rescued me, because he was already beaten. It was a strange thing and a wonderful thing, and it hadn't been so surprising, after all, that he had been afraid of me.

"Just a man," I said softly. "Just an ordinary man."

"All I needed was the pebble," he said quietly, almost normally, "and I would have had the galaxy."

"No," I said. "It wouldn't have done you any good. It isn't any good to anybody, except maybe to someone who hasn't been born yet."

"You're lying!" he shouted. "I could have used it. Whatever it was, I could have used it. I was close to it once. I felt it. It was power. It poured out at me, and the galaxy nestled within it, glittering. . . ."

He raved on. Desire, that was the pebble. Something different to everyone who came close to it, and no use to any of them. Not to Sabatini or Siller or me or Laurie or anyone. And it was a sad thing that the death and the torment had been for nothing. Yet, perhaps it was not for nothing. I had an idea. It isn't objects that shake worlds, but ideas.

"Dane!" His voice was sane again, but it was weaker. "You don't owe me anything but hate. I'm going to ask you a favor, anyway. It won't cost you anything. Kill me, Dane. Before you leave, kill me."

I studied his face, white now in the light, the darkness of the features fleeing, the nose more prominent than ever. It cast a grotesque shadow. He meant it.

"I'll tell someone where to find you," I said. "You can be fixed up."

"No!" His voice was violent. "Dane! I beg you! Don't do that! If you won't kill me, leave me here to die. My back is broken. I'll never walk again. They'd fix me up to creep through life. Creep! Me! Sabatini! Please, Dane! Please!"

His voice broke, and I knew that this was the first time Sabatini had ever asked anybody for anything, and it was the most precious thing anybody could ever give him, even more precious than he had thought the pebble to be.

"Where is the girl?"

"I don't know, Dane. Believe me. I don't know."

He was telling the truth. Even if I hadn't been sure of it before,

I was sure of it now. He was fighting for death, and he wouldn't lie now.

"Who has her?"

"Nobody."

"Not the Emperor?"

"Him!" His voice was contempt. "The fool doesn't even know what's going on in his own world."

"The Citizens?"

"No."

"The Peddlers?"

"No. Nobody, I tell you."

"How do you know?"

"Agents and counter-agents. Spies and counter-spies. They don't do anything that I don't know. Their organizations are riddled and rotten, because they aren't strong enough to keep their own counsel, as I did. The moment the pebble reached Brancusi, I knew about it. Before Frieda received her orders from the Citizens, I knew it, and I knew where she was supposed to take it, and who she was supposed to take it to. Then she didn't do it. She was taking it to someone else."

"Who?"

"I don't know," he said. His voice was puzzled. "She went mad before she told me. She kept babbling about the Cathedral."

I thought about it, and it made sense. It fit into the pattern that was shaping up in my mind, about the unseen player in the game, the one force in the galaxy that hadn't made itself known. It was obvious. It was so obvious that I almost laughed that I, of all people, hadn't seen it before. I knew where Laurie was and where the pebble was and the meaning of the circular dot Laurie had put on her note. I didn't know yet how to get there, but I would think of a way. I would force the unseen player to show his hand.

I picked up the cord, the one without a knot in it, and I walked to the door with it in my hand, slack. I opened the door, and I stood there for a moment, looking down at Sabatini, crippled beyond hope, his face no longer fierce and bold but ugly and pitiful, like a little boy who knows that he is different from the rest, with a nose that the others point at and laugh.

"Dane. . . ." Sabatini said weakly. It was a boy's prayer for pity and sympathy.

I dropped the cord near his hand and I went out into the night. Before I was out of the alley, it was lit by a brief, blue glare.

NINETEEN

I climbed the long, low steps, and it was not as I had once imagined it would be, something proud and daring, but only a slow, steady plodding upward toward the massive palace doors. The people gathered to watch, because a monk is seldom seen outside the monastery and never near the palace, and I was cloaked in a coarse, gray robe and hood. I had to be careful as I climbed that I didn't step on the hem and stumble.

They stared, the glittering nobles and their women, and the watchful guards, but they didn't move to stop me. I reached the doors, and I stopped, because the doors weren't open. They were three times my height, and I felt small and insignificant as I lifted the huge metal knocker, which was round like a world and engraved with the outlines of continents by which I recognized Brancusi. I let it fall, and the door boomed hollowly. I waited, and after a little while the doors swung open, creaking, and I knew that they weren't used very often.

A slave stood in front of me. He was dressed brilliantly in orange-and-blue livery, but he was wearing a golden collar. "What is it?" he asked respectfully.

"I wish to be taken before the Court of Justice."

"The Court of Justice?" he repeated.

I nodded gravely. "It is in session?"

"Yes, Father," he said. "But what business can you have with the Court?"

"That," I said, "I will reveal to the Court."

He shook his head bewilderedly and led me through long, vaulted corridors, towering high above my head, lavishly decorated with frescoes and murals glorifying the Emperor and his line. Beneath our feet deep carpets muffled our steps and hid all but an edge of rosy, almost luminescent marble.

The slave stopped before two tall wooden doors that glowed with a rich patina. He opened one of the doors and held it for me. "The Court of Justice, Father."

I took one step into the room beyond and stopped. The room was huge. At one end of it was a platform. On the platform was a

long, high desk. Behind it sat three grave-faced men in ceremonial orange robes. Behind them was a tall chair, richly ornamented. The chair was empty.

In front of the dark desk was a small wooden box with barred, wooden sides. Inside the box was a cringing serf, ragged and hopeless. Back of him, ranged on low benches, were other serfs, freedmen, craftsmen, some gazing hopefully up at the desk and the great chair behind it, some staring with dazed eyes at the floor beneath their feet. Uniformed mercenaries lined the walls, vivid in orange and blue, and two stood in front of the high desk, facing the crowded benches, their arms folded across their chests. In spite of their fine appearance, the mercenaries were careless. They expected no rebellion; it was obvious that they would get none.

Riches and poverty, I thought, here they meet in the court of justice where all are equal. And why, I asked myself, are there no nobles here or Peddlers? I remembered an old saying, "The law is for the poor; it is the only thing they can afford."

My appearance had caused a stir, a ripple that turned the benches into a sea of faces, a murmuring of distant surf. The mercenaries shifted. Even the judges turned, frowning. I studied them now. The one on the right was old. His hair was white and his face was lined, but his eyes were like cold, blue stones. The one on the left was young and bored; he leaned back in his chair, his white face superior and indifferent. Between them, leaning forward, his black eyes fixed upon me like two spears, was a big man with an ageless, craggy face. He was hard, like a rock; his eyes were hawk eyes. There was something of Sabatini in him. He was the one of whom I would have to be careful.

Still frowning, the middle judge turned back to the serf who was shivering in the box below.

"With which hand did the criminal steal the bread?" he growled.

One of the mercenaries below the desk answered in a loud, firm voice. "With the right hand, your Justice."

"The penalty for theft is written," the judge said, glowering at the serf. He brought down a mallet. A clear, ringing sound vibrated through the huge room like the unblemished voice of truth. "Strike off his right hand. It will steal no more."

A single, wordless cry broke from the lips of the serf; the benches sighed. Silence descended again as the two mercenaries stepped forward and dragged the serf away through a small

black door to the right of the high desk. Two more mercenaries took their place in front of the desk.

The judges turned to look at me once more. I felt the hawk eyes again, and shivered.

"What brings you here, Father?" he said.

"Justice," I said clearly.

"For whom?"

"For myself."

The room murmured.

"Who has injured you, Father?"

"Everyone. But that is not why I am here. I am here to surrender myself."

"This is very irregular," the judge growled, frowning. "What is your crime?"

"I have killed."

The room gasped and then roared. The mallet rose and fell again and again, shivering the room with vibrations. "Silence! Silence!" the judge roared. Slowly the room quieted. He turned to me once more, his eyes black and intent. "You intend to waive your clergy?"

"No." I said it quietly, but it floated to his ears.

He scowled and sat back. The old judge leaned forward. "Then why are you here to disturb the proceedings of the court?"

"It is the duty of the secular authority to apprehend the criminal clerk," I quoted firmly, "and bring him before the secular court to plead to the charge. I am here."

The hawk eyes leaned back toward me, quickly. "How do you plead?"

"Not guilty!"

The room boiled with voices. At a gesture from the judge, the mercenaries took one step forward, all around the room. The voices stilled.

"If you are here to make a mockery of the Emperor's justice, you shall be dealt with accordingly, in spite of your clergy," he said. "If you come in good faith, you shall receive what is meted out in this court, justice according to the law. You have pleaded not guilty to a crime already confessed. On what ground do you plead?"

"I killed in self defense and for freedom."

"The only legal defense for killing is the Emperor's authority."

"Then I plead my clergy."

The judge glared furiously. "Is the Bishop's Ordinary in the

court?" No one responded. "Very well," he said, turning back to me. "You are held over for formal hearing tomorrow."

He turned to the young, bored judge, who no longer seemed so bored, and whispered, glancing at me. He sat upright again. "Take the prisoner away!"

And as the mercenaries came forward, I saw the young judge get up and slip through the tall door behind the great chair.

The small black door opened as I was led toward it.

I had become quite experienced in cells. I found the Emperor's accommodations quite comfortable, more so, in fact, than my old cell in the monastery. This was clean, dry, and well-lighted. There was a cot, and I lay on it, thinking, until I went to sleep. The dreams were not so bad. I almost welcomed them.

They came for me early, two mercenaries, colorfully anonymous. They led me back up the many flights of stairs to the courtroom. They stood me in front of the high desk again, but this time it was different. Now I was inside the box, and behind me the benches were gone. Instead there were comfortable chairs, and the chairs were filled with barons and lesser nobles, powerful, sleek, and laughing; they talked gaily with their women. They had come to see a spectacle.

The three judges were in front of me. They sat behind the desk, relaxed now, leaning back in their chairs, whispering to each other. They glanced at me, and their smiles were secret and wise. I shifted uneasily.

There was an air of expectancy in the room. The murmur of many voices and the easy laughter only emphasized my feeling that a sharp sword hung over the room. It was wielded by a mighty, unseen arm, and it was poised above me. What the audience didn't know was that this sword had a double edge.

I waited, thankful that my face was concealed in the shadow of the hood. The tension grew keen. Everyone sprang to their feet, the nobles behind me, the judges in front, looking toward the tall door behind the great chair. It opened. Guards entered, quick, watchful men, and behind them walked a middle-aged man who rolled with fat and panted from the effort necessary to keep his bulk in motion. He had a pig's face with a pig's shrewd little eyes. He waddled to the big chair, and he slowly eased his body into it, and he overflowed. He was grossness overlaid with a surface sheen of rich purple cloth and glittering jewels.

This was the Emperor, absolute ruler of Brancusi. His

presence magnified the occasion into something even more important than I had anticipated. A little shiver of excitement ran through me.

The Emperor sighed and nodded, almost imperceptibly. The judges took their seats and after them the nobles. The craggy, hawk-eyed judge turned inquiringly to the Emperor and received the negligent wave of a puffy hand that sparkled diamond points of light around the room.

The judge turned back to me, stern-faced and important. "The hearing will begin in the case of the confessed murderer, William Dane," he said coldly. "How do you plead?"

I shivered again and blessed the concealing robe and hood again. They knew my name. They had worked swiftly. My position would be desperate if I was wrong. But I couldn't be wrong.

"Not guilty," I said clearly, "on grounds of self defense."

"That plea is not acceptable by law," the judge said. "How do you plead?"

"I plead my clergy," I said.

The judge looked up, shrugging. "Is the Bishop's Ordinary in the court?"

One of the two mercenaries in front of the desk returned. "The Bishop's Ordinary is here."

"Let him come forward and claim the prisoner for the Church, if the prisoner's claim is just." The voice was coldly judicial, but there was something else in it that made me frown. It was all too smooth, too well-planned.

There was a stir in the back of the hall. Someone was coming forward, but I didn't turn to look. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a white robe pass by. The cowl was thrown back, as if to demonstrate that there was no reason for concealment. I recognized the white hair and powerful face of the Abbot.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he stopped in front of me, peering benignly under my cowl.

"Let the prisoner's cowl be removed, so that I may see his face," he said gently.

One of the mercenaries stepped forward and threw back my cowl. I stared into the Abbot's eyes. They looked at me steadily, unwinking, and sadly, and neither of us looked away. For this moment there was no one else in the room; it was between us.

"This is William Dane, your Justice."

A murmur rose slowly behind me and slowly died away.

"What is his condition?"

"He was an acolyte in my monastery," the Abbot said, and then, shaking his head slowly, "but he broke the monastic rules and fled."

"Do you claim him for the Church?"

The silence was hushed and expectant.

And he said, sadly, wistfully, "I cannot." The room relaxed, sighing. "When he fled from the monastery, he removed himself from our jurisdiction."

That chance was gone then, I thought. That was all right; I hadn't been counting on it. I smiled at him. "Thank you, Father," I said, so softly that only he could hear.

He shook his head unhappily. "Ah, my son."

"Tell the court the circumstances of the prisoner's flight," the judge said.

The Abbot turned. He was so close that I could have reached out and taken his throat in my two hands and squeezed. But that was over. It was all done between us. My hands were relaxed on the rail of the cage.

"A small, crystal pebble came into his possession. It had been stolen from the Emperor. He hid it in the Cathedral before he fled. Later he returned to carry it away."

The Abbot bowed low before the Emperor and his judges, but not as low as he had once bowed before a gun and a pebble. He walked away, and I forgot him as I looked up at the judge. He looked down sternly from his eminence.

"Has the prisoner anything to add before judgment is passed?"

I looked down for a moment and then back up to stare into his cold, fierce eyes. "With the court's permission, I will tell a short story."

"Proceed."

"Not so many days ago," I said softly, "the Emperor of Brancusi had a pebble. It was only a pebble and nobody knew what it was but many people wanted it." I paused and looked at the Emperor. His eyes were narrowed; he licked his lips with a nervous tongue. "Close to the Emperor, trusted by him, was a girl named Frieda. She stole the pebble. An organization known as the Citizens had directed her to take it to a man named Siller, but she never intended to obey. She was going to take it to someone else, but she was followed by a man named Sabatini, once ruler of the largest of the United Worlds, who wanted the

pebble for himself. In desperation Frieda dropped the pebble in the Cathedral's offering plate. She gave it to me. And eventually I discovered what the pebble was."

Behind me the room gasped. The judges sat up straight, even the young one. The Emperor leaned forward and whispered in the ear of one of the judges. The judge turned to me.

"Where is the girl Frieda?"

"She is dead."

The room sighed.

"Where is the man Siller?"

"Dead."

"Where is Sabatini?"

"Dead, too."

The judge sat back, silent. Whispers began behind me. The judges consulted among themselves. The crag-faced one turned back to me. "Are these the murders to which you are confessing?"

"Siller tried to kill me and was killed in the attempt. Frieda was killed by Sabatini. Sabatini took his own life. Besides these I killed four others, who would have killed me if I hadn't been luckier than they. All men hired by Sabatini, known commonly as Free Agents."

"It has been told you before that self defense is not acceptable as a plea. You have not been claimed by the Church. How do you plead?"

"I plead my clergy," I said again.

The judge frowned. "You have been refused by the Bishop's Ordinary. You must make an acceptable plea or receive summary justice."

"There are other tests. I ask that they be invoked."

The judges whispered. The middle one turned back to me. "In a case of this nature, the literacy test is unacceptable."

"There is a final test, an ultimate test beyond challenge," I said slowly. "It has come down to us from the days of the Founder, Jude the Prophet. It is accepted throughout the galaxy."

The judge gasped. "You claim the right to work a miracle?"

They talked it over behind the high desk while the noble audience hummed with interest and excitement. I stood in the box, watching them quietly. Finally the judges turned to the Emperor. He got up slowly, ponderously, his little eyes fixed on me, and stepped forward. I knew, suddenly, that it wouldn't be

wise to underestimate this mass of flesh. He held absolute control over Brancusi, and no matter what the justice of my claim, he could refuse it if he wished, if he thought it important enough to risk a breach with the Church. He had seized control of the situation, and I, like the rest of the hall, waited for him to speak.

"The prisoner's audacity should be rewarded," he said in a soft, colorless voice. "He will have his chance to prove his clergy by working a miracle for us. On one condition."

The hall waited. I waited, gazing up at him. He looked down at me with a slow smile playing around his thick lips.

"The condition being that if he fails, he will plead guilty and having so pleaded will reveal all that he knows about the pebble."

The Emperor waited now, his eyes narrow and watchful. My face was still, but I smiled inwardly. The fat fish had grabbed the bait. Now all that remained was to see if there was an unseen hand on the other end of the line.

I bowed my head. "It is agreed, your majesty."

The Emperor smiled. "Search him."

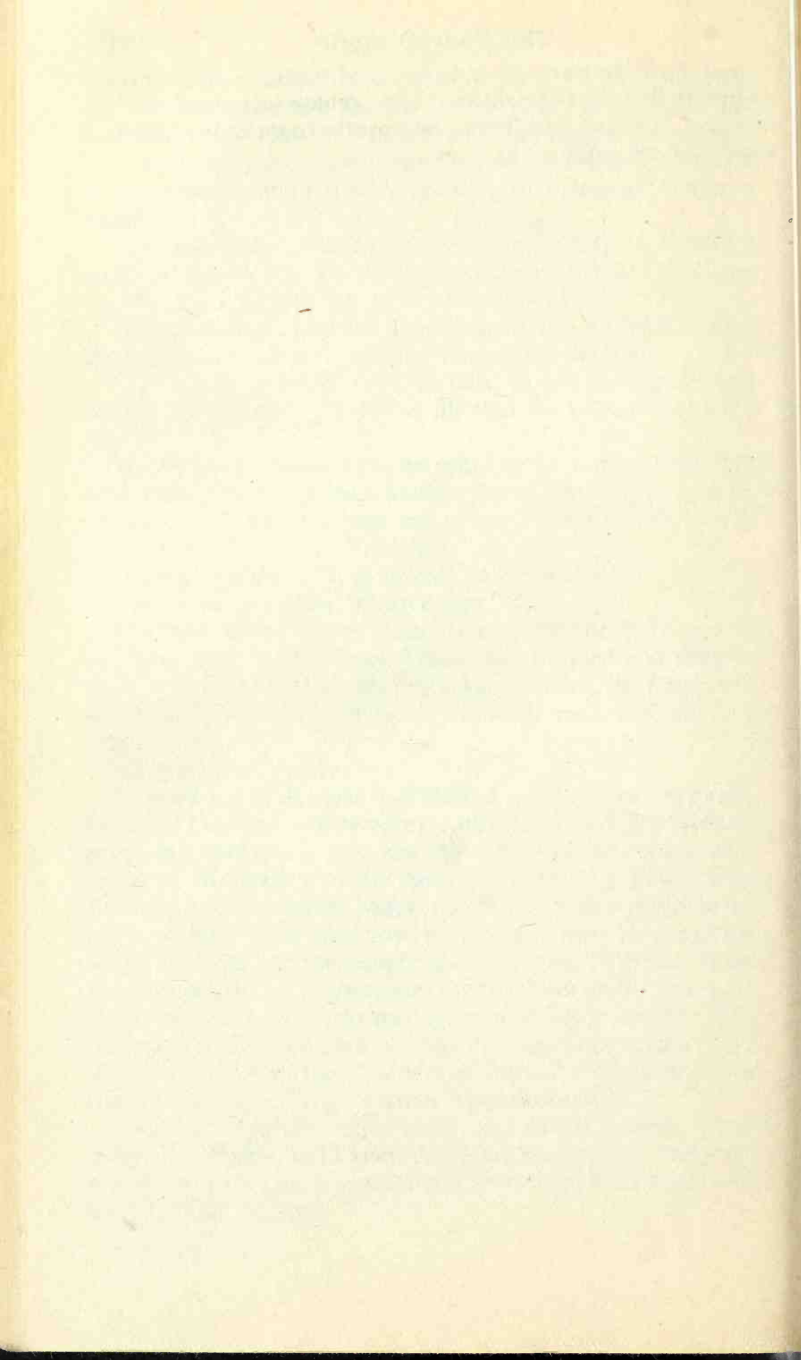
The mercenaries moved from in front of the desk. They went over me from head to foot. When they finished and stepped back, frowning bewilderedly and empty-handed, the Emperor's smile was gone. He studied me curiously and then waved a pudgy hand.

"Commence. Perform."

I bowed my head again and looked up and spread my arms wide. "If I cannot here perform a miracle," I said clearly, "and prove my clergy, it is only just that I consign myself and all I know to the man who has been given worldly power over Brancusi and over all the people thereon. If there is justice in the universe, let it show itself now. If there is a power for good that wants freedom for the people of the galaxy, let it act or see freedom perish. Let it prove now that I am not guilty, just as no one is guilty for acts performed without malice, no matter what the law. The decision does not rest with me, Your Majesty, nor with you, but with the One who is above." I raised my arms toward the high ceiling. "I await Your decision."

I waited, hopefully, expectantly, and as the seconds ticked away, doubt grew, and I knew that I had been wrong, and that I would never see Laurie again, never know happiness again, and soon I would be dead.

And the room wavered, and I saw the Emperor's staring eyes and putty face, and I would have liked to have seen the Abbot's face, too, but there wasn't time, because the room had vanished, swallowed up in the night.



TWENTY

I had felt the sensation once before—the blackness and the long falling, only this time it was longer and the deeper blackness of unconsciousness didn't wait at the end of it.

"Hello, Laurie," I said, blinking into the light.

She pulled her hands out of the gauntlets and lifted the cap from her head and turned to look at me. The breath caught in my throat.

"Thanks for providing the miracle," I said. "You seem to make a habit of rescuing me."

She smiled wryly. "This time you didn't leave us much choice."

She was dressed modestly in a blue tunic and skirt that fit loosely and concealingly, but I remembered too well. My hands hung awkwardly at my sides, remembering, too—remembering how they had held her. If I had owned pockets I would have pushed my hands into them, but there aren't any pockets in a robe.

My eyes twisted away. "That was my intention. Where is the Archbishop?"

"You can't see him today. He's resting. He hasn't been well. Maybe tomorrow or the day after."

"It doesn't matter." I looked around the room curiously. It was a small room. The floor was rubbery under my feet, and the walls were metal, and the low ceiling overhead was metal. There were other machines in the room; I recognized about half of them.

"It's the Archbishop's ship, of course," Laurie said. "He's on one of his periodic inspection trips. That's his excuse. We're in an orbit too high to threaten Brancusi and too high to be in any danger from orbital rockets. That also made it very difficult to get a fix on the courtroom. We almost didn't get you, you know. Even when I pulled, I wasn't certain I had you or that you would reach here alive."

"You didn't have to," I said. "You could have left me there."

"And let you reveal the secret of the pebble? We couldn't do

that." Her smile was crooked.

"You haven't read it then?"

She shook her head. "It was an awful chance you took. You couldn't be sure that the Archbishop was involved or that he had the power to save you."

"No, I couldn't be sure. But I was the next thing to it. I knew that the Archbishop was near Brancusi. Siller told me, and Sabatini mentioned him to the Abbot, but I forgot until I tried to figure out which force was acting anonymously. When I crossed out all the others, there was only one left—the Church. You had to be working for the Archbishop and you had to have this power, because you might have sneaked into the old castle where Sabatini was holding me, but you couldn't have got me out after I fainted without something like this." I pointed to the machine. "And the note you sent to Falescu. I didn't see the significance of the circle over the 'i' for a long time. Then I realized that it was the symbol of the Church, your way of authenticating the message."

"Still, it was a terrible risk." She was frowning. "You might have been wrong, or the Archbishop might have decided not to interfere. He almost didn't, you know. It went against all his principles and policies to meddle openly and reveal the Church's power."

"That's why I set it up as I did. I had to do it openly and crucially, or he would never have interfered. I had to make it a question of me or the pebble. I wasn't risking much. The life I was leading was only worthwhile when I didn't have the answers."

"Did you read the pebble, really or were you just bluffing?"

"Both," I said. "I could have told the Emperor everything I knew about it, and it wouldn't have helped him. It won't help the Archbishop, either, not in the way he's expecting. All the torment and the death were wasted."

"Oh, Will!" she said. Her eyes darkened.

I wanted to run to her, to take her in my arms, and hold her so tight that sadness could never reach her again. But I didn't have the right, and I was afraid, and consciousness of what had passed between us was like a wall around me. I couldn't move.

Instead I studied the mechanism which was almost identical with the one in the control room of the Cathedral. "Strange," I said, "that it should have so much greater range."

"The Archbishop has his choice of skilled men and machines

from a thousand worlds. The power was increased; defective parts were replaced. This was the way the machine was supposed to work—we think. Your Cathedral machine was only using a small part of its potential.”

I nodded. “And all these others?”

“They work, too. The Archbishop is the head of the Church, the guardian of its miracles. The miracles he can work are strange and wonderful.”

“And he can’t help a torn, bleeding galaxy.”

“That isn’t his duty,” Laurie said quietly. “His duty is to guard mankind’s inheritance until he comes of age. He can’t give these things away like toys to children. They’re much too deadly. Think of these in the hands of a man like Sabatini or Siller or the Emperor of Brancusi.”

“Perhaps,” I said, shrugging. “Perhaps. I’ll speak of these things to the Archbishop when I see him.”

She started to say something and stopped. I watched her and my heart ached inside me.

“Laurie,” I said. “Laurie—”

She looked up quickly, almost eagerly. “Yes?”

“Nothing,” I said.

We were silent.

“What is the pebble?” Laurie said finally. “Will you tell me, Will?”

“For a price.”

She studied my face for a moment. “What is it?”

“I’ll tell the Archbishop when I see him. It won’t hurt anybody or involve anyone else. It requires only a little effort. But I won’t name it until I see him.”

She was thoughtful. “Don’t ask for anything like life or freedom, Will. He’s a very kind man. He’ll give you those anyway. But will you tell me about the pebble, now?”

I hesitated, knowing that I was endangering the one thing I wanted—the one thing I had a chance of getting, now. And I said, “If you promise not to tell it to anyone, not even the Archbishop, especially not the Archbishop, until I’ve bargained with him.”

She held her head high, well back. I could see the fine white arch of her throat, and she said, “I promise.”

“I won’t tell you,” I said. Her face fell. “I’ll let you see for yourself. Get the pebble.”

She turned and went out through a metal door, and I was left

alone. I inspected the room again. This time I noticed the metal shields against each wall. I went to one and studied it, and unscrewed the clamp and let the shield fall away. It was a shutter. I looked through a clear window into a field of velvet black studded with jewel-fires, sparkling with innumerable colors. It wasn't immense and frightening. It was a picture; there was no feeling of depth and distance. Space was there, close at hand, and the jewels with them, and behind the jewels a vast sweep of cloudy, white brilliance, like a giant bridge across the galaxy, waiting for the touch of a giant's foot. But the giants were gone now, gone long ago, and only pygmies crawled between the stars.

And the stars were so close that I could have reached out to pick one for Laurie, and it wouldn't have shone as brightly as her eyes. My throat ached with the beauty.

I closed the shutter and screwed it down tight and walked across the room to the other shield. After a moment it slid away, and I fell screaming through the long night.

Slowly my shaking stopped. Slowly my whitened hands relaxed from the handholds on the wall, and I forced myself to look again. Brancusi swam below, a blue-green sphere floating in a black sea, and the sunlight glinted off the great oceans and the little lakes and blazed from the polar icecap. Part of the sphere was in shadow, a crescent of night around the eastern rim, and there I could see a dim radiance from a city rising in a misty half-globe above it. I wondered, as it slipped away, if it was the Imperial City.

The sphere was beautiful, too, once I had conquered the illusion that I was falling. It was a fairy world, not like the other which was beauty but a different kind of beauty, cold and eternal. This was warm and living and miniature. This was a home, and life was born on it, suckled on it, lived on it, died on it, and never saw it as it really was. And so they marred it, too.

For a moment I saw it as men had made it, a fortress, cold and gray and massive, with a few men sitting in the top rooms where the sun warmed them, and the rest of humanity huddled below in the damp and the chill, squirming together like white worms. It wasn't surprising that they were poor and ignorant and unfeeling.

Some day, I knew, the fortress would fall. Some day the gray walls would topple and crumble and melt away, and the sun would reach down into the lowest dungeons and cleanse the

foulness. Before very long I would do what I could to bring that day closer.

"Will," Laurie said.

I turned, startled. I hadn't heard her come back. She was standing in the middle of the room, the pebble in her hand held out to me, her eyes watching my face. I turned back to the shutter, swung it into place, screwed it down, and turned toward Laurie again.

"Put it down on the machine, there."

She set it down gently. It lay there on its side, innocent, transparent, egg-shaped. We stared at it and looked up together, into each other's eyes.

I love you, Laurie, I thought. I love you. I love you. But the thought was bitter and hopeless.

Laurie flushed and looked down.

"You knew what I was thinking," I said. "You can hear thoughts."

"Sometimes," she said. "When the mind is open."

"Like just now."

"Yes."

"Try it on the pebble. Push your mind out to it. Ask it to speak to you."

She looked at the pebble again, stared at it hard. Her eyebrows drew together. She frowned. But finally she sighed and looked away, puzzled.

"What did you hear?"

"Nothing," she said. "Or maybe something like a distant murmuring, like bees a long way off. Was that it, Will? Is that all it is?"

I let out a long breath. That hope was gone, too.

"Put on the skullcap and try it again."

She fitted the cap to her head and flipped the switch on and looked down at the pebble and looked away a moment later, her eyes wide, and I knew how instantaneous the message was.

"Oh, Will," she said breathlessly. "How sad. How wonderful and sad."

"The saddest thing about it is that their children are still unborn."

"Maybe it isn't so long now," Laurie said hopefully. "I can read thoughts a little, and you—"

I shook my head.

"You can," Laurie insisted. "Once or twice"—she blushed—"I

felt your mind touching mine. And you have other gifts. You can tell when people are speaking the truth; that's why I never tried to lie to you. And you can sense their emotions when the emotions are strong. Maybe you can even locate people by them."

"Yes," I said, thinking about the fight with Sabatini. "But I thought everybody could do that."

She shook her head. "I've been to a great many places and known a great many people and none of them could do what I can or what you can." She was silent for a moment as her enthusiasm ebbed. "But it isn't any good, is it?" She motioned toward the pebble. "It can't help us."

"Not directly," I said. "Tell me, Laurie, did you know who I was the first time you saw me?"

"No," she said. She was telling the truth. I was glad of that much.

"And then you found out," I said. "And you rescued me from Sabatini with the help of this." I motioned to the machine.

She nodded. "We were looking for Frieda, you understand, but when we found her it was too late. But you were there, and we had found out who you were, and it was important that you be rescued. I offered to go."

"Frieda was working for you?"

"Yes. The Citizens thought she was one of their agents, but she was working for us. She was going to bring the pebble to me, but she was trapped before she could get that far. And you were brought into it."

"You were the contact," I said. She nodded. "That was why you sang those songs, the main reason. Anyone who wanted to pass along any information or get instructions would go from tavern to tavern until he heard someone singing those songs."

"Yes," she said. Her eyes were steady.

"Falescu," I said. "He was working for you, too."

"Yes. He would have brought you here to the ship or seen that you got here. But the Emperor's Agents picked him up for questioning. They didn't learn anything; he has been released. Come. You're probably tired. I'll show you where you can sleep."

I followed her along narrow corridors toward what I guessed to be the rear of the ship. We passed a few spacemen in silver and black who nodded respectfully to Laurie and curtly to me. Laurie stopped in front of a door and slid it open. Inside was a

small cubicle with a bunk in it, a chair, a washstand, and little else.

"We're short of living space," Laurie said apologetically. "Will—"

"Yes?" I said.

"Is Sabatini really dead? I've thought about it, and I can't imagine him dead."

"He's dead," I said, sighing. I told her what had happened, and the way he had died.

She was thoughtful. "That terrible, unhappy man," she said. "But why did you lure him to the warehouse? You didn't tell me that, and I know you didn't do it for revenge."

"I went back to your apartment and found you gone. I thought he had captured you," I said. There was no point in trying to lie.

"Oh," she said. She started to turn away.

"Laurie," I said.

"Yes?"

I hesitated. "Did you come after me when I was in the dungeon, just because of the pebble?"

"No," she said. She turned a little more.

"Laurie," I said.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry about the note. It wasn't necessary."

"No," she said.

"Will you forgive me for that?" I asked humbly. I was too close to her.

She smiled wryly. "I forgave you a long time ago."

"Laurie," I said, in a rush, to get it all out before I could change my mind, "why did you do it? Why did you get mixed up in it?"

"Because I wanted to," she said slowly. "Because it was my duty."

"Duty to whom?" I asked. It was almost a groan.

"To people. And to the Archbishop."

"You shouldn't have done it."

"It wasn't much. Frieda did much more."

"But—" I began, and stopped. Words were hopeless. *I love you, Laurie.*

I love you, Will. It rang clear and bell-like in my mind; my heart was painful in my chest. There were no walls between us; the fortresses were down. And yet as I studied her face, I saw that

she was pale and unhappy.

"It's terrible, isn't it?" she said softly.

"It doesn't have to be," I said. "It could be the most wonderful thing in the world. We two, with what we have, could be happier than anyone has ever been before, except maybe for those long ago who spoke to us through the pebble, across the ages and the light years."

"Yes," she said.

"Tell me, Laurie," I said with difficulty, "tell me that it was all a mistake. Tell me that you were just playing a part—"

But she was shaking her head, her eyes sad and old and full of pity and maybe something else that was wistfulness. "I couldn't have pretended, Will. You know that. And it wouldn't do any good to lie to you. There's no other place for a woman down there, or on any world. I did what was necessary. Sometimes it wasn't pleasant, but other people have done unpleasant things and things that were far worse. I learned things I couldn't have learned in any other way. I learned, for instance, that the Emperor's mercenaries hadn't captured you when you went for the pebble. I'm not sorry for myself. I'm only sorry for you. It makes a difference, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I said dully.

She stood looking at me for a moment, sad-eyed and silent. "Good-night, Will."

I didn't say anything. The walls were back between us, stronger than ever. We had torn them down with love and built them up again with words.

I lay down on the bunk and turned my face to the wall, but it was a long time before I went to sleep.

TWENTY-ONE

... and as I lay there, remembering how the pebble was gone and how fear first entered my world with Frieda, not knowing whether it was night or morning, Laurie came for me.

She knocked at the door, and I knew it was Laurie. I got up and opened the door. I hadn't undressed when I lay down after she left me.

"The Archbishop will see you," she said. She didn't look at my face. Maybe it was just as well. It was unshaven and haggard with sleeplessness.

She led me back down the corridors, and I thought of the three things I had to do, one for humanity and two for myself, before the game would be over.

"Why did he hate you so much?" Laurie said.

"Who?" I asked.

"The Abbot."

"He's an ambitious man," I said. "And he said he was—I believe he is—my father."

She turned her head and shot a swift glance at me over her shoulder and looked back to the front. "The poor man," she said softly.

It was a strange thing to say, but I knew what she meant. "Yes," I said.

She stopped in front of a door and knocked gently.

"Come in," said a soft voice from within the cabin.

Laurie slid the door back, and we entered the room. It was not much bigger than the cubicle I had slept in. In the center of the room sat an old man in a chair. He was pale and his hair was pure white, and I realized after a moment that he was crippled. He couldn't walk. And I knew, too, that he wasn't as old as I had thought. Disease and pain and sorrow had eaten away at him. They had etched lines in his face and scooped out hollows for his eyes to sleep in.

And his eyes were wise and his eyes were kind and I knew that I could trust him.

"So," he said gently, "we meet at last, my son."

"At last?"

"I've been interested in what has happened to you and what you have done."

I bowed my head and said nothing.

"Sit down," he said.

We pulled out chairs from against the wall and sat down, I opposite him and Laurie beside him. She took one of his thin hands in hers and held it. I realized that they were ranged against me.

"And the pebble turned out to be useless and worthless," he said.

I turned toward Laurie. "You told him!" I said accusingly.

She raised her head defiantly. "Yes," she said. "I couldn't let you bargain with him. You might ask for something it would hurt him to give."

I leaned back again in my chair, cold and angry. "Your word means nothing?"

"Nothing. I've sacrificed more."

"And yet you meant it when you said it. What changed your mind? What was said later?"

The Archbishop had been looking back and forth between us. Now he raised one almost transparent hand. "Children!" he said. We fell silent and glared at each other. "She told me," he said, and smiled ruefully. "But I'm afraid she was thinking more of you than of me. This child knows me too well. Now that I am committed, I can't refuse you anything within reason."

I frowned and glanced at Laurie. She was looking at the Archbishop. Her face was pale.

"What is it you want, my son?"

"Later," I said. "You said that the pebble is useless and worthless. But if you had lived with it as long as I have, you might change your mind. Because you're only half right. The pebble is useless but not worthless."

"A subtle distinction."

"But a valuable one. We can't use it, true. Because we don't have the power to carry out its instructions; it isn't addressed to us. But it isn't worthless because it suggests an idea which could reshape the galaxy and prepare the way for the Third Empire. It suggests two ideas, in fact."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, my son."

"You will pardon me, then, if I repeat many things which may

be old to you. But perhaps you haven't had the facts of the galaxy hammered home to you as I have."

"And what facts are those?"

"The galaxy is split up into thousands of separate worlds, each at war with the others, each a fortress which cannot be conquered except at a cost almost more than the world is worth. And the basic reason is that defense is far superior to offense."

The old man nodded agreement.

"And so," I went on, "we have the fortress psychology which pervades everything. It means isolation, fear of attack, hatred of the alien. It means strong, centralized governments. It means concentrations of power, wealth, and authority. It means oppressed populations, looking ignorantly, hopefully, fearfully to superiors for defense and order. It means stagnation, decay, and slow rot which will eventually destroy all semblance of human civilization as technical skill and knowledge are destroyed or forgotten and slowly the links between worlds are broken."

"That would be true," the Archbishop said, "except for the Church. It is a storehouse of knowledge and technical skill."

"Let me come back to that in a moment. As long as this vicious circle of defense, centralization, ignorance, and fear continues, there is no hope for the galaxy, and all the knowledge held by the Church is worthless if no one is fit to receive it."

"Are you suggesting then," the Archbishop said, raising one white eyebrow, "that we strengthen the powers of offense, that we give weapons to ambitious rulers and thus break the circle?"

I shook my head. "That's one solution, and it might work. But the carnage and destruction would be terrible, and if, eventually, one ruler managed to unite the galaxy by force, it's probable that he would have little left to rule. No, the answer doesn't lie in making warfare more destructive."

Laurie frowned. "Then what is the answer?"

"Slowly, slowly," I said. I hesitated, trying to frame my ideas in the right pattern. I had the answer, and I was sure of it, but it wasn't any good unless I could convince the Archbishop. "The basic necessity of the fortress is the ignorance of the people. An intelligent, educated people can't be kept inside a fortress. Knowledge is a physical force which would burst the walls from within. The rulers know that. The first principle of their political philosophy is to keep their subjects weak; the second is to keep them ignorant. One is physical, the other is mental; but

essentially they are the same. Let the people have no weapons."

I looked at the Archbishop, but his lined, impassive face gave no hint of understanding.

"Go on," he said.

"The problem," I said, "is communication."

"But that is the answer the Citizens had," Laurie objected. "And it didn't work."

"An idea may be valid no matter what its source," the old man said quietly. "Go on, my son."

"They had the answer," I agreed, "but they didn't have the method. They tried to do it with books. That was understandable because books were the least censorable method of communication available to them, and the written word is still the mode and stimulus of clear thinking. But they had to give the people an incentive to learn to read. The incentive they chose was not something thoughtful, which the rulers could not and would not supply, but something emotional, which the rulers could counter with ease, which cost them nothing."

"Perhaps," Laurie said sarcastically, "they should have offered treatises on mathematics and logic."

"No," I said seriously, "although even those might have done better. But it wasn't good enough. The method was wrong, because the written word *is* censorable—when the people must be taught to read. There is only one completely uncensorable method of communication."

"And that is?" said the Archbishop.

I love you, Laurie.

She flushed and then her eyes brightened. "The mind. Of course."

"And how do you propose to communicate from mind to mind?" the Archbishop asked. "Laurie tells me that the true telepaths have not yet been reborn."

"Telepaths?"

"That is the word for them. I read it somewhere a long time ago."

"Telepaths," I repeated, and looked up. "We do it every day."

"Indeed?" The Archbishop's eyebrows were raised.

Laurie's face was alive with interest. "We do. Of course. In the Cathedrals. The services are given mentally, by the machine. We've had it all the time and we didn't recognize it."

I nodded. "The uncensorable method of communication."

But the Archbishop was shaking his head. "Would you have

the Church preach rebellion? That isn't our way. Our duty is to preserve man's inheritance until he comes of age."

"And what if he never comes of age?" I asked quietly. "He will never come of age if the Church does nothing. He will only sink deeper and deeper into savagery. Ignorance, like knowledge, is a cumulative thing. Knowledge is a pressure from within; ignorance is a weight, and the deeper it pulls man down the heavier it grows."

"No. No," the Archbishop was saying. "It isn't possible."

"The Church has a duty it isn't fulfilling. It must make mankind worthy to receive his inheritance. Now, the Church, the one great galactic force, is no better than the individual rulers. The rulers give the people bread and circuses; the Church gives them solace and miracles. One pacifies the body, the other the spirit; there is no real difference between them. Calm the people; make them contented with their lot."

"And if we act, what will keep the Church from being destroyed?"

"Its strength," I said.

"It isn't strong enough to defy the rulers," the Archbishop said. "We have existed this long, and grown, because we didn't challenge the temporal power."

"No, we complemented it, and the people lost. Everywhere the power of the Church is underestimated, its leaders fearful and weak. The rulers would think a long time before attacking the Church; it would bring on a battle which would leave that world wide open to conquest. But that isn't the only source of strength. The rulers need the Church; without it unrest would be ten times as great. Were it not for the treasure house that the Church represents, in the final analysis the galaxy would be better off without the Church. There is still a third source of strength which is always ignored—the people themselves, who would not stand by and see the Church destroyed by the rulers. Threaten the Church, and the people would rebel."

"Perhaps," the Archbishop admitted, "but we can't gamble with the future of the Church."

"But you can gamble with the future of humanity? Without the people, what is the Church worth? But you are imagining something that I haven't suggested. I don't advise anything as obvious as inciting the people to rebellion. That would be too risky. I suggest only that the Church pass on to the people some of its inheritance, not devices but knowledge—which is, in the

end, more potent—the kind of knowledge they can handle. Beginning with the knowledge of how to read.”

Laurie's eyes were burning with inspiration. “*A is for Alien; B is for Bondage.*”

“*F is for Fortress,*” I said. “*F is for Freedom.* And when they can read, you give them simple books, and when they master those, you give them more difficult books.”

“But we aren't equipped to write books or to print them in quantity,” the Archbishop objected.

“The Citizens are.”

“Are you suggesting that we join forces with them?”

“They have good men,” I said, “and clever ones. And some of their aims should coincide with some of yours. I'm suggesting that you join with the best elements of all forces that are working for freedom and a reuniting of the splintered galaxy. The Citizens and the Peddlers and the enlightened nobility, if there is any, because basically you are all seeking the same thing.”

“Intrigue and spying and secrecy,” the Archbishop said with distaste.

“You didn't hesitate to participate in them before.”

He bowed his head in admission.

“There is another part to it,” I said. “The pebble is an inheritance now, too, and the message it contains sets forth a mission. The telepathy machines can watch for the incipient telepath, whoever he may be. He can be taken aside and helped and put with others of his kind in some sort of colony, and someday the true telepaths will be reborn. Only then will a real basis for a lasting society be available, because it must be built on universal understanding which is impossible without telepathy. It will be reparation for the crime men committed against the telepaths of Earth, that the machine men used to ferret them out and destroy them should be used to reunite the scattered ability.”

“And what of The Word, what of our religion? Under the program you set forth, it would wither away and vanish.”

“What is the Church? You must face that question. Is it a religion or a vault for man's inheritance? Go back to Jude. Was the religion he founded an end in itself or a means? Was he a prophet or a wise man? I think he was one of the last of the telepaths—a scientist certainly—who saw the galaxy exploding and saw that man's only hope of preserving his ancient knowledge was to surround it with mysticism. The miracles

themselves—not religious miracles but demonstrations of little-known phenomena. Go back to The Word itself. See how generations of theologians have changed it. See how we have lost sight of Jude's purpose and raised around ourselves a wall of self-deception.

"But I don't think our religion will wither away. The ethics are good; the principles are sound. The best and strongest in it will be alloyed with the new, and emerge stronger and finer. And that which withers, should wither. That which helps to keep the people poor and helpless, which drags them down, which doesn't lead them upward into the light, should vanish. For the Church is not a storehouse now. You can go into a storehouse and take out what you need. The Church is a fortress, too, and it keeps the people out when it should let them in. Before the other fortresses crumble, we must throw down our own walls."

The Archbishop sighed. "But it would take so long. Centuries. Millennia."

"I'm not saying it would be easy. There's no shortcut to peace and freedom and a united galaxy. You can't repair the damage of thousands of years with a few days' labor. But we must make a beginning, and those who come after must continue the work."

"When you are young," the Archbishop said softly, "it is easy to think in such terms. But when you are old, as I am, you seek goals that are more immediate. You don't foresee the difficulties that I recognize. Someday, in a year or two or three, I shall be dead"—I saw Laurie clutch his hand tightly—"and my successor will go his own way, will set the Church into new paths. How can I plan in centuries when the Bishops' Council will elect a man who may not agree with my goals?"

"You must select your own successor," I said quietly. "You must choose someone who will carry on the work, and he must choose someone after him. If the pretence of legality is necessary, you must replace your bishops with men who will follow your plan, even if you are dead."

Slowly, very slowly, he nodded. It was reluctant and weary. "It shall be done," he said. His gentle words would change the shape of the galaxy. He smiled. "You have fought very hard for humanity, for billions upon billions of people throughout the galaxy. Now, what do you want for yourself? As I said, Laurie has made it difficult for me to refuse you anything."

"I want two things," I said.

Laurie frowned. "You said only one."

I stared at her coldly. "I've changed my mind."

"Speak, my son," said the Archbishop.

"First," I said, "I want to go to Earth."

"What would you do there?"

"I want to see it," I said. "Perhaps it's only sentiment, but I'd like to live there where the old telepaths lived, and know the peace that they knew, look on their sky and walk their world, and maybe I would know myself someday as they knew themselves and do a few of the things that they were able to do. There are secrets there; I know where to find them, as Laurie does. I wouldn't disturb them, because they are for others who will come long after I am dead, but my knowing the secrets won't diminish them. I would like to build a village. The telepaths discovered by the Church should be sent to Earth, to develop there as their fathers developed."

"And leave the battle for others?" the Archbishop asked gently.

"If you need me," I said, "you have only to send for me."

He nodded. "It shall be done. And what is the second thing you want?"

"I want Laurie," I said.

I heard a gasp, and I knew without looking that Laurie's face was white. But I was watching the Archbishop, and I was unprepared for the expression of pain that crossed his face.

He turned to look at Laurie, holding her hand. "How can I give you up?"

"What claim do you have on her?" I demanded.

He looked back at me. "None, really," he said softly. "Except that she is my daughter."

"Your daughter!" I exclaimed.

"He is the kindest, gentlest man in the galaxy," Laurie said fiercely. "If he sinned a long time ago, he has more than made up for it."

"One can never redeem a sin," he said, still looking at Laurie. One white hand lifted to stroke her dark hair. "I loved her mother. I love Laurie. And this is a sin I have never repented, though I am damned for it."

"Never, father!" Laurie said fiercely.

"And you sent her down into that!" I asked indignantly.

"He didn't send me," Laurie said violently. "I pleaded with him to let me go. And how could he refuse, when he was sending others?"

"You let her go?" I demanded of the Archbishop again.

"Yes," he sighed. "Yes. I let her go. And now if she wishes to go with you, I can't stop her. I wouldn't stop her. Speak, Laurie."

I looked to Laurie now. Her eyes brimmed with tears, and I loved her more than I could ever love anybody or anything.

"But it still makes a difference, doesn't it, Will?" she asked. Her voice quavered.

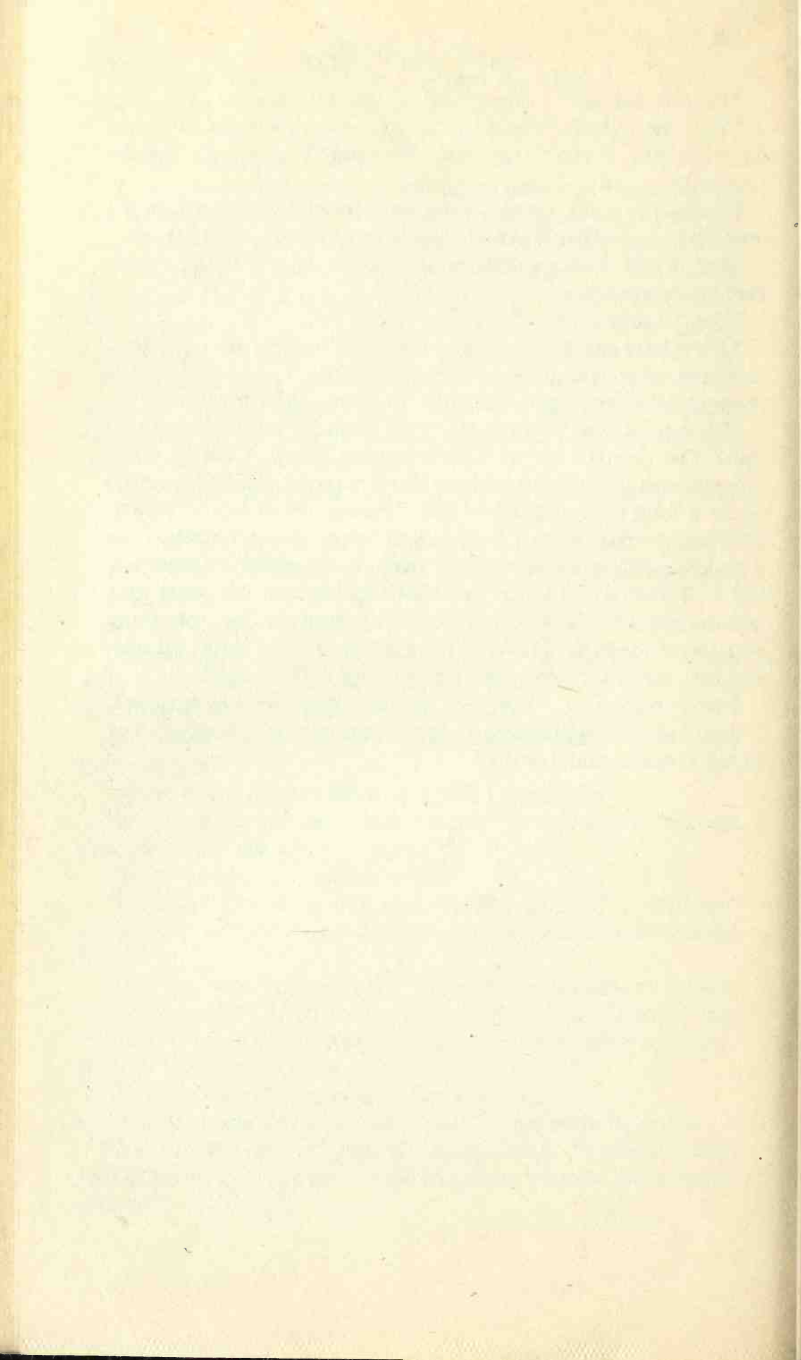
"Yes," I said. "Yes—"

"Then how can you ask me to go with you? How will I feel, knowing what you are thinking and feeling, knowing that you remember? Knowing, constantly, that you can't forgive?"

"I know," I said through clenched teeth. "I know. Don't you think I've thought about it and thought about it until I don't know what to think. But with me it isn't a question of choosing. I chose a long time ago, and I can't change. Now I can't forget. Maybe someday, when I'm wiser and better, it won't matter. But it makes a difference now, and it may always make a difference, but I—I love you, Laurie, and that's so big that the other may tear me apart but it can't tear that away from me. I'm not asking you to decide now. I'll wait. I'll wait for a long time. I'll wait forever. And every moment I'm waiting will be agony."

I was on my feet. "Forgive," I said. "Who am I to forgive?"

And I stumbled blindly into the corridor, and I found my way to my cubicle, and I waited.



EPILOGUE

I walked over the rolling meadows of Earth, my eyes on the low, green, rounded hills on the horizon, for Earth is old and wise and gentle, and the mountains are weathered down. The sky was very blue overhead, and the grass was green under my feet, and peace and quiet were all around me and over me and under me, and I breathed it into my lungs and it seeped into my body.

I had grown a little older and a little wiser along with Earth, but it gave me a pain that was almost physical to see the spaceship sitting in the meadow in a blackened circle of burnt grass.

I walked to the base of the ship, to the foot of the long steps that had been let down from the opening high in the side, and the captain was waiting there to greet me.

"I hate to hurry you, sir," he said respectfully, "but the Council has been waiting for many days now to install their new Archbishop."

I sighed and held out my hand to Laurie to help her up the long, long steps that led back to the stars. . . .

Index

The following is a list of the names of the persons who have been mentioned in the text of this book. The names are arranged in alphabetical order, and the page numbers on which they are mentioned are given in parentheses. The names are: (1) John Doe (123), (2) Jane Smith (145), (3) Robert Brown (167), (4) Mary White (189), (5) Thomas Green (211), (6) Elizabeth Black (233), (7) William Grey (255), (8) Sarah Jones (277), (9) Charles King (299), (10) Anne Lee (321), (11) James Hall (343), (12) Margaret Clark (365), (13) George Adams (387), (14) Helen Baker (409), (15) Benjamin Franklin (431), (16) Rebecca Miller (453), (17) Daniel Taylor (475), (18) Susan Moore (497), (19) Joseph Wilson (519), (20) Mary Ann Davis (541), (21) John Henry Evans (563), (22) Elizabeth Ann Foster (585), (23) Thomas James Harris (607), (24) Sarah Elizabeth Lewis (629), (25) Charles William Martin (651), (26) Anne Maria Nelson (673), (27) James Robert Phillips (695), (28) Margaret Ann Reed (717), (29) George Henry Scott (739), (30) Helen Maria Stewart (761), (31) Benjamin Franklin Taylor (783), (32) Rebecca Ann White (805), (33) Daniel James Young (827), (34) Susan Maria Zane (849), (35) Joseph Henry Adams (871), (36) Mary Ann 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Clark (2895), (128) Rebecca Ann Davis (2917), (129) Daniel James Evans (2939), (130) Susan Maria Foster (2961), (131) Joseph Henry Harris (2983), (132) Mary Ann Lewis (3005), (133) John Henry Martin (3027), (134) Elizabeth Ann Nelson (3049), (135) Thomas James Phillips (3071), (136) Sarah Elizabeth Reed (3093), (137) Charles William Scott (3115), (138) Anne Maria Stewart (3137), (139) James Robert Taylor (3159), (140) Margaret Ann White (3181), (141) George Henry Wilson (3203), (142) Helen Maria Zane (3225), (143) Benjamin Franklin Adams (3247), (144) Rebecca Ann Baker (3269), (145) Daniel James Clark (3291), (146) Susan Maria Davis (3313), (147) Joseph Henry Evans (3335), (148) Mary Ann Foster (3357), (149) John Henry Harris (3379), (150) Elizabeth Ann Lewis (3401), (151) Thomas James Martin (3423), (152) Sarah Elizabeth Nelson (3445), (153) Charles William Phillips (3467), (154) Anne Maria Reed (3489), (155) James Robert Scott (3511), (156) Margaret Ann Stewart (3533), (157) George 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