

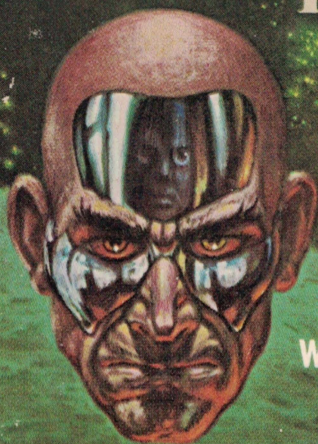
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TONIGHT WE STEAL THE STARS

John Jakes

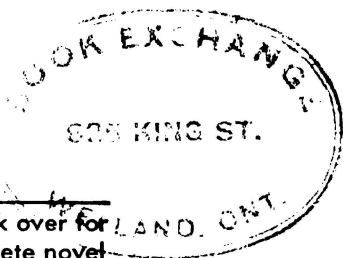
In II Galaxy, only
Wolf Dragonard can make the
impossible possible



Theft of the Seven Stars is impossible, yet somewhere in II Galaxy there are hushed voices, and secretive eyes, and long dreams of the Seven Stars clasped within a closed hand.

And somewhere else in II Galaxy there is a powerful and hulking man with golden eyes who could not even in the wildest drugdream conceive of his fate being tangled up within the Seven Stars.

This burly man will begin a hunt to stop the most dangerous and daring crime in history—and he will end the hunt as one of those who make the impossible possible. His name is Wolf Dragonard. This is his adventure, in the ninth age of the star kings of II Galaxy.



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TONIGHT WE STEAL THE STARS

John Jakes

AN ACE BOOK

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Cover by Jack Gaughan.

For
my wife RACHEL,
who might get to like science-fiction
after all.

THE WAGERED WORLD

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Printed in U.S.A.



PROLOGUE

See again II Galaxy.

In a cold, slow dance of light it revolves through the abyss, carrying with it the unnumbered planets where dwell the descendants of the Out-riding in the lightships. From the First Home, from the Earth, came the builders of its civilization.

Nine thousand and some years before this, the holocaust of interplanetary war wracked II Galaxy. The great houses, the great commercial corporations which had expanded and extended their domains since beyond even the days of the folk-memory, fell.

A hundred thousand planets burned and bled. But from the devastation, phoenix-like, the houses rose again.

Each house of fabled name—Xero and Genmo, Raca and Mishubi, Gullffe and Arsgnat, Stanbrans and Easkod and Ibyrn—seized power from the wreckage and grew stronger than before. And at the end of centuries, the house rulers joined in loose but dominant alliance. These near-immortal men, these seemingly ageless, deathless star kings, are the Lords of the Exchange.

Again trade thrives—for those few rich enough to trade. The commoners, of Terran stock or otherwise, live in near-primitive savagery. But the masters of the great houses which control the manufacture and flow of goods accord-

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ing to plans privately devised among themselves live in opulence and splendor.

And among the Lords, none is more opulent, more splendid than Genmo I.

He rules from his home system under the giant white sun Autus. His commercial house produces most of the motive power used throughout II Galaxy: the sleek ground transpos owned by the Lords and a few of their wealthy sycophants; the vehicles employed by the galaxy's police force, the tough, strapping Regulators; the hyperdrive assemblies of the commercial lightships. By jealous guardianship of superior technology rebuilt from the ashes of the interplanet war, the House of Genmo controls transportation virtually unchallenged.

Lord Genmo, who is now 850 years of age, bothers little with the daily business of his commercial house. His official residence is located on the planet Wheel. At other times he can be found at his summer palace on the bleak planet of Whitepeake.

But wherever he travels, there travel also the supreme symbols of his authority.

The Seven Stars.

Misnamed by the rabble, these seven priceless jewels represent the sun and six planets of the Autus system.

Wheel is symbolized by an orangyx as big as a big man's fist.

Muldoonsworld by a palladine.

Valleja by a scintillant scanth.

Whitepeake by a deeply glowing manerald.

Bruckner-X by a carnel.

Gobineaux by a firestone.

And Autus itself, the sun, is represented by a fabulous white oon.

Now the Seven Stars are on Whitepeake.

In a great open pavilion of the summer palace the Stars hang suspended on display for gaping visitors. Forever whirling, the six jewels revolve around the seventh, the oon, the sun, in perfect simulated orbits.

Yet the Seven Stars are, so to speak, not fully of this world.

By means of an intricate optical system, they are seen *here*, in Genmo's palace, while in actuality, for safety's sake, they are kept spinning and glowing *there*, a very

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short but very perilous distance inside a congruent time-reality controlled by Genmo's engineering devices; they are further guarded by the thousands of soldiers who surround the summer estate.

Therefore theft of the Seven Stars is impossible. Death and ruin wait for any man who covets them.

And even if it were not so, would any dare to strike beloved, beneficent Genmo?

None would vow aloud to do so, of course. But a Lord who controls so much will also have enemies.

So somewhere in II Galaxy there are hushed voices, and secretive eyes, and long, languorous dreams of the Seven Stars clasped within a closed hand.

And somewhere else in II Galaxy there is a powerful and hulking man with gold eyes who could not even in the wildest drugdream conceive of his fate being tangled up within the Seven Stars.

He is of the house and lineage of Dragonard, this burly man who will begin his hunt in order to stop the perpetrators of the most daring and dangerous crime in history, and end his hunt as one of those who make the impossible possible.

He is a member of the Regulators. He is not called Wolf without a reason.

This is his adventure, in the ninth age of the star kings of II Galaxy.

I

The six Regulator Howlers reached the oceanfront boulevard and turned left in a rumbling column. Inside the lead vehicle, Sectioner Wolf Dragonard put the scope on scan and surveyed the troubled area.

He felt edgy, exhausted from lack of rest. He knew that what happened in the next hour or so would be regarded by his superiors as a critical test of his command ability; as positive or negative evidence of whether he'd recovered from the drinking binge that had taken him out of action for almost half a year.

He adjusted the rheostatic handles of the scope to focus

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the image in the screen above his slingchair. His hands seemed to weigh pounds apiece. He was sweating.

This section of Point Nihil had been only lightly hit by the riots that had erupted a little less than two days ago. The Howlers rumbled past shuttered shops and empty walkways on the left. Dragonard saw the smashed-in facade of a drugdreamer, wreckage where the walkway had been torn up at an intersection.

The Howler treads clanked and banged on the plastic roadway. To the right stretched the curving purple beach lapped by the yellow-green waters of the artificial ocean. The ocean, heated to comfortable warmth, was one of the features which made Point Nihil such an attraction to the students on holiday. Now, in the glare of the synthosun sinking blue over the water, the beach looked forlorn. A band of students wearing the green epaulet ribands of the House of Xero ran past. They jeered at the Howlers. Dragonard scowled but did nothing. His main responsibility lay ahead, where mobs blocked the boulevard and the central hostel area was burning.

He coughed suddenly. The air inside the Howler had a sour, metallic smell. Six men besides himself worked in close proximity. Console lights changed color, mottled his squarish face as he watched the scope screen, studying the black clot in the distance.

That had to be a mob, just waiting for authority to show its face.

The sky above Point Nihil's downtown was heavy with smoke. The blowers built into the dome that covered the resort would be having trouble coping with the emergency. He reminded himself to call back to the spaceport for a pollution team.

A speaker crackled. "Regulator column, this is Point Nihil Manager's Office calling."

Dragonard slapped a switch. "Sectioner Dragonard speaking. Transmit."

"Things are very bad down here. We've been waiting over an hour for you."

"We're on the way," Dragonard replied. "Just passing Avenue Zee. We had an accident at the spaceport."

"Accident?" The voice grew alarmed. "What kind of accident?"

"Nothing too serious," Dragonard lied. "We landed with

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twenty-four Howlers. The eighth one coming off the logistics ship tumbled off the unloading ramp. It's mired. So the rest of my Howlers are stuck aboard until we get the ramp cleared. I brought the first six Howlers on ahead. The rest of the column will follow shortly."

"Six Howlers aren't going to be much help against this kind of insanity."

Dragonard's mouth jerked, sour. "You should have thought of that when the governors of this planet decided to put most of Collegium's money into tourist port facilities at the expense of commercial landing areas. Regulator ships can't come down on those pads where the students dock their flyers. We had to land in that glorified swamp."

A grumble over the speaker. "Well, get here goddam fast. We need you."

"Everything will be under control shortly," Dragonard snarled. "Checking out."

He slapped the switch, returned to a study of the screen. He felt the tension building.

This was his first major command responsibility since Elena died in the flyer collision. He thought of her face suddenly, fought to drive the image from his mind.

Remembering her hair, her mouth, the way she'd whisper on a long, chill night—that was bad. She was dead. Her death had driven him to take restleave, which was nothing more than an excuse for the prolonged drunk. He'd been back only one week when this happened.

The column was perhaps ten long squares from the mob and proceeding at reduced speed; Dragonard glanced down from his slingchair, which hung high and forward in the Howler's central compartment. The chair was suspended by flexible ropes. He swayed with the motion of the vehicle. The effect, which had never bothered him in the past, unsettled his stomach.

He looked down at his kit on the floorboards directly underneath. He thought of the wineflask inside. He felt guilty. The tension tightened a notch.

He forced his attention back to the screen. "Give me amplifiers."

His second officer called a terse wilcomply, threw in the switches. Dragonard's ears were hit with a brutal, savage roar from the thousands of students massed across the boulevard directly ahead. Flails and maces were being used.

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Their spikes shone in the flare and sputter of burning shops: One multi-story hostel was completely afire.

Think it out, he said to himself. *No hasty action. No wrong decisions. The Regulator Boards of Rev will be watching the performance.*

He wasn't so sure that he hadn't already made a wrong decision by bringing the first six Howlers into the riot area without the support of the rest of the column. He hoped to God his engineers would get the mired Howler free very soon.

He called for a check on the spaceport situation.

The second officer replied, "No progress yet, Sectioner."

A huge man not far past thirty, Sectioner Wolf Dragonard watched the scope screen and gnawed his lip. A very tricky situation, this.

The rioters were not criminal dregs. They were students sent to Collegium by the various houses of the Lords of the Exchange. An airless world where life was sustained beneath synthosun domes, Collegium was dotted with technical centers where the students received instruction that prepared them for lifetime service in the manufacturies of the Lords on other planets of II Galaxy.

Three times a year, at holidays, the students from the various technical colleges poured into Point Nihil for a week of fun. There was always minor trouble. But this time, perhaps due to recent unpopular edicts by the governors of Collegium limiting student debts, the young men wearing the colors of the different Lords had come to Point Nihil in an unusually hostile mood. When street fights turned to burning and killing, the Regulators were summoned in their big ships.

An amused voice at his elbow said, "Are you sure proceeding into the city is wise, Sectioner?"

Dragonard's gold eyes were slits when he swung around. Console lights reflected in the three polished metal plates set into the mangled flesh of Interrogation Agent Conrad Vondamm's cheeks and forehead.

Vondamm was not quite thirty, an ascetically slender man. He wore black robes, doublet and cape of the I.A. sub-corps of the Regulators. His mouth was little more than a leftover pucker of scar tissue. The rest of his natural face was equally gnarled. His hands, by contrast, were smooth and almost womanly. Dragonard saw his own distorted

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image in the polished faceplates. The sight always unnerved him, as it unnerved suspects whom Vondamm questioned. Vondamm had been injured in a fuel explosion on a light destroyer five years ago. Makeshift cosmetic surgery was conducted on an outplanet immediately afterward. The plates were set into his head. Their terrifying effect on those he interrogated made him one of the most successful I.A.'s operating.

"We need a show of force," Dragonard said. "Or are you planning my strategy these days?"

Vondamm shrugged. "Merely a comment."

"A comment suggesting that you could do better, Conrad?"

"Perhaps. I don't have a drinking problem. Sir."

"You goddam son—" Dragonard choked off the rest. Two of his officers were watching. His cheeks reddened. God, why did he have to lose his temper? One mistake now and he'd be through. His temples started to ache, a recurring aftereffect of the binge.

"Personally," Vondamm said, "I would have waited until we could mass the entire column. But as you say, Sectioner, I'm not in command. Pity, isn't it?"

With a whirl of robes Vondamm disappeared into the clucking machinery at the rear of the compartment. Dragonard seethed.

He didn't miss the hidden meaning in Vondamm's words. He'd known for a long time that Vondamm coveted his rank, and was simply waiting for him to make a slip. Vondamm's accident had scarred more than his face. It had injected a viciousness into his ambition, and cruelty into his interrogations. The savagery of the latter was legend.

A sharp cry from the second officer diverted Dragonard's attention to the scope.

The Howler was rolling through smoke. Almost two hundred students had massed outside. Rocks and bits of debris started to rain on the vehicle's skin, *ping-clang*. On the screen, contorted young faces screamed obscenities. Dragonard recognized red epaulet ribands of trainees of the House of Genmo. The Howler began to shudder.

"They're rocking us, Sectioner," the second officer shouted.

"Give me sound from all units."

He whipped a neckchain out of the collar of his tunic, inserted the plugs in his ears as the sonic generators began to warble. The rocking subsided.

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Even plugged up, Dragonard experienced throbbing pain in his eardrums. Blue lights flashed. Good. All six Howlers were emitting.

The rioters on the screen clutched their heads, began to flounder. One began vomiting. Another fell to his knees, was trampled in a sudden exodus from the vicinity of the lead Howler.

Dragonard wiped sweat from his chin. Better.

"Give me ahead half."

"Ahead half, sir."

The Howler cranked up its speed. On monitors Dragonard saw the other five Howlers follow. On the screen the mob parted in front of his vehicle. Suddenly the soundload diminished.

Before he could growl a question, his second officer exclaimed:

"Malfunction, Sectioner. Our generator's gone."

Even as Dragonard yelled the order for inspect-and-repair, he knew this was trouble.

The mob discovered that the first Howler was incapacitated. Bloated student faces leered in the screen, pressing close. The Howler began to rock violently again.

A moment later Dragonard yelled, "Watch it—we're going over!"

His voice was drowned as the Howler crashed on its side.

II

The overturning Howler flung Dragonard's slingchair against the compartment wall like a pendulum. His head smacked an instrument console. He slid down into the angle formed by the now-horizontal wall and the vertical compartment ceiling. One of his men floundered on top of him. Flails and the cheap racca wood swagger-sticks affected by the students rattled and banged in rising rhythm all over the outside of the vehicle.

Sparks shot in red showers from the shorting master console. Dragonard got hold of his dress dagger, slashed himself free of the slingchair straps, rolled out from beneath the

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other man, who was blinded by blood from a forehead cut. Smoke billowed in the wake of the sparks. Another Regulator groped for the console switches.

"Leave them alone, Jannus!" Dragonard yelled.

The Regulator had a feverish look. "We'll be roasted unless we power down, sir."

"You'll be roasted if you touch—*Jannus!*"

Too late. The Regulator fastened one hand on an advance rod, the other on a modulator bar. The moment both hands completed the circuit the console flashed and dazzled with light.

Regulator Jannus arched his back and shrieked. Powerage poured through his body, broiled his skin black even as Dragonard struggled toward him. Jannus' body dropped at Dragonard's feet. The big Sectioner raked his hand through his close-cropped white hair, cursed.

Vondamm clutched his arm. "What's your strategy now, Sectioner?"

Dragonard ignored him. He shoved past the I.A., whose faceplates reflected the scope screen blacking out as screaming students beat on the outside lens with racca sticks and a spike-mace.

Dragonard fought his way ahead. His men seemed dazed, uncertain. He reached the hatch in the now-vertical ceiling.

"Ready with the blasters. We're going out."

"Ready," another Regulator rasped. "The temperature's past the failsafe limit. I'd rather get my skull cracked than cook hiding in here." The man managed a nervous, what-the-hell grin.

Dragonard worked on the hatchbolts with his free hand. He welcomed that grin by his subordinate. The Regulators were fiercely, even brutally trained, but they developed *esprit de corps* in the process. They felt as other men did; but their training forbade the admission.

The backs of Dragonard's hands stung from the mounting heat. The face of the master console was melting. He fumbled with the last hatchbolt. Somewhere behind him Conrad Vondamm squealed, "Get us out of here, Sectioner! Get us out before we all die!"

Deep in his throat Dragonard laughed a silent laugh. He relished the I.A.'s terror because Vondamm always seemed master of any situation. Dragonard wiped his palm

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on his breeches to clean off the sweat. Then he attacked the bolt again, finally got it unfastened.

He tossed his blaster from left to right hand, eased the hatch back with his elbow.

A torrent of screams and curses greeted him. The students, shadow-figures, clustered outside. Dragonard could see little else except flames in the amber evening sky. The synthosun had fallen.

He shoved his blaster through the hatch, crawled out.

The students screamed in fury. But they respected Dragonard's weapon. He managed to clamber out and stand as the ring of students fell back. One by one his men followed.

They formed a little semicircle, backed up against the overturned vehicle. Obscenities in a dozen different star-dialects rang through the crowd. Wineflasks passed hand to hand. Fingers pointed. But the students, several hundred of them milling here in the center of the boulevard, were temporarily at bay.

Touch and go, this. Dragonard's bristly white hair ruffled in the hot wind that fanned the fires in the multi-story hostel nearby. Clouds of sparks floated to other, smaller structures in the vicinity. New fires sprang up almost at once. Meantime, word had been passed through the mob. It grew larger moment by moment.

"The rest of the Howlers should be right behind us," Dragonard growled over his shoulder. "Head for them."

"Why aren't they sounding?" one of his men whispered.

"Perhaps our difficulty has rendered them like our commander," Vondamm said. "Virtually helpless."

"Shut your mouth, Conrad," Dragonard said.

Vondamm laughed low. "The air restored my senses. I was trying to restore yours with a little joke."

"Ho," a student cried. "The policeys are fighting each other."

"They know better than to fight with us," yelled another.

This produced growls of glee through the immediate fringes of the mob.

"Bardix," Dragonard snapped without turning.

"Yo."

"Turn around. Go up and over the machine. Get a fix on the other Howlers."

"They should be close now, sir."

"Climb up and be sure. Do it fast so you don't get hurt."

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"Yo," the man repeated.

His boots clanged as he turned, climbed. The mob stirred. In the distance the crackling of ray-rifles disturbed the night. Somewhere a structure collapsed.

The mob parted suddenly. An emaciated student with a seedy red chinbeard lurched forward. Like those around him he wore the red epaulet riband of Genmo's house. In one hand he carried a wineflask. In another he swung his racca wood swagger-stick.

"What's the matter, policeman?" he demanded. "Afraid to move out?"

"Just the reverse," Dragonard answered. His gold eyes were cold. He raised his blaster. "We want you to move."

The student sniggered. His eyes shone with the after-effects of a visit to a drugdreamer. "You'd get one or two. We'd get the lot of you, though. You policeys are always throwing your authority around, as if you thought the manufacturies would run without us."

A chorus of agreement. Only one student voice protested:

"Don't bait the son, Larrs. Look at his eyes. Like a god-dam sphinxcat's."

Larrs swigged from his wineflask. "I don't truckle for any yellow-eyed po—*stop that one!*"

Larrs pointed a bony hand. Dragonard twisted. His man Bardix was going up and over the side of the Howler. Students reached him. A spike-mace descended. Bardix cried out.

Bardix disappeared, dragged from the Howler by scores of hands. Dragonard's stomach flip-flopped. Bardix screamed one more time. Then the rhythmic pulping of the spike-mace masked the sound.

"Scrang them!" Larrs shouted. "Any son who isn't a coward, *scrang the Regs!*"

The drunken yell triggered the mob. It surged ahead, and Dragonard's professional iciness sloughed away.

Larrs led the band, running at the policemen. His mouth cracked open in a rotten-teeth smile as he flicked the end of his racca stick. A stiletto shot out. He drove it for Dragonard's neck.

As the mob closed in from all sides, Dragonard lowered his shoulder, rammed Larrs in the belly, heaved him up and over. One of Dragonard's men let go with a blaster. It

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ate through three students and left a smoking hole in the plasto boulevard. Curses turned to screams.

Larrs tumbled against the overturned Howler, slid down. He bounced to his feet, came at Dragonard again with the stiletto bright as a needle. The tip raked Dragonard's jawbone. He slid to one side. Larrs's lunge carried him past.

Dragonard shoved the muzzle of his blaster into Larrs's ribs, triggered.

A pit appeared in Larrs's side. It spilled bone and intestine. Larrs stuffed one hand into the hole and shrieked again. *"Godbless, policeman! Godbless, I didn't mean harm—I"*

Dragonard kicked the corpse away.

He jumped high, caught the top of the Howler and clambered up. From a kneeling position he began firing at the students crowding around the vehicle. *Puff-glare*, two of them died. *Puff-glare*, another.

Vondamm crawled up beside him. The rest of the survivors followed. A killing rage was on Dragonard now. He fired, fired, fired. These assassins had lost their right to be treated with restraint.

He saw a ribanded student kicking in the skull of one of his men. The student raised his boot again. Dragonard disintegrated the student's head.

"Here comes the next Howler," Vondamm panted.

Suddenly the mob melted. The second Howler in the column nudged alongside. Dragonard jumped aboard.

As he dropped through the hatch he counted six students dead, plus two of his own men. The commander of the Howler hurriedly vacated his slingchair.

"We just had a report, Sectioner. The rest of the column from the spaceport is coming up. They're approximately at Avenue Emm right now."

Exhausted, angry, Dragonard rubbed the bridge of his nose. "All units at full sound."

"Full, sir?"

"You heard, mister."

In five minutes the overturned Howler had been shunted aside.

In ten the relief column arrived with all horns blasting.

In less than an hour the riot was quelled.

The boulevard was strewn with the bodies of students who had fainted under the sonic impact. A last band of militants faded away down a smoky alley. The upper

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floors of the hostel caved in with a geyser of fire. Dragonard switched the scope off scan and he unbuckled the sling-chair straps, preparing to go outside, assess the damage and gather prisoners.

He started. Interrogation Agent Vondamm stood at his elbow.

"Congratulations, Sectioner. We very nearly didn't bring that off."

"I don't need your congratulations, Conrad. Especially when you don't mean them."

"That's unfair."

Dragonard scowled at his own reflection in the three plates. "The hell. You're hoping for mistake number one."

"Sectioner, whatever do you mean?"

With an oath, Dragonard shoved past and climbed outside. He didn't want the warped Interrogation Agent to see how shaken he was, now that the chaotic battle had come to an end. He didn't want to give the slightest indication of his exhaustion; of the hammering in his head; of the double vision that multiplied the burning structures as he jumped down from the Howler.

The boulevard tilted under him. He clutched the Howler's tread for support.

He thought: *Why are you so damn afraid?*

Answered himself: *Because Conrad's right. Conrad knows I'm shaky. I know it too.*

The fact that he'd used his blaster on the mob confirmed it. Legally, of course, he was justified. In the pursuit of their duty, Regulators could employ appropriate force when attacked. He and his men had been attacked. If he had refused to use his blaster, there might well have been an alternate ending: his entire group torn apart by the students.

Still, it wasn't normal for him to fall back on the most brutal way. He should have worked out a plan of action that would have saved lives, not taken them.

A little late for that, Wolf, he thought as he surveyed the wreckage of the resort's main thoroughfare.

All up and down the line of Howlers, his men were climbing out with ray-rifles at the ready. Smoke blew, stung the eyes.

Now. Quickly. What was his next move? He flogged his brain.

Yes. Prisoners.

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He called for an audiohorn. As it was being handed down, he wondered how his reaction to the riot situation would be greeted by his superiors. He had the uneasy feeling that tonight he had set his own cause back once more.

Utterly weary, he lifted the audiohorn and began bel-lowing orders.

III

Three hours later, Wolf Dragonard finally located the room where Conrad Vondamm was interrogating captured students.

The room was dim, vaulted, smelling of mold. At other times it served as a public café popular with vacationers at Point Nihil. It occupied the second subground level beneath a complex of souvenir shops three squares from the main boulevard.

Dragonard stepped past the Regulator on duty at the plastodoor artfully crafted to resemble a dungeon entrance of precious wood. The Regulator saluted. Dragonard hardly saw. He signed for silence, slipped inside, quickly closed the door to shut out the light from the corridor.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust. As they did, he began to notice details: overturned pedestal tables; huge false-front wine casks; racks in which genuine bottles were crisscrossed with synthetically spun cobwebs. A shimmering blue-green flame jumped erratically in a lamp niche. A strobeprobe revolved on its little pedestal. Otherwise the café was dark.

Dragonard stood at the head of heavy stone stairs one level above the café floor. He didn't move. His mouth wrenched.

The strobeprobe was an ingenious device utilized by Interrogation Agents. It swept wide beams of light across the face of a suspect. In between the sweeps another housing focused much more intense light in the suspect's eyes.

Dragonard watched as the humming unit revolved—*sweep*. Light whirled around the room. The revolution suddenly stopped. Calibrated apertures opened with a click. Pin-beams shot at the eyeballs of a student shivering on a low stool.

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The pinbeams remained on long enough to produce acute discomfort. Then the unsettling sweep began again. A complete cycle took only seconds, resulted in a maddening rhythm of light and shadow.

Vondamm paced behind the strobeprobe, nearly invisible in his dark garments. His three faceplates seemed to float, disembodied. They reflected the sweating face of the young man seated in front of the device.

Sweep-flash. Sweep-flash. The student was thin. A faint bluish cast to his skin indicated mixed blood. He moaned, twisted his head away.

Vondamm jumped forward, caught the student by the hair, jerked him around.

"Keep your eyes on the light, Master Traco."

"I've told you—" *Sweep-flash.* The student winced. "There was no organization—"

Vondamm knotted his hand deeper in the student's hair, forced him to stare into the apertures that blasted his eyes with white brilliance. "I don't believe you, Master Traco."

Vondamm kept his voice cheerful, conversational. Somehow, it merely added to the horror of his face, all scarred skin and burnished metal. Vondamm released the student's hair with a flourish.

"No, Master Traco, you'll have to do better than that."

"I swear to the public gods—"

Vondamm waved. "You students will utter any blasphemy if it suits your ends."

Sweep-flash. The student's face glistened with sweat. He squeezed his eyelids shut. Dragonard noticed a shredded riband hanging from his shoulder. Vondamm slapped the boy's face.

"Open your eyes, Master Traco, or I'll step up the lumens."

"I'm going blind," the student moaned.

"Nonsense. This is purifying to the soul. You were caught rioting."

"We . . ." The student's whole body jerked as the strobes swept across his face. "We . . . just got angry. We . . . were drinking a lot. . . ."

"And taking drugs," Vondamm added "We found a drug-dreamer plaque in your effects, Master Traco. I have it here." The I.A. twinkled a small token in the backwash of light.

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The student's voice rose raw with pain: "Christ, haven't I *said* I took an experience?"

"Yes, you have indeed admitted your illegal use of drugs several times over."

"Then leave me alone! I haven't anything more to confess."

"I refuse to believe that. I refuse to take your word on so serious a matter until we probe a little more deeply. After all, addicts can't be trusted."

"Addicts?" the student slobbered, near hysteria. "For God's sake, a ha'token experience makes me an addict? Everyone takes—"

"Everyone was not caught firing a shop with a chem torch, Master Traco."

"I admit it, *I admit it!* Damn you—I was high on the narcos, all right? But there's no conspiracy! I don't know a thing about a conspiracy! Now will you turn that light off? Please. Please do it. *Please.*"

A shudder crawled up Dragonard's spine. His anger quickened again, as it had quickened when he first learned that Vondamm had chosen an out-of-the-way site for his interrogations, and had informed no one of its location. Dragonard knew why. Vondamm operated best in private, where counselors could not enforce D.P.

As Dragonard fumed, someone else cried out feebly down below. He realized other students must be huddled in the dark. They were privileged to watch the spectacle while awaiting their turns. Looking hard, Dragonard discovered a few Regulators too. The blue-green flame danced in its niche.

The longer he watched, the angrier he grew. The last hours had been trying.

First he'd faced the complexities of organizing the patrols to arrest and identify rioters still abroad. Then he'd attended sessions with the city management of Point Nihil. The pompous governors of the planet Collegium had flown in by special shuttle. They seemed to blame Dragonard's Regulators for the damage to their domed city. Finally came the infuriating discovery that I.A. Vondamm had chosen a secret location for his questioning.

Traco the student whimpered, bit his lip. The strobe-probe revolved, *sweep-flash*. Vondamm's face might have been an ornamental mask worn by a backlands warrior on one of the truly primitive planets.

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At length Vondamm sighed. "Very well, Master Traco."

"Sweet bleeding wounds, believe me! *There was no conspiracy!*"

"There was," Vondamm insisted. "A student-organized, student-led conspiracy to destroy Point Nihil because of the government's new edicts on student credit."

"We . . . were angry . . ." Traco panted. "We were heated up, but . . . there was no plan . . ."

Vondamm smiled. "I don't believe you."

"Take the light away. It's killing me, I can't stand the light any longer!"

"Unfortunate. You force me to raise the lumen level, not lower it."

"*Take the light away, please, please!*"

"I will not take it away," Vondamm said, "because I do not believe your story."

"I do," said Dragonard.

The thunder of his voice had a stupefying effect. Vondamm spun, his mouth dropping open. His arm twitched, knocking the strobeprobe. It crashed over.

The revolving lights flashed wildly along the ceiling. An instant later the pinbeams lit. They pointed into Dragonard's eyes, burned.

"Shut it off, Conrad," he bawled. "Then come up here."

Defiant, Vondamm pointed to the student. "Don't release that man yet."

Two of the Regulators emerged from the shadows. They hesitated.

Dragonard held his wrist across his eyes. "Unless someone shuts that damn thing off right now, everybody in this room is cashiered."

A Regulator leaped to switch off the strobeprobe. The café was plunged into thicker dark, lit only by the wavering lamp. Conrad Vondamm climbed the stairs swiftly. He started to speak. Dragonard motioned him outside into the corridor lit with antique torches. Alongside one of the torches, the café signboard hung smashed.

Once the door had shut, Vondamm began, "What is the meaning—"

"Shut up, Conrad. Why didn't you tell me where you were going?"

Vondamm licked his withered lips. "I thought you were too busy to be bothered, Sectioner."

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Dragonard's gold eyes shone. "Really? Or did you just want privacy?"

"Naturally, Sectioner, I operate efficiently when I'm undisturbed."

"You mean you enjoy your work more completely."

There was hate in Vondamm's scar-puckered eyes. He controlled himself, swept his black cloak around his hips with an almost dainty motion. "I refuse to acknowledge that remark."

"Then acknowledge this one, mister. By secreting yourself with the prisoners, you deprive them of D.P."

"Bah! Due process is a legal sham. It enables the guilty to hide behind—"

"It protects innocent people from sadistic bastards like you, Conrad."

Dragonard's voice shook. He was letting his temper run away with him and knew he shouldn't. Yet the metal-faced man infuriated him.

Why? a silent voice asked. Because you know he's waiting for the first slip? Waiting to claim promotion?

"I could file charges for that obscene insult, Sectioner," Vondamm reminded him.

"And I can cashier you on the spot for insubordination. I will unless you clear that goddam cellar and take those prisoners back up to where you're supposed to question them. The offices of the city management."

"But if I do that, counselors will soon be present!"

"Counselors are *supposed* to be present for D.P.!"

Now it was Vondamm out of control and shrilling: "There *was* a conspiracy! I'm certain of it. This is the only way to root it out! Evidently you are unable to recognize facts, Sectioner. Evidently drinking has made you so addled that—"

Wolf Dragonard struck Vondamm with his open hand, blistering-hard.

In an instant the enormity of Dragonard's error came home to him. And to Vondamm, who raised one slender hand to touch the ridges of scar tissue at the edge of his right cheek plate. He did it almost lovingly.

Vondamm smiled.

"The unforgivable breach," he said. "Thank you, Sectioner. I don't believe you'll trouble me any further this evening, will you?"

And he turned and reentered the café.

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The Regulator on duty at the door watched the whole thing. He couldn't conceal his astonishment, and dismay.

"Eyes ahead, mister," Dragonard barked. He spun and stalked off.

At the foot of the stairs going up, he stopped. He covered his eyes with one trembling hand. Weariness and anger had betrayed him. But that was an excuse. Excuses were not tolerated.

Slowly Wolf Dragonard climbed the dark stairs. He saw none of his surroundings. He saw, instead, the wreckage of his own career.

IV

"You struck a subordinate," said Echelon Director Arthur Yee. "I know there were extenuating circumstances. And Vondamm's a twisted one, all right. That's why he has a record of successful confessions. Still—" Yee shook his head. "It is the unforgivable breach."

Wolf Dragonard stood at attention in front of his superior. "I've dictated my papers of resignation, sir."

Silence.

Echelon Director Arthur Yee regarded him with concern. Yee was older, nearing retirement. His skin was the color of slate. It contrasted with his gray hair, which he wore untrimmed to the dress collar of his uniform.

The Echelon Director's uniform carried but three campaign ribbons, small and colorful. Dragonard recognized them all: the Stellaris Rising; the Siege of Maltby's Moon; the Month of Burning. Yee had a trunkful besides.

"I don't want your goddam resignation," Yee said at last. "And stop standing there like a pillar of virtue. Sit down, Wolf."

"No thank you, sir."

"I said sit down."

Dragonard obeyed. Yee smiled in a tolerant way. The tension broke.

Just the surface tension. Dragonard was still wound tight inside. Three weeks had passed since the night on Collegium when the incident happened. He had filed his own

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report, figuring that if he didn't, Vondamm certainly would. In due course he had been relieved of command of the planet-wide investigation of the student riots. He had boarded a Regulator destroyer for the return to Bromdaagar-8, the headquarters planet of the galactic police. He had been planetside only three hours when he was summoned to this confrontation.

Yee touched a button in his work platform. "Care for a drink?"

"No thanks."

"It has its therapeutic benefits," Yee replied. "In limited quantities."

Dragonard flushed. Yee waited for the brandy bubble to pop up. When it did, he inflated the tube, sucked thoughtfully.

Dragonard had trouble meeting Yee's gaze. His eyes roved past the Echelon Director to the plexiwall. Against a backdrop of green and umber stars, the vast concrete complex of Regulator headquarters spread to the horizon. It was fully mechanized and illuminated. The Lords of the Exchange hoarded none of their technological marvels when it came to equipping their law enforcers. The trillions of commoners on the planets might grub for their existence by primitive means, but the Regulators were above the herd. Only now did Dragonard begin to understand just how much he would miss the work to which he'd devoted his life.

After another sip Yee said, "I won't accept your resignation, Wolf."

"Sir, the regulations specify—"

"Don't quote regulations at me, kindly. I'm familiar with the punishment. For the offense in question, it's either dismissal or suspension at the option of the commanding officer. I'm your commanding officer so it's my option. I—"

Abruptly Yee rubbed the bridge of his nose, as though in pain. Then he straightened.

"Excuse me. Bit of a headache. Been having them lately. I must check in for the exam soon. But let's get back to the subject. That's you, and a fine career being systematically destroyed."

Dragonard twisted the heavy signet on the last finger of his right hand. "Nothing's been right since Elena died."

"Six months ago."

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"Yes, sir. Such a damn senseless accident . . ."

"With the other flyer pilot at fault."

"Yes, and convicted now. It doesn't help."

"So you took to the spirits. I understand your reaction. I don't admire it."

Angrily Dragonard said, "We'd filed the banns."

Yee raised a dark hand. "Wolf, I understand. But I can't excuse an emotional binge which jeopardizes the performance of this organization. If this were strictly a personal matter, I'd simply tell you to forget it. It's not entirely personal so that's impossible. Believe me, I also understand your feelings about Interrogation Agent Vondamm."

A scowl cut across Dragonard's face. "I've made no charges against him."

"You don't need to make charges. I know the man's tendencies. I hear the talk. He envies you, Wolf. He envies you because you're a top-rank Regulator. Perhaps we need to have Vondamm psyched, though I'm sure his performance would suffer." Yee caressed an old, deep scar in the ebony of his face. "Sometimes this is a pretty nasty trade. Men like Vondamm serve their purpose."

Dragonard agreed with a nod. Yee's voice murmured on:

"I know how Vondamm is driven. He has completed the sectioner examinations. Passed them with highest marks, I might add. He's got a brilliant brain. But he knows he can only advance if a sectioner is either promoted or cashiered. Apparently he's fixed on you as his target."

"Damned if I can understand why, sir. We've been assigned together a year and a half and I don't ever remember doing anything to anger the man."

"Of course not. Not consciously. But your strength—just being a whole man and good at your job—that's all it takes, don't you see? Your mere existence becomes hateful."

Put that way, the explanation was depressingly believable. He pulled at his ring. The Echelon Director massaged his forehead again. Dragonard wondered about that. Physical debility was something almost unknown to Yee's make-up.

Finally the Echelon Director shrugged the pain aside with an irritated frown, pointed to Dragonard's ring.

"You come of a good house, Wolf. Don't throw that away."

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For a bleak moment Dragonard stared down at the ring. It was old, with an oval black stone. The stone's long dimension paralleled the bone of his finger. Into the black stone were etched the images of two mythical beasts, a snarling lion and a rising phoenix. It was the sign of the House of Dragonard. The ring had been with him since childhood.

"I've thrown it away already, it seems," he said.

"Not necessarily."

Under heavy white brows, Dragonard's gold eyes flickered, curious. Yee continued:

"I choose to exercise the option of suspension. However, you must clearly understand that your protracted drinking on your first restleave and your resulting loss of efficiency, following Elena's death, have been duly noticed. At this moment your career is most certainly at stake. Still, provided you haul yourself together, it's not beyond salvage. Therefore I'm posting you onto a second restleave of one month. This time, no drinking."

The hope coursed through Dragonard like a tonic. He tried to speak, could not.

"For your information," Yee went on, "Vondamm has already filed his own charges in addition to yours. The fact that you filed first actually helped me clear my decision at the top. Vondamm's charges have been examined and dismissed under the heading of extenuation." Yee leaned forward across the work platform. "Extenuation, however, can never again be used to cancel any further charges against you. So don't make any mistakes, Wolf. Rest up. Enjoy yourself on Korb for a month, and then come back ready for—"

"Korb?"

"Yes. I'm posting you to Blaze City. I understand it's a wonderful resort. You've never been to the Free Territory, have you?"

"I was on the planet Korb once in connection with a case. Are you certain . . . ?"

Yee's amber eyes focused on his face. "Don't question me, Wolf. Just take the restleave, enjoy Blaze City, and come back prepared to work."

Yee rose, extended his hard hand.

"Good luck to you, Sectioner. We need men like you. Excuse me now, please. Departmental conference."

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Taking a foldofile off the work platform, Yee crossed the carpet and exited through his private door.

Dragonard was appalled as he left the headquarters building. He couldn't believe what he'd heard. Echelon Director Arthur Yee posting him to a city that was a known criminal haven, on a planet where the Regulators had only token jurisdiction? Insanity!

He wondered whether Yee had done it for shock effect, to make certain the cure was effective. Did he expect such an unorthodox solution to work? Dragonard had his doubts.

Enough, he said to himself. *You're giving up to defeat already if you think that way.*

There was no mistake. Private orders arrived in his pigeonhole at barracks that night. The orders were complete with falsified identifications. Of course Yee could arrange all such matters if he wanted. But it made little sense. Little sense at all.

Still, Dragonard knew he must go ahead. Refusing at this stage would be the end of everything.

V

The commercial lightship *Nova Deluxe* carried Dragonard into the Free Territory three days later.

He traveled as Wylie Dun, independently registered mercantile. Yee's staff had taken pains to give him a background that would be suitably at home in Blaze City. Most independent mercantile dealt in profitable sidelines—mainly duty-exempt smuggled goods.

The Free Territory system under the red giant Vendome-2 consisted of three planets. Yarm, the largest, was uninhabitable. The second planet out from the giant, Enterprise, was a booming commercial world, and the smallest of the three. The planet's commercial colony had been founded by rebellious immigrants from the Autus system governed by Genmo I.

In less than fifteen years, Enterprise had changed from a remote trade-staging world to a globe crowded with manufactories. This was due to the leadership of the man

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who led the first immigrant party, and was now the political ruler of the entire system.

Governing Engineer McIlhenny had held a high place in the technocratic ranks of Genmo's house. As Dragonard recalled it, there had been a disagreement over the ownership of some of McIlhenny's conceptual patents. McIlhenny gathered some other engineers and their families and fled, somehow avoiding the murder that almost always seemed the fate of those who argued with the Lords of the Exchange over matters of personal ownership.

Under Engineer McIlhenny's leadership, the Free Territory had developed thriving and sophisticated factories which built motive devices similar to those manufactured by Genmo's house. There were even rumors that certain Lords bought transpos secretly, and much more cheaply, from McIlhenny's huge warehouses on Enterprise.

The third planet, Korb, was basically primitive. A resort area had developed on its southern continent where a lush delta met a steaming sea. It was to this place, Blaze City, that *Nova Deluxe* carried Wolf Dragonard and set him down amid a mélange of old, primitive buildings hard by sparkling resort hostels.

He registered at one of the former, a seedy inn called the Pleasure Port. Night-long activity in its torch-lit corridors testified that it lived up to its name.

There was much to do and see in Blaze City: bazaars of stolen goods from all over II Galaxy; flesh theaters where the procurance-masters of the Lords sought household companions for their rulers; several amphitheaters devoted to a continuous program of races run by the huge, scaled beasts imported from the primitive continents; nonstop gambling arcades; an illegal free-metal market where bullion thieves met openly at café tables to barter their booty. Blaze City seethed with life under the sulfurous yellow sky of the southern continent, and a man could be continuously diverted, provided he was strong and wary and carried a dress dagger and a concealed blaster when he walked abroad, as Dragonard did.

He drowned himself in the tumultuous, steaming life of the town for several days. He gambled some of his Regulator benefit balance. He fought his way out of two attempted assaults and a small riot by narco addicts. There were one or two smiling, obliging girls, but the experiences were

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unsatisfactory. They left him with aching memories of Elena.

It was all largely wasted motion. He knew it when he crawled exhausted onto his thin pallet at the Pleasure Port near dawn every morning. It was wasted motion that failed to improve his mood or settle the basic problems: his sense of emptiness, lack of purpose, and the resulting doubt about whether he would ever function efficiently at his job again.

One unspoken pledge to Yee was kept. He drank nothing.

On his tenth day in Blaze City, Dragonard went out to one of the beast tracks in the afternoon.

He won and lost alternately. At afternoon's end, a sullen yellow sunset darkened, and the strange scented rain of Korb began to fall. He tucked his cowl up around his head and joined the crowds leaving by the aisleways.

The final race had been canceled. Dragonard had hoped to recoup some of his losses on that one. In a sour mood, he jostled along through the packed aisleway and thought longingly about a good cool draft of wine.

The crowd pressed tight against him. On his right, a white-furred Tapanoid talked to his mate in a weird polysyllabic singsong. On his left, two big, barbaric outbackers from one of the planet's wild continents argued over the outcome of the canceled race. One offered to wager his fighting amulets that his favorite would have come in first.

Dragonard passed under an archway at the amphitheater entrance. Here particularly dark shadows gathered, relieved only by the sickly, rainy light outside. He felt a sudden pain in his belly. His eyeballs hurt.

Everything blurred, slid away at an oblique angle. The dark rushed up around him. . . .

"Apologies," he muttered a moment later when he came to. He'd stumbled against the Tapanoid. The creature was singsonging loudly, presumably protesting the rudeness of some spectators. The Tapanoid and his mate hurried on.

Dragonard brushed at his shabby cloak, blinked. His mind had gone completely blank for a microsecond. He didn't know why. The idea terrified him a little.

"Stranger-not-of-Korb?"

With a start Dragonard realized that the voice was addressing him. He turned, saw a whiskered alien beckoning from the shadows near the base of the arch. He didn't im-

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mediately recognize the planetary origin of the alien. Uneven calico-colored whiskers sprouted from a head that resembled a sphere of pink gelatin.

The alien beckoned with fingers that were nothing more than vestigial pink stumps. The creature wore a patchwork cape and cowl and, Dragonard discovered as he approached, smelled of beast-dung.

The creature was a genemute, he realized. Probably one of the host of pimps and spoil-sellers who lingered at public places all over Blaze City.

"I don't want your sister, your mother, or your cousin," Dragonard said to the genemute.

"Stranger-not-of-Korb, you have a pleasing mien."

"I don't want your brother either."

"No, no! The Stranger-not-of-Korb misinterprets. I am here—" a jingle of belt pouch that bulged with credits—"specially hired as an emissary of a most attractive woman of the quality. She saw you in the stands. She was taken with your appearance. She wishes to make your acquaintance, in order that you might pursue mutual pleasure." The alien's glob of a mouth opened in a wet giggle. His calico whiskers quaked. A gnat flew out of them.

Dragonard could imagine the female horror who had tried to arrange such a meeting. "Where is this beautiful dream?" he said with sarcasm.

"Yonder. Pleasure incarnate awaiting."

Wolf Dragonard turned, ready to laugh. He caught his breath.

At the flyer platform just outside the archway, a young, slender woman of astonishing loveliness watched him from the port of her hired craft. Her hair was a mountain of cosmetically treated silver. Her eyes were cold, like deep winter ice. Her mouth was painted in the fashionable shade of currant. Small jewels gleamed at the high collar of her cloak. She stared directly at him, neither embarrassed nor bold, but merely honest.

"That's a beautiful woman," he agreed.

"She wishes only the privilege of conversing with you. Please speak to her so that I may keep my earned purse."

The frosted eyes watched through gaps in the crowd. Dragonard suspected all sorts of deadfalls but, after all, he did have his blaster snugged out of sight and his dress dagger handy.

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"Keep the purse," he said to the mutant. He walked toward the flyer in the yellow rain.

He moved up the stairs to the flyer platform. The woman's request might be genuine. It was a common practice for runaway matrons to find diversion in Blaze City. But he found he just couldn't summon much interest.

He approached the flyer's polished hull. The woman sat back a little to avoid the slanting rain. Dragonard was taken with her frosty blue eyes. The rest of her face was a little too perfect for his liking.

"I came over so your hired man wouldn't lose his fee," he said.

"Did my hired man transmit my interest?"

"Explicitly. But—"

"Are you an abnorm?" she asked in a calm voice.

Hot color built up in his face. "Do I look like one?"

"Definitely not. That's why your lack of interest is puzzling. Perhaps there's another girl?"

He felt the pain of it as he said, "There was."

"At least we could ride together into the city. You'll never get aboard the public flyers in this downpour." Again that shamelessly honest stare, and a delicious up-curling of her currant mouth. "You might change your mind, you know. I'm lonely and bored. You might find the trip amusing."

Dragonard looked around for signs of a trap. He saw nothing unusual. A bit of the woman's scent drifted to him, a pleasing cinnamon tang.

The woman raised one silver eyebrow. "Well?"

Dragonard grinned. "Hell yes, why not?"

He climbed inside the flyer and dogged the hatch, settling down beside her on the plush seat. The rented flyer was not one of the cheap per-hour models.

"My name's Wylie Dun. Mercantilist."

She let him touch the fingers of her extended hand. "My name is Helene."

"No last name?"

"At this stage I find it a bit more discreet just to say Helene. Who can tell about later?"

Her smile curled again, slowly. Dragonard's blood felt the smile for the first time.

The programmed flyer rose through the rain toward the jumble of the Blaze City skyline. Dragonard settled back,

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feeling relaxed. He was about to ask a question when he noticed an unmarked flyer bearing up on them to starboard.

He saw a pair of unpleasant faces in the forward ports. The flyer veered in much too close.

"Stand by, gentlefolk!" boomed an amplified voice from the strange craft. "Boarding!"

"I'll be damned twice," he growled. "Skypads. You don't waste much time, woman. We've been off the ground half a minute and your friends are here already."

Helene's frosted eyes went round. Dissembling? Or genuine terror?

"Wylie Dun, I do not know what you mean."

"Hell you don't," Dagonard said as he reached for his dagger.

"Boarding!" thundered the voice from the other flyer.

The pilot brought the craft slamming up alongside in hatch-to-hatch position. Suckerpods locked the vessels together.

In a puff of smoke, both hatches disintegrated and the skypads swarmed through.

VI

"There's a likely patch of gems," said the first of the thieves as he came crawling into the flyer, a blaster in his hand.

His mate clambered in after him. The first thief pointed to the cluster of jewels on Helene's collar.

"Relieve the gentledame of her valuables while I do the same for the gentlesire."

The skypad stood up. He was tall, forced to bend his head in the confined space. He grinned unpleasantly at Dragonard, who all at once seemed to have collapsed on the cushions in a jellylike posture.

"This one don't look too well appointed, Taddeus," the skypad said. Dragonard curled his fingers on the hilt of his dagger, which he was concealing under his cloak. He was conscious of Helene watching him with dismay, even contempt.

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"Please," Dragonard said in a mewling voice. "Please, your worships, I'm creditless."

"Let's have a see," muttered the big skypad, reaching for Dragonard's cloak.

As the man pulled the cloak aside, Dragonard had the skypad where he wanted him: off balance.

He shifted his knife hand past the skypad's wrist, thrust up through the man's grimy doublet. The skypad screamed, lurched back, fell.

The second thief had been joined by a third. Both converged on Helene. She clawed at their faces. Dragonard caught the one called Taddeus from behind, dragged him off.

Taddeus spun around, spitting obscenities and saliva. Dragonard slashed his knife back and forth across the thief's cheeks, laying them open. Taddeus went to his knees with a shriek.

Dragonard kicked him. Taddeus crawled through the blown hatches back into his own vessel. The other skypad followed hastily. Angry voices greeted their failure.

"*Dun!*" Helene screamed.

Dragonard pivoted, his gold eyes wild with anger. The first skypad had raised himself on one elbow, was leveling his blaster at Dragonard's belly.

The thief's doublet was sodden with blood. His eyes looked maniacal. Dragonard had just a fraction of time to dive out of the way as the blaster cut loose, sizzling the air with heat.

As he fell Dragonard's mind and body functioned instinctively. Training in the Regulators had prepared him. He executed a wrist-flick that sent the dagger flying like a silver insect. The weighted knife drove into the thief's right eye.

Blood foamed. The skypad screamed. His fingers kept jerking the firing bar on his blaster.

Dragonard scrambled forward, seized the thief's wrist, snapped it with a loud crack. Then he tore his knife out of the man's head and rammed it to the hilt into the thief's belly.

Panting like an animal, he rocked back on his heels. The skypad burred and died.

The blaster had done damage. Most of the starboard side of Helene's flyer had been burned away, as well as

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a correspondingly large section of the thief craft. Terrified, those in command of the other vessel broke the sucker-pod connections. The criminal flyer veered off again and descended swiftly through the rain toward the ground haze settling in over Blaze City.

Dragonard picked up the dead thief and pitched him out the hole and watched him fall into the murk.

Then, breathing deep, he wiped the dress dagger on his cloak and put it away.

In the struggle Helene's peacock-colored cape had been twisted awry. Beneath it she wore one of the semitransparent gowns affected these days by the women of quality. The raw breath of fear made her breasts rise and fall quickly.

Dragonard sat down beside her. Wind and rain beat down at them through the rent in the hull. But the flyer's programmed guidance system was evidently undamaged. They proceeded steadily toward the blooms of torchlight flickering in the murk below.

"I misjudged you, mercantilist Dun," Helene said.

A shrug. "The best way to deal with filth like that is to convince them they're invincible. They go to pieces when they discover otherwise."

"I think you have had considerable experience at killing," she said.

"Among other things. I am a mercantilist, after all."

"And a much more interesting one than I thought originally."

He faced her in the blowing mist. He was acutely conscious of their nearness and their isolation as the flyer dropped and dropped through the red murk. From below the unceasing noise of Blaze City began to penetrate the whistle of wind.

He studied her beautifully sculptured face. "Those sky-pads weren't yours."

"No."

"You didn't arrange this."

"Not the attack, no."

His smile was brittle. "This time, Helene, I do believe I believe you."

She bent forward. "And I thank you." She kissed him briefly with her cinnamon mouth.

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Then she drew back. Once more she regarded him with that utterly uninhibited stare.

"Now do you think we might develop a relationship to our mutual pleasure?"

"We might."

"Where are you staying?"

"An inn called the Pleasure Port. You wouldn't like it."

"I have a villa upcountry, Dun. I made a bad marriage, you see." A smile of self-contempt. "That's an old and tattered tale in Blaze City. But in my case it's a true one. My husband was quite a number of years older. I endured his . . . physical inattentions as long as possible. We entered judiciary proceedings. He died of a seizure during the hearings. Thus I inherited his estates as well as his import-export business. It's a respectable trade. A professional manager runs it for me. It's mostly confined to exchange between Korb and Enterprise, but it does handsomely enough. It keeps me in most things a woman could want." Her fingers touched Dragonard's hand. "Most things."

She leaned closer. "You have emotional attachments, don't you?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Don't let it concern you. My wants are simple. Spend a few days at my villa. It's my only way to repay you for your assistance just now. And who knows?" She smiled in the depths of those frosted eyes. "I may be able to enliven your interest after all."

Gold eyes brooding, Dragonard watched her a moment longer. Now that the shock of the attack had passed, her presence exhilarated him. Restored his self-confidence a little—

He put his mouth down on hers and kissed her again.

Leaning back, he said, "We might discuss your generous offer at supper."

Helene laughed and pressed close. The flyer slowed its descent for landing in the bright red murk.

Shortly after dawn the next day, they left for Helene's villa in the uplands.

VII

A faceless robot drew an old ivory plectrum across the strings of an equally ancient stringharp and waked forlorn, sensual music in the dim hall. Torches blew in the evening breeze. Outside, the crystalline peaks of the upcountry reflected the waning light like so much glass.

The half dozen servants who staffed the turreted house on the loaf-shaped hillside had gone to their wing for the night.

Except for the robot standing in a far corner, they were alone.

Dragonard lay on a contour couch drinking the last of his wine. It had a delicious dry tang. He set the crystal goblet down, stifled a yawn-within-a-smile.

"Am I really so boring, Wylie?" Helene teased.

"Not at all. It's just that I'm sated."

She made a moue. Her mouth glistened in the torchfire. "With food."

"And other things."

A lazy pleasure showed in his gold eyes. To a great extent, it was genuine.

The past four days had proved more therapeutic than he could possibly have imagined. His skin had regained some of its tone. He felt rested. He was clean and trim and had even gotten over appropriating the wardrobe of Helene's former husband. The clothes fitted him well.

Across the remains of the succulent meal they'd just consumed, Helene leaned against the pillows of striped myx fur. Her hair was a peak of silver. She was beautiful in a simple but costly tunic of silverlink.

Helene's husband, importer-exporter Baldur Brightstone, had obviously been a man of wealth and not a few illegal coanctions. The rambling house was equipped with a number of mechanical devices, including the robot harpist, that normally could be found only in the palaces of the courtiers who hung around the thrones of the Lords of the Exchange.

Helene lifted a tapered ewer. "More wine?"

Dragonard shook his head. Tonight, for the first time,

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he'd allowed himself a drink. He had taken five goblets with his food. Even so, the effect after abstinence was rather pronounced. He was growing pleasurably drunk.

"I'm sorry this visit has to end tomorrow," she told him.

"Yes, I've enjoyed it too."

She touched his hand. Bangles on her wrist jingled softly. "I'm glad. Perhaps some of the pain of the past has been erased?"

"More than a little."

The scented wind stirred transparent hangings at the arched windows. Or was it only the delicious scent of Helene's skin blown to him? He inhaled deeply.

"Unfortunately," Helene added, "my husband's business does now and then require my presence."

"So you said. Trade deeds to be sealed." Dragonard grinned. "Hell with 'em."

Her fingers slipped into his palm, caressed. "I wish I could say that. I can't."

He bent, kissed the soft inside of her arm. "My bad luck."

He sat back. Helene poured herself another goblet of wine. She drank half of it. When she spoke this time, her speech was blurred.

"You're really a very remarkable man. A man of parts. An excellent swimmer—"

"You have an excellent pool. And an excellent stable of riding beasts, I might add."

One of her silver eyebrows cocked. "I meant to ask where you learned to ride so well."

Carefull Sometimes in their conversation he had to catch himself before he made a slip that might have revealed his Regulator training. He shrugged.

"I haven't always been engaged in the disreputable career of a mercantilist."

"What were you before? You're rather secretive about all that."

"I find it's safer that way." He chuckled. "You get chased by fewer angry women when you desert them."

She smiled and sipped more wine. "Do you really have to go back to that wretched system of yours?"

"The Craxbilladyes aren't bad planets for a man in my trade."

"Ruled by whom? I think you told me but I've forgotten."

"The Mishubi house. Electronic devices. Communications."

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"Which benefit only the Lords of the Exchange."

Dragonard shrugged again. "It's the way of the world."

Her response to this was an emphatic shake of her head. "Not in the Free Territory, Wylie. A man like you could prosper on Korb and Enterprise. The police don't have more than a token role in the affairs of the Free Territory. It's public knowledge that Engineer McIlhenny only allows the Regulators' presence so he can forestall outright hostility with the Lords. Otherwise, he runs the Territory his way. With a minimum of restraint, a maximum of tolerance for—" the frosted eyes veiled a moment, luminous, secretive—"free enterprise."

Dragonard laughed. "I've noticed. Enterprising skypads, enterprising whores—"

"Nevertheless, Korb is an enormously profitable planet."

"So is Enterprise, I'm told."

"Of course!"

She poured more wine. Her fingers slipped on the ewer. She made a polite recovery, dabbed her currant-painted mouth with linen. Then she leaned forward.

"That's why I wouldn't live anywhere but the Territory, don't you see? Engineer McIlhenny pours a big part of his manufacturing profits into making the Territory go. Do you know about all the public facilities and collegiums and parks on Enterprise?"

He allowed that he didn't. She described them, impressively, then continued:

"The atmosphere here is exciting, progressive. Contrast that with the rest of II. Who rules? The Lords. Who prospers? The Lords. Who has the only chance to make a really spectacular fortune? The Lords! That's why McIlhenny left Genmo's house, rebelled and fled."

"I understand McIlhenny's production is beginning to cut into Genmo's control of transportation."

"A bit." She gave a muzzy nod. "A bit. That puling old man! His name's the worst obscenity I know."

"You're obviously a loyal citizen of the Territory." Dragonard smiled.

Suddenly there was a strange, almost vulpine cast to Helene's face. He tried to fathom it. He had trouble even focusing his eyes. Quite without warning, the wine had induced drowsiness, compounded by his exhaustion from their six-hour ride on beastback earlier in the day.

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Helene seemed uncertain about speaking. At last she made up her mind.

"I don't mind telling you one more thing, Wylie my love. Lord Genmo will very shortly be taken down another few pegs."

Dragonard tensed. Wylie Dun might show an absence of interest. Wolf Dragonard could not. He struggled to sit up. His eyelids weighed like chunks of metal.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you know," she whispered, "about the Seven Stars?"

The warning bells clattered in his brains. They had a muffled sound. *Wake up!* But it was a rough go. Double vision made him see two Helenes, two torches, two strumming robots. Keeping his tone casual, he answered:

"The symbols of Lord Genmo's house?"

"The gems, yes. The seven gems he carries with him everywhere."

Dragonard blinked. The double vision vanished. "They're heavily guarded. They're priceless."

Helene snorted. "Obviously! Because the Lords manipulate gems as they manipulate everything else in the whole damned galaxy. The Seven Stars are synthetics because it's too easy for natural gems to be synthesized in a lapi-chem lab. Rubies, emeralds—common as dust! So the Lords had to create their own artificial varieties, and limit the production so that a whole new order of wealth could be established. An order of wealth they could control! *That's* what makes the Seven Stars so priceless. And—"

She hesitated. She drew in a breath. The silverlink tautened across her fine breasts.

"—and, my dear Wylie-love, that is also what makes the Seven Stars so very much worth stealing."

The enormity of it stunned him like a physical blow. He had trouble even accepting the absurd idea. He wanted to laugh.

He didn't because, even in his foggy state, he recognized the seriousness of her words.

"No one could steal the Seven Stars," he said with some difficulty. His head pinged and rang. "No one."

She wagged her finger. "Don't be so certain, Wylie-love."

He realized she was more than a little drunk herself.

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That was probably why she'd ventured the fantastic statement.

"Who could do it?" he demanded. "You?"

Helene shook her head. "I'm only interested in the undertaking because I'd like to see that withered old man treated as he deserves."

"Then who?"

"Oh . . ." Another wave. She was almost giddy now. "Certain friends. Not savory people, perhaps. But very brave and clever and resourceful people."

Again that hesitation, as if she wondered how far she dared go. The wine made her laugh with every other breath, and she teased him with her eyes because he looked thunderstruck. He was.

"Poor Wylie." She touched his chin, glided her mouth over his. "Poor mercantilist Wylie. Dream dreams of *size*, Wylie-love! We do in the Free Territory. The plan is no drugdream. These friends of mine—why, they've already gone to Genmo's system."

Another jolt. "Already gone to the Autus worlds?"

"Yes, Jenny and her—ah, but I have probably said too much."

"No, I'm very interested."

"But trustworthy?"

"You decide."

She did, with a muzzy smile. She drank more wine. Dragonard fought to stay awake. "Jenny," he repeated. "Who's Jenny?"

"Jenny Sable. A very clever thief-girl. She'll put it off, she and those working with her. She's already in Fulldrive right now. In fact she's been living in Wheel for months, detailing the plan. The plan to . . . get around all of Genmo's prancing dummy soldiers . . . all his . . . detecting gear at his . . . summer palace. . . . She'll even find a way to take . . . the Seven Stars out of the congruent space-time where they really ex—"

Helene gasped in mid-word. She pressed a palm over her eyes.

"God help me, love, I'm very drunk."

"The whole idea's incredible," Dragonard told her. "Impossible."

Slowly Helene drew her hand down. Her frosted eyes had trouble focusing. She stroked the back of his hand.

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"Yes, Wylie. You believe that. Keep believing that. It'll be safer for all concerned."

"Ridiculous joke," he muttered. But his mind was hammering.

A fantastic notion. No one could pull it off. Only madmen would try.

And yet, what she'd said about the Free Territory hating the House of Genmo was true. What if a skilled band of thieves was really dedicated to the attempt? To his knowledge no one had ever tried to steal the Seven Stars. Perhaps the obstacles existed mostly in the minds of those to whom Genmo's powers loomed largest.

What if it *could* be done?

Helene drifted out to the balcony for a bit of air. Dragonard thrust his palms against the old parquet floor. He had to move, go to her, cast off his dissembler's mask. This was a matter no Regulator could ignore.

Slippery, the parquet seemed to float away beneath his hands. The wine sizzled and fumed inside him. A quick, wracking nausea seized him. He couldn't stand up.

The plank-hum of the stringharp grew thunder-loud. Helene diminished into the distance, a weaving figure silhouetted against crystalline peaks that reflected the night stars over Korb.

Dragonard tottered up at last. His right leg doubled under him.

He pitched over on his face, unconscious.

VIII

"Your report is almost ready, Sectioner. I have a feeling—well, never mind, sir."

The light-faceted banks of the memory machine glowed, changed colors. Immense tapedrums revolved. The room in the subground of the run-down Regulator station in Blaze City was damp and poorly lit. Even the memory machine showed signs of corrosion.

Wolf Dragonard was conscious of his disheveled appearance, his pretentious sable doublet, his foppish boots of soft yellow leather. At the villa these had seemed ap-

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propriate. Waking in the same costume in his garret at the Pleasure Port, with absolutely no memory of anything after the time he passed out, he felt ludicrous.

And tense with worry. The tension showed in hollows beneath his gold eyes.

Dragonard had come directly to the Regulator station on foot. The trip through the streets was an ordeal. His stomach churned. His temples vibrated. His eyes watered. He wondered whether Helene's wine had been drugged. Or had he just poured too much of it into a weakened system too suddenly?

In any case, waves of nausea swept over him as he identified himself to the duty officer. He was turned over to this trim young Regulator for the handling of his inquiries.

Clearly the young officer thought that the Sectioner was a peculiar specimen. Dragonard insisted on information without revealing the reason. His prerogative, of course. But the way he did it—vaguely, jerkily—plainly made the officer wonder. He knew he looked and smelled bad. What was worse, all the relaxation that had rebuilt his confidence at the villa might never have happened.

"How much longer, Sperro?" he demanded.

"Another moment, Sectioner." The officer was deferential, humoring him.

Can they smell failure on me? Dragonard wondered. *Or madness?*

He really wondered whether he was sane. Theft of the Seven Stars? No rational person—

Stop. Criminals were never rational. Criminals who lived in the Free Territory and despised the name of Lord Genmo I would be less rational still.

Chattering, the memory machine began to disgorge its taped record. The officer, Sperro, slid the tape through his palms, sight-reading the perforations.

"Bad luck, sir. There is no citizen record of anyone named Baldur Brightstone on Korb."

"Brightstone's dead," Dragonard shot back. "That could account for—"

"No record of an import-export firm with **that** name either."

"The firm might operate under some other name."

"Legal principals would have to be registered, Sectioner."

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"His wife," Dragonard breathed. "Helene Brightstone. She'd be registered."

Slip and whisper, Sperro slid the tape along, read the punches. "No citizen of that name either, Sectioner."

"There has to be a record!" Dragonard shouted. "The machine's wrong!"

"Sir—" Sperro scratched his chin, his face absolutely impassive. At last he took the risk. "You know they never are."

Confused, Dragonard stared at the interplay of lights. "She used another name, then. All the names I heard were fictitious."

"That could very possibly be, sir. Of course the machine would have no way of cross-checking. The physical description you gave us"—the officer slid the last of the tape through his palms, slid it past the point where the perforations ended—"does not match any descriptions of habituals which we have stored."

For a moment he was tempted to have Sperro run the name Jenny Sable. He thought better of it. Already a terrible doubt of his own memory was beginning to torture him. Probably Jenny Sable was just another fictitious name like Helene Brightstone—

Brightstone? It registered in his weariness at last. Brightstone: gem.

What a perfect false name. What a grand private joke to flaunt on fools.

Dragonard lurched forward to where Sperro was shutting down the memory machine, flicking switches that killed the humming. He closed his hand on Sperro's arm.

"The villa. Her villa. I was there, mister. I went with her in a flyer because—well, it was part of this investigation."

Obviously Sperro doubted that too. He had somehow sensed the lunacy of the situation. Dragonard scowled. Sperro refrained from making a comment. Dragonard was almost talking to himself.

"We flew over a watercourse for a good part of the way. A watercourse that was long dried up. Purple at the bottom—"

"That would be the Northwest Tributary," Sperro said.

At least that much was established. "I want a flyer," he said. "And a pilot. You'll come along, mister."

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"Yes, sir," Sperro said with obvious reluctance. "I'll see what I can do."

Through the yellowing sundown the flyer chattered along. Dragonard sat far forward in the senior command position. He watched the landscape. Below, the flyer's shadow chased over a huge bend in the dried channel.

"I remember this bending," he growled. "Turn about ninety degrees left. Yes—those peaks. Those highest peaks ahead. And the loaf-shaped hill just beneath—"

The words died in his throat. Even at this distance he could clearly see that the hillside was bare.

Sperro issued orders to the pilot. The flyer swung. It proceeded toward the hillside and set down at the base. Dragonard was first off, a frightful sight now. His close-cut white hair ruffled in the wind. His beard had sprouted, white too. He went stumbling up the hillside where stunted rootlike vegetation clung. At the summit he turned, blinking out over the wasteland.

"There *was* a villa here!"

The wind fragmented his words, tossed them out over the forlorn plain like nonsense. Sperro and the pilot were tiny figures watching him from the hillside's base. Something fighting inside him made him yell all the louder: "It stood right here! Huge! With servants, pools, a flyer strip. I *saw* it!"

Whistling, the wind made the words drift off and die.

"Come up here!" he yelled. "They must have moved earth with machines."

Under Dragonard's direction they searched the terrain closely for an hour. They discovered no sign of earth-moving. Once Dragonard turned and saw Sperro and the pilot shaking their heads. There was cold terror in him as sundown came.

IX

In less than three days, Wolf Dragonard confronted his Echelon Director again.

The scene had an uneasy familiarity and Dragonard knew why. The situation had not merely changed. It had wors-

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ened. This was reflected in the doubtful expression in Arthur Yee's eyes as he studied Dragonard, his slate-colored hands tented together.

"There's no more to the story?"

Dragonard shifted uncomfortably. Unshaven, he had come directly to the complex on Bromdaagar-8 from the public spaceport. He had slept badly on the voyage through hyperspace cramped in a fourth-class communal cabin. He felt the lack of rest, of nourishment, of some form of stabilizing reality.

Yee himself looked almost as tired. Dragonard's message had wakened him in the middle of the night. It was now close to dawn. Across the huge facilities of the headquarters area, few living creatures could be seen. Drone patrollers wheeled down empty stone avenues under lonely lights.

"Not much more," Dragonard told him. "We searched for signs that the villa had been razed. We didn't find any. I took the flyer back to Blaze City and booked passage here immediately."

Yee compressed the tips of his fingers against the skin just above his eyebrows. When the apparent pain subsided he said, "An entire villa couldn't be razed overnight, Wolf."

Why is he staring at me that way? Dragonard thought. Does he think it's all the result of another binge?

"I got to realizing that on the transport back here, sir. There's an alternate possibility."

"What's that?"

"None of it happened."

Arthur Yee's left eyebrow crooked. "A dream? Something on that order?"

He almost didn't dare answer. But too much was at stake for him to worry now about being ridiculed.

"Something far more concrete, sir. An induced hallucination. We know it's possible if you have the proper drugs and a few bought chemos to handle the formulation. The men—the drugs—they'd all be available on Korb. Remember my describing the blackout as I was coming from the beast-track? It lasted a second, no more. What if the whole sequence of events from then on—meeting that woman, the skypad attack, her villa and that last dinner—were all carefully detailed projections planted in my head? What if I was somewhere else the whole time? And whoever planned

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it only brought me back to the Pleasure Port so I could wake up there wearing those fop clothes?"

Yee digested the implications. "There was no other physical evidence but the clothes?"

"None. Nothing else to show any of it ever happened. The Pleasure Port was a hole, sir. Men and women and things in between coming and going all night long. I could have been away from it for days, then been lugged in late one night unconscious, and no one would have paid any attention."

A flight of Regulator scouts rose from a launchpad in the distance, eight blue spires of flame that dwindled to vapor trails where the southern horizon of Bromdaagar-8 grew pale. Yee activated his humidor, inhaled a carcinofree cigarro.

"Such an operation would cost plenty of credits," Yee told him.

"Yes, but technically it isn't impossible." Dragonard found his voice growing raw. "There's simply no other explanation."

"But one."

Then Dragonard was standing, gold eyes angry. "If you think it's delusion—"

"If I thought so," Yee interrupted, "I'd have ordered you psyched five minutes ago. Sit down. Have one of these and let's both try to keep our heads."

He tossed Dragonard a fuming cigarro, quickly covered his eyes as one of the sudden pains attacked. He swore under his breath. Finally he went on:

"Let's assume that what you say is true, Wolf. What was the purpose of hallucinating you and making it seem that your encounter with this Brightstone woman was real?"

"To—hell, I know it makes no sense—to inform the Regulators that someone was going to try to steal the Seven Stars."

Arthur Yee nodded. "You were right in your observation earlier. One of the biggest barriers to such a theft is the fact—*supposed* fact—that it is impossible. Which is not at all true. A crime like that is only"—Yee waved. The cigarro traced blue spirals around his long hair—"well, impossible to the ninety-ninth percentile. There is a margin of feasibility. The right group, with the right leader and more

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nerve than sanity, might get close." A long thoughtful puff. "The trouble is, the Regulators deal with people like that all the time. So we ought to run a check on the ringleader. What did you say her name was?"

"Sable," Dragonard answered. "Jenny Sable."

The Echelon Chief programmed a query. Within half a dozen minutes a taped report spewed back into his hands. He read it with fast, experienced glances.

"Take heart, my friend. Sable, Jenny, cleared input customs in the city of Fulldrive on the planet Wheel in the Autus system two weeks and four days ago. Her routine profile revealed antisocial tendencies. Customs checked further, found that she had a reputation as a skilled thief." *Whisk*, the tape whipped through his hands. "Including two accusatory judgments on other planets in the past three years. Both dismissed. She was observed for one week. Nothing suspicious. Observation was suspended." Yee crumpled the tape and tossed it on the worktop. "Smile, Wolf. You're not insane after all."

Dragonard shook his head. His relief was immense. And yet, immediately, a new and even vaster problem began to coalesce. Yee voiced it:

"Why in the name of the bleeding wounds tell the Regulators?"

For a time they both pondered it silently. Dragonard's skin crawled. He sensed the hidden unfolding of a plot far too large for him to grasp.

"Let me speculate a little," Yee said at last. "I'm recalling your friend Helene's little speech. She was correct in at least one thing. There is indeed a growing tension between the house of Genmo I and the Free Territory. Governing Engineer McIlhenny's planet Enterprise is developing motive devices that are becoming a genuine economic threat to Lord Genmo. McIlhenny left the Autus system in rebellion. Even now relations are polite but strained. Witness how he just barely tolerates the presence of the Regulators, and gives them ragtag quarters at that. Now, if thieves from the Free Territory ever attempted to steal the Seven Stars . . ." Yee left the thought hanging.

And Dragonard finished it: "Diplomatic repercussions."

"Only the beginning, Wolf. Possibly outright hostility."

"War?"

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"It's not out of the question. McIlhenny could retool quickly."

"Then what do we do?"

"Exactly what the Regulators are meant to do. Look into it."

Yee rose, began to pace the thick carpet. He tugged at his ear for a moment or so, then stepped to a wall shelved with a reader and banks of microbooks. He plugged in a control-rod, adjusted switches along its surface. He released the rod.

The facade of reader and microbook cartridges sank into the floor. Behind the false front was a massive infobank, all its lights dark. Yee thumbed a switch, got a response, asked in a low voice for certain stored data. Gauges on the infobank began to stream with light.

"Yes, we are obliged to investigate the matter," Yee told him. "On a very secret basis, I might add. I hate to be dismissed for senility when I'm this close to retirement. Steal the Seven Stars indeed! In any case, I'm going to ask you to undertake the project, Wolf. Discover whether this theft plot is real or just someone's drugdream. If it's real, we must move to countermand position as soon as possible. I would say, basically, that the assignment breaks into two parts. One is mine. I'll use the resources of the infobanks on all the planets to which we have access to pursue the question of this woman Helene. Is she real or not? If not, who's behind her? You—well, you'll go to Fulldrive. Find the thieves if you can. Find this Jenny Sable."

Again self-doubt tortured Dragonard. He wasn't certain that he would be mentally able to cope with the strain of —*God!* When was he going to get hold of himself? The stakes allowed no hesitation.

"Yes, sir," he said. "And if I find her?"

"The next step will be dictated by your circumstances."

"What if it means following the thieves to Whitepeake? That's where the Stars are now, isn't it?"

Again Yee nodded. "Genmo will be at his summer residence for another two-month. As you know, Whitepeake's virtually unpopulated. There are no Regulator stations there because of the lack of cities and the planet's isolated position in hyperdrive lanes. That's why I called for the information a moment ago."

At the infobank Yee programmed a pair of screens. Two

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faces appeared, backlit, with the illusion of dimensional reality.

"On Whitepeake, you can appeal for assistance from either of these two men."

Yee's ebony finger pointed left, to an ascetic, emaciated face.

"Controller Bludblom. Very close to Lord Genmo. One of his most trusted advisors. Or, if something more physical is needed—"

A finger to the right, to a man with handsome features almost too perfectly formed. Dragonard didn't particularly care for the aura of arrogance that surrounded the latter portrait.

"—Marshal Ian Waterloo, Genmo's military commander."

Dragonard glanced from one to the other. The moneyman, Bludblom, placid, but not without a certain cunning in his lidded eyes. The militarist, Waterloo, whose face might have been the creation of the entertainment studios of the House of Arsgnat.

"Both of them have Genmo's ear," Yee concluded. "One apiece."

"Is there a favorite?" Dragonard wanted to know.

The Echelon Chief shook his head. "And as a result, I understand the two men are intensely jealous of one another. Genmo has had many mistresses but his germ plasm was defective at birth and he has no heirs. He will likely be succeeded by either Bludblom or Waterloo assuming the hereditary title. It's hard to say which rival is the more powerful."

"I've heard both names," Dragonard commented. "Bludblom's called a genius."

"And little else. High up as I am, I hear the gossip. There's precious little about the Controller. His personality is unknown. He's a cipher. I suppose men who actually control the financial balance columns have been that way since the First Home."

Dragonard studied the glowing images. "And Waterloo?"

"A top reputation as a militarist. But aggressive. Even tending to the paranoid. Overly hasty on occasion, I can vouch. Marshal Waterloo would be the logical man to whom a Regulator would appeal for help, though."

A low ringing disturbed the quiet. The Echelon Chief reached into his tunic, pulled out a small gleaming com-

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municator. Dragonard suppressed a smile. He recalled Yee's close relationship with his wife Tomira, and the linked platinum instruments she had given him for his birthday several years ago. There had been barracks jokes about it.

Standing too far from Yee to see the miniature screen, Dragonard nevertheless heard the Echelon Chief's wife ask, "Arthur? How soon will you come home to rest?"

"Shortly, Tomira."

"Please do. Remember you have an early appointment for the psychodynamics lab."

"I had forgotten, my dear. Thank you for reminding me."

"Arthur, you need your rest. Please come home soon."

"I will, I promise. And thank you for reminding me about the meds. Signal and out."

Yee replaced the glittering instrument, noticed Dragonard staring at nothing.

"You needn't look so damned evasive, Wolf. Yes, I am seeing the meds at the psychodee lab because of the pains in my head. Unfortunately the diagnostic machines find nothing amiss. The pains get no better. That's enough of my problem, though. Let's suspend the talk tonight. You look exhausted and I know I am. I appreciate your reporting promptly when you arrived—"

Dragonard's tongue felt thick. "I wasn't sure what your reaction would be, sir."

"My reaction is quite simple. We cannot afford to assume that this talk of stealing the Seven Stars is someone's crazy joke. Let's pray it is, but not operate on that assumption. If we dismiss it and there is something to it, we invite catastrophe."

And Dragonard knew Yee was right.

The pneumodoors parted. They left the chamber. A Regulator on guard came to sleepy attention, saluted. The two men strolled down a walktube which separated from the vast building to become a plexiwall cylinder leading to the tower adjoining. Far below through the transparent floor gleamed the tiny lights of the administrative flyer park. Up ahead a branching in the walktube led down toward this park. At the branching Yee stopped.

"Report to me again late in the morning, Wolf. We'll map plans in more detail."

"I will, sir."

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Yee scrutinized his officer. "There's one final question I didn't ask."

"Sir?"

"Do you feel fit enough to take on the mission I've suggested?"

Doubt born of fatigue and mental turmoil assailed him. He fought it. He was sure Yee heard the uncertainty in his voice as he answered, "Yes, sir, I do."

Yee nodded. "A wise answer. Frankly, rumors about you have been widespread since you went on restleave. Nasty talk, really: Wolf Dragonard's finished. Wolf Dragonard will be given medical separation. Perhaps our friend the Interrogation Agent has started some of them. But the point is, I have been questioned by the highest levels about my handling of your case. Your career is still very much in doubt. Complete this job successfully and things can be as they were before the unfortunate incident with Vondamm. Let this case be the answer to the scoffers, Wolf. You're a good Regulator. Stay that way. My reputation is at stake too. I made the decision on second restleave."

Dragonard hardened his mouth. "I'll be all right, sir."

He wondered, though. He wondered.

Elena—

He was thirsty. A little wine would—*no!*

Echelon Chief Yee clapped his shoulder. "Excellent! As a matter of fact, I do think the trip to Korb helped your spirits. Personally I would never have thought of sending you to a place like Blaze City for a holiday. I'm certainly glad you suggested it yourself. In the morning, then, Wolf. Good night!"

Humming an old military air, Yee turned off down the sloping walktube and was soon lost against the twinkle of lights from the flyer park far below.

Dragonard groped to the wall and stood there, staring out.

"I'm certainly glad you suggested it yourself."

Yee didn't remember his own orders.

Or did he?

Was he pretending on purpose? Did the headaches have anything to do with it? Was the Echelon Chief breaking too?

Shaken, Dragonard proceeded along the walktube. The immediate surroundings faded, replaced in imagination by a surrealistic sense of immense gears meshing. He smelled a plot

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of such vast scope that he couldn't begin to assimilate it. Helene. The Seven Stars. Yee severely disturbed . . .

Stumbling on toward the barracks tower, Dragonard shuddered and wished for the light of day.

X

For nine days Wolf Dragonard lay anesthetized in the surgeries of the Regulator base.

At the end of that time, Wylie Dun, mercantilist—a Wylie Dun with long black hair, a more square and formidable face, thicker hands, altered print-patterns and dental capping—conferred with Echelon Chief Yee a last time. He then boarded a relay for the commercial lightport. There he caught the giant transport for Wheel.

The planet Wheel was old, primitive. Its principal cities were widely separated on vast, deserted continents. The city of Fulldrive had a population of just under a million. Two-thirds of Fulldrive was a ramshackle collection of primitive apartments on old, winding streets. The night life was only a shade more restrained than that of Blaze City. It was more furtive because of the heavy presence of the Regulators.

The remaining third of the city contained relatively newer living areas, lighted by powerplants rather than torches. In this section lived those who enjoyed Genmo's favor, principally the technical staffs who operated the huge test complex on the city's western edge. This facility shook the old town day and night with the thunder of transpos. Behind the guarded walls lay the primary testing site of Genmo I's vehicular empire.

Drowned in the roar of engines but softened by the flicker of torches that were never put out in the narrow ways, Fulldrive crouched on the edge of a dry and dusty basin many leagues across. From the city's highest points a newcomer could look out east and see pastel vistas of blowing dust and, westward, the loom of the test facility wall which ran for several miles just under the brow of old, wind-sanded peaks.

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Mercantilist Wylie Dun arranged accommodations at a public hostelry in the old quarter. He slept by day and prowled by night. Heavily armed as he was, and made ugly by the surgeons, he wasn't bothered.

He grew acquainted with various informants. One night after he'd been in Fulldrive almost a month, one informant, for the proper amount in credits, at last allowed as how he'd heard of a girl called Sable. He mentioned where she might be found, then hurried away.

Next day, loitering in the public market, Dragonard saw her come to shop.

She was not tall, but she was splendidly proportioned. She wore manboots of dark blue plasto, and breeches, and a sleeveless tunic caught up at her waist with a silver cord. Big copper bangles danced from her earlobes. She had dark hair like a black waterfall, and she didn't bother to restrain it with combs or rings.

Dragonard studied her from the shadows of a booth. He handled a fat, porous weegeeble while the vendor looked on with some irritation.

The girl's skin was almost saffron. Her eyes were almond-shaped, quite intense. She was shopping at the next booth, dropping moonmelons one by one into a hamper and haggling with the boothkeeper over the price.

"Buy weegeebls?" growled the vendor at his elbow.

Dragonard threw the head back into the bin. "No weegeebls."

"Goddam off-worlder," the vendor hissed, but Dragonard was already gone. Jenny Sable had set off through the crowded market, moving fast, her hamper swinging.

Dragonard walked fast in pursuit. He was oddly excited by sight of her. For a thief, she was damn beautiful. Mixed blood, probably. Of the old First Home stock and one of the humanoid races. Her earlobes had distinct points—

Caught, he stopped.

He'd neglected to exercise the proper caution. In his desire to keep her in sight, he'd blundered into the open. And now Jenny Sable, evidently alert to this sort of thing, had stopped too.

She started back toward him, hamper swinging fiercely from her hand.

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XI

Standing beside a booth that sold cheap replicas of transpos, Wolf Dragonard watched the girl stride toward him. Her walk was clean-limbed, lithe. His pulses picked up as she closed the distance.

Now a dozen paces away.

Now eight.

Six.

He noticed that her eyes were a pale sea-foam color. They moved with a restless quickness as she sought the best route through the crowd, adjusted her direction to compensate, glided in and out among the shoppers with easy grace.

The booth-keeper wheedled Dragonard about buying the transpo model he'd picked up in desperation. Dragonard paid no attention.

Three paces away now. Jenny Sable walked fast, head up, like one trained to elude traps.

The sea-foam eyes sought his face briefly—and glided away. Thunderstruck, he scowled.

Jenny Sable hurried past the booth. She melted into the noisy crowds behind him. Dragonard didn't understand. He was certain she'd noticed him trailing her.

Then he caught a flash of familiar uniform piping.

From the direction in which Jenny Sable had come, two patrolling Regulators with crowd-control wands appeared. Dragonard laughed low. He hadn't been the object of Jenny's attention at all. Rather, she'd observed the policemen on patrol in the public market and decided to go the other way.

The Regulators kept the usual wary eye on activities all around them. But they didn't move with undue haste. They didn't seem to be pursuing the girl. Dragonard tossed the transpo model to the booth-keeper and took off across the market, walking fast. His gold eyes searched ahead.

Finally he saw her. She was just disappearing out the far side of an open shed where round green stalks of dream corn glistened wetly in shallow hydropon flats. Dragonard

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raced through the shed, saw Jenny Sable hurrying up a steep and much less congested street, her hamper still swinging from her hand.

He noted with some pleasure the way her trim body worked as she walked. She'd be a strong girl, physically adept and quick. He found himself recalling her pretty face with more and more interest.

He was dismayed at how quickly he'd panicked back there, assuming automatically that he'd given himself away. But Jenny Sable was only being prudent in avoiding Regulators. If she were planning the crime Dragonard had heard about—and there was no doubt in his mind now that she was up to something—she simply wouldn't want to be remembered at all by the authorities, even as a face in the crowd. Hence her quick flight.

But he was still upset by his own poor judgment. It indicated the precarious state of his nerves. If he hadn't stood his ground at the booth, had instead moved quickly to confront the girl and offer some excuse based upon his wrong assumption, he would have given the whole game away. The realization shook him.

He kept moving on her trail. Deeper and deeper into the seamiest quarter of Fulldrive the girl went, down the narrow ways where even now, at midday, torches streamed in wind that smelled of fuel. Finally Dragonard darted into a sour doorway. Ahead, Jenny Sable turned left through a high gate.

After a moment Dragonard resumed walking, pulling his cowl up over his white hair for safety's sake. A cracked plaque on the open gate identified the place as the Brake-&Pin. He glanced in.

Across a courtyard where two scaly riding beasts stood tethered, he saw a ramshackle building. Someone inside was shouting and cursing. Jenny Sable was just disappearing through the main door. One of the bangles in her ears caught a slant of sun falling down among the sleazy apartments surrounding the inn. The door slammed. She was gone.

Dragonard hurried on. The inn's raucous noise followed him for quite a distance.

That night, and for several nights thereafter, Dragonard returned to the inn. He always took a tiny table in one corner of the smoky common room.

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After dark the inn was packed with a mixed crowd of laborers, unsavory criminal types and a few of the burly warriors from the outlands, stoic slab-faced brutes with greasy hair and fighting rings decorating their arms. Rather than sit in too-obvious silence among them, Dragonard made a somewhat noisy show of drunkenness. The tap girl, a plump young woman with bare bosoms and little bells in her pierced ears, instantly categorized him as a harmless sot.

So Dragonard became established at his small table. He ordered tankard after tankard of the foamy, bitter drink called alewife. Because the table was in the corner at the junction of two rickety walls, he was able to empty most of the tankards into the malodorous sewage trench which ran around the baseboards of the room.

Jenny Sable held court at a round planked table on the far side of the torchlit chamber. After several nights of observation, Dragonard concluded that there were only two other people with her. One was a hulking, dull-eyed albino with huge shoulders. Dragonard assumed that he provided the muscle for the small company. The other man was less easy to categorize.

The man was slight, almost feminine in the delicacy of his bone structure. His hands moved constantly, playing with the handle of a tankard or drumming the tabletop or simply stroking his own cheeks. His hair was whiter than Dragonard's own, and his face, triangular and ferret-like, was dominated by huge round eyes that had a kind of deranged luminosity. Dragonard contrived to shamble to the serving area to order a refill when the inn got especially busy one night. From that position he surveyed the lantern-eyed man at closer range. He got an unsettling shock.

On the back of the man's right hand shone a cloud-shaped purple blotch with iridescent highlights.

An eraso. Jenny Sable had an eraso in her company. He turned away quickly.

At first he felt a quick surge of contempt. The branded man had once been a Regulator. Of course he had served on a special detail, using his esper powers for investigation and scrutiny of suspects at long range. The stigmata on the man's hand indicated that he had abused his police power in some way, and as a result his mind had been scrubbed.

Erasos were held in such contempt by Regulators that the

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latter had been known to kill one of the former on sight. Dragonard controlled his emotions with difficulty. Then he wondered why an eraso was part of Jenny Sable's band.

He recalled that some erasos, under torturous drug injections that markedly shortened their already wasted lives, could on occasion call upon their powers again and control minds or see the future for short periods of time. Dragonard filed that away for later checking. How could a precog fit into her plan?

Another week went by. He continued his careful routine of observation. Jenny Sable called at the freightport every day, as if expecting a shipment. Once he had her routine down with some certainty—she seldom went anywhere but the freightport or the public market—he devoted himself to the albino, since he was the only other member of the group who ever left the Brake-&Pin.

Three times Dragonard followed the albino up to the huge walled testing facility. Three times he watched the albino pay a token that admitted him through a stile into the public observation area. There a person could sit in a crude grandstand and watch the bullet-shaped ground transpos produced by the House of Genmo being subjected to grueling tests on a special track before they were released for shipment. The public stands always attracted a good crowd. The albino seemed just one of the many fascinated by the swift, sleek vehicles.

Through all these days, Dragonard felt steadily better. He was functioning efficiently, if slowly. There was only one trouble: the face of Jenny Sable kept intruding in his thoughts.

He saw her waterfall of black hair, her delicate saffron skin, her sea-foam eyes quite often in his imagination. Unbidden, they also intruded into his dreams. This produced a vague unease, a sense of disloyalty to Elena's memory.

Finally he grew impatient merely watching and following. He planned his next step, and acted.

"Here, master, here," wheezed the booth-keeper. "We have some excellent values today. A gem for your wench, you say? Here, here."

Obese hands lifted a tray in the cool windy shadows just off the public market.

"Have you ever seen a finer selection of natural emeralds?

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At the ridiculously low price of twenty Genmotic Scrips each."

The vendor spread the trays on a rickety bench. The common jewels gleamed like so many green eyes.

"Not as valuable as the synthetic variety, I must admit, master. But bargains in their own right, true bargains! Do you see one you like?"

A tense grin flitted over Dragonard's face. "Every one of them." His hand dipped to his waist, hauled out the blaster. "Thank you."

He scooped the emeralds into a pocket of his cloak while the vendor watched with bulging eyes. Dragonard whirled, stepped out into the clamor of the market. Of course two Regulators with their crowd-control wands were not many paces away. Dragonard had waited for just such a moment.

He feigned a stumble, cursed, shoved against a laborer with baskets of weegeebles on his shoulders.

"Get out of my way, you damn lout!" he growled.

The laborer was off balance. One of the baskets upset, cascading weegeebles onto Dragonard's head. In the booth the vendor let out a squeal:

"Regulators! I've been robbed! Regulators, over here!"

Dragonard floundered, kicking his way through the weegeeble heads rolling every-which-way on the cobbles. A whistle piped, high-pitched, familiar. He chuckled to himself, made a show of cursing and stumbling all the more.

"Stand fast!" one of the Regulators called, running up.

"Hell with you," Dragonard yelled back, turning to flee.

A hand clamped on his shoulder. Dragonard spun, swept his right arm across and raked the Regulator's face with the muzzle of his blaster. The other Regulator dove in to help and the fight was on.

XII

The first Regulator shoved his crowd-control wand into Dragonard's belly. A wave of force vibrated his bones, hurled him backward through the air. He crashed onto his back.

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Emeralds spilled out of the pocket of his cloak and winked in the sunlight. Dragonard raised his blaster, a nasty scowl on his face.

He was gratified that the two young Regulators did justice to their profession. They moved fast and efficiently. One lunged out like a swordsman to touch Dragonard's wrist with his wand. Dragonard's arm convulsed like a living thing. His teeth ached with pain.

When he recovered his senses, his hand was empty. The convulsion of his arm had shaken the blaster free. One of the Regulators had it.

Dragonard scrambled up, drove in at the second Regulator, battered the control wand aside, hammered his fist into the man's belly. The Regulator caromed away. Dragonard turned, unloosed a punch straight at the face of the other policeman.

While Dragonard's fist was still in midair, the Regulator touched it with his wand.

With a not-so-simulated yell, Dragonard flew through the air. He landed hard and writhed.

The Regulators closed in. They held their wands a hand's width from his face.

The first one barked, "Identifications, please."

Dragonard produced them. They were examined, thrown back.

"Wylie Dun's his name," one Regulator said to his companion. Dragonard rubbed his aching head. He noted with satisfaction that the large crowd that had collected hadn't missed the name. The Regulator added, "A mercantilist. He's probably traveling under an alias."

"Not a very successful mercantilist if he has to steal emeralds," remarked the other.

This gave Dragonard the opportunity to unleash a stream of profanity.

"That's enough!" The first Regulator touched the wand to Dragonard's jaw.

Dragonard hit the cobbles with a force that made his spine throb. When they hauled him up he couldn't walk by himself. He muttered a few more oaths.

"Keep quiet or you'll get the wand again," said the Regulator. "We'll see how much fight you have left when you're in detention."

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Detention lasted precisely eighteen minutes.

"This is highly irregular, Sectioner," said the station chief. He had been hastily summoned to the subground when Dragonard showed his genuine credentials.

Dirty and disheveled, Dragonard still managed a smile. "But important, I assure you."

"Important enough for you to commit a crime?"

"Look, have you beamed my Echelon Director or not?"

The station chief, a harassed, heavy man, nodded. "I've just been in contact with Yee on Bromdaagar-8 by beam, as you insisted. He vouches for you. He says—as you did—that you're on a crucial assignment, and that you're to have every cooperation, no matter how erratic your behavior seems." Skeptically the chief shrugged. "I can't imagine what could be that important, but perhaps something is."

No, you can't imagine, Dragonard thought. *You can't imagine because no one would imagine the theft of the Seven Stars.* He remembered Yee's inexplicable behavior back at headquarters, again had that feeling of unseen forces manipulating events.

"You treated my men pretty damn hard," the chief observed, then he added, "sir."

"Necessary." Dragonard rose, brushed dirt from his ragtag cloak. "I wanted to be sure it got known around town that Wylie Dun the mercantilist committed a crime and beat the hell out of the Regulators who caught him. That is, tried to beat the hell out of them."

Dragonard grinned at the two arresting officers, who lingered near the door. Neither smiled back. He added: "You have good men, chief."

"Coming from a Sectioner, that's a compliment."

"I want to be released now. I want your men, wherever your men go in Fulldrive the next few days, to complain about the injustice of that. Talk about how a cheap thief named Wylie Dun was let loose on a technicality. Have them mention the services of a legalist. Just be sure it's known that Wylie Dun is a lawbreaker who got out of your clutches."

The subground chamber, like similar rooms at other Regulator posts, was unheated and uncomfortable. The station chief shivered. "Will comply, Sectioner. Can you tell me anything about what's behind all this?"

"No."

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"But it is important?"

Two hours after sunset two nights later, Wolf Dragonard sat wrapped up in his cloak in the fourth row of the ramshackle grandstand overlooking the test track of the House of Genmo.

Here and there in stair-sockets throughout the grandstand, torches burned orange. A stiff wind blew. Below and somewhat to his right, alone on a bench in the second row, sat the albino from the Brake-&Pin.

Every now and then the albino pulled a drinkskin from under his doublet and swigged. Dragonard had been in the stands since midafternoon. Now he, the albino, and one drunk sleeping up on the last row were the only people remaining. Dragonard pretended to doze, his cowl pulled tightly up around his head. He was hungry and tired. But he knew the facility would be closing soon. Then he'd put the next phase of his plan into operation. He intended to create a vacancy in Jenny Sable's band by injuring the albino so that he would be out of action for several weeks. Dragonard's palms sweated.

It might not be so easy. The albino had the eyes, the face of a brute. He was a good four hands taller than Dragonard, and looked powerful. Dragonard was sweating.

Out beyond the concrete balustrade of the paid spectator area spread a fantastic sight. The eight-lane transpo test track banked and twisted through the foothills of peaks whose summits were still tinged with light. There were three or four ground transpos out on the track now, visible as blurs of light where the track dipped into sight at various points. One of the transpos, a four-passenger, was coming in flat out from the left, down the straightaway that led past the grandstand and turned toward the automated service pits just under the balustrade.

The albino turned toward the rising sound, his face almost beatific. He drank again. A loose grin of joy contorted his mouth as the transpo came streaking along.

It was a magnificent sight, Dragonard had to agree. The bullet-shaped vehicles reached speeds of 250 leagues-per-hour. The four-passenger roared in along the straightaway so fast that its yellow and blue running lights created an impression of horizontal streaks. The test driver hunched at his controls in the driving blip high and forward.

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The roar increased. The grandstands shook. The transpo thundered past on its eight wheels, leaving a backlash of sound and a wave of hot turbine gas.

The sight of the mighty machine vanishing along the first banked turn reminded Dragonard how opulently the Lords of the Exchange lived—and how poor by contrast were the lives of the commoners who labored on the Lords' behalf. Disturbed, he thrust the disloyal thought away.

Tires screaming, the transpo was halfway through the banked turn and drifting. It crossed four of the eight lanes by the time it flashed out of the turn and shot on, lost among the foothills where the track wound out of sight.

The albino rubbed his thick hands together, clucked to himself. Clearly the man had a passion for the swift vehicles. Dragonard had seen the same love-of-machine on other planets. Perhaps the poor always found some twisted way to worship the very symbols of their oppression.

Now another four-passenger flashed in along the straight-away, its yellow and blue lights tracing lines across Dragonard's retinas. The albino took another swig from his drink-skin. Dragonard wished the guards would come in and clear the stands so he could follow the albino into the dark streets and dispose of him.

All at once Dragonard realized the four-passenger was slowing down. Its tires smoked as the cowl angled in toward the service pits. In another moment its speed had halved. It was coming in for fuel.

The albino crept forward to the balustrade to watch. Dragonard's pulses picked up, sensitive to the sudden intrusion of something unexpected.

The transpo braked, stopped, its powerplant idling. Immediately lights flashed in the automated pit. Hose nozzles extended to couple with fuel ports that snapped open in the vehicle's streamlined fast deck. Other mechanized arms shot out and began inspecting tires with probes and gauges.

The canopy of the lighted driving blip slid back. The test driver, a rangy man in a heavy helmet, climbed down and stretched. Suddenly the albino went up and over the balustrade. He dropped to the track beside the startled driver.

"Leave me ride once," the albino said in a bleary voice. "I know how to run her too. I read up. I can pay you credits."

"Are you crazy? Get off the goddam track." The driver

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shielded his eyes and peered up in the stands. "Where the hell are the guards?"

"You got to leave me ride just once," the albino burred drunkenly, grabbing the driver's arm.

The driver swore, tried to pull away. The albino interpreted it as an attack. His hand balled and smashed the side of the driver's head twice.

The driver went down. He lay with his head at an odd angle. He didn't move. Up in the stands, the sleeping drunk moaned.

This new, unexpected term in the equation of his plan required action. Dragonard raced down and jumped the balustrade himself as the fuel and tire inspection arms retracted. The albino clambered into the blip, his grinning lips shiny with drool.

Dragonard tumbled aboard the transpo as the canopy slid shut. Seated in the left driving bucket, the drunken albino hauled back on the throttles. Presumably he saw and heard Dragonard swing aboard behind him, but evidently his mind was so fuddled with the thrill of this forbidden joyride that the significance of Dragonard's presence didn't penetrate. The albino's forehead glistened with sweat as the display lights changed on the control board. He hummed snatches of song.

The throttles went all the way back. The transpo's powerplant thundered. The vehicle accelerated like a launched rocket. Dragonard was flung hard against the small cabin's rear bulkhead.

In another instant the transpo was roaring down the eight-lane track while the albino sang at the top of his lungs.

XIII

Instantly Dragonard realized he had another serious problem on his hands: the albino was so drunk he could barely control the vehicle.

The transpo plunged toward a banked curve, drifting across lanes. Dragonard struggled upright, saw smoke from the front wheels whipping past the canopy blip.

The albino had discovered the guidebar. He turned it

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slightly. The transpo came out of its drift, hit the beginning of the bank. The albino twisted the guidebar the other way.

The transpo's cowl aimed at the upper edge of the bank. Without realizing it, the albino was shooting the vehicle up the bank like a projectile. Dragonard hurled himself forward past the driving bucket. With his left shoulder he shoved the albino to one side. He siezed the guidebar, twisted it the opposite way.

"Who the bleeding hell—?" the albino began. Spittle shone at the corners of his mouth. He was wedged against the cabin's wall, watching Dragonard lying on his belly and working the guidebar with a frantic gentleness.

The eight wheels howled and smoked as the cowl swung left again. The transpo came down off the bank. Its frame began to vibrate.

Dragonard was stretched out in the narrow space between the two driving buckets. From this cramped position he tried to read the various lights on the display board as he eased his fingers away from the guidebar, shoved his palms against the ridged floor. He came up on his knees in time to see a dazzle of light out past the cowl. From his left, the albino attacked.

Dragonard's nose squirted blood and his head snapped back when the albino hit him. The albino's face turned gleeful.

Caught as he was between the two buckets, Dragonard had difficulty maneuvering. As the albino lashed out again, Dragonard whipped his hands up, caught the flying wrist, kept the punch from landing.

The albino wrenched. He was extremely strong. He hauled his hands to the left, then to the right. Dragonard held on, conscious of another streak of light. His mind registered a fractional impression of a tall pylon with a lighted cupola at the top, and watchers inside.

The transpo careened out of the curve and onto a straight-away. It veered back and forth across the eight lanes on a zigzag course.

"You damn fool!" Dragonard shouted. "Stop this machine or you'll crack us up!"

The albino mouthed obscenities and wrenched viciously hard, breaking Dragonard's hold.

Dragonard scrambled out of the way of the next punch. The force of the albino's blow carried him forward. He

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sprawled across the right-hand bucket. Still on his knees, Dragonard brought the blade of his hand down hard on the albino's neck.

With a shriek of rage the albino twisted onto his side. Dragonard crawled back. He got his blaster out, steadied it as much as the pitching of the transpo would allow. The vehicle's frame was vibrating very hard now. Dragonard heard the beginning squeal of fatiguing metal.

"Stop the goddam thing or I'll kill you," he said.

"Who . . . the hell . . . are you?" the albino panted. "One of the Lord's . . . high-assed . . . guards?"

The transpo blasted out of the straightaway and headed toward a ninety-degree left turn flanked on both sides by high boulders. They'd never make that turn—

Dragonard reacted without thought. He jumped up, landed on the albino's ribs with both knees. The man shrieked as bones cracked. With the drunken man thrashing and threatening to throw him off, Dragonard managed to reach out with his free hand and slap the colored lever next to the guidebar. The lever was marked AUTO.

Instantly the pitch of the transpo's powerplant changed. A quick, grinding noise made the whole vehicle shudder again. But now it shot ahead without seesawing. The automatic controller geared down and negotiated the ninety-degree bend at a safe speed.

The albino drove his elbow into Dragonard's groin. Dragonard fell backward again, his whole lower body suffused with pain. He was tossed from side to side as the transpo whipsawed into another series of curves. Somewhere klaxons began to blast.

The albino crawled toward him with dumb-brute murder in his eyes. Dragonard saw another of those pylon-and-cupola affairs flash past outside. Now red search-beams revolved atop the cupola.

Lord Genmo's soldiers knew there were interlopers on the track.

The albino caught Dragonard's boot, twisted.

Pain screamed up along that leg as the albino panted and applied more pressure. The albino's teeth shone like wet chips of ivory in the dim light. He didn't know who Dragonard was. He only knew that the man with the gold eyes had tried to thwart him, and that was enough. His small pink eyes showed what he intended to do about it.

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Murder.

Dragonard didn't want to use the blaster. He had no choice. He raised the weapon, aimed.

The albino released his leg, shot both hands out. Dragonard whipped the blaster back to avoid the grasping fingers. He wasn't fast enough. The albino knocked the blaster out of his hand.

Chuckling, slobbering, the albino snatched at the weapon. To reach it he had to lean across Dragonard's knees. Dragonard remembered something, darted a hand forward, yanked the drinkskin from under the albino's tunic.

The albino had the blaster now. He swung it toward Dragonard's forehead. Dragonard brought his hand up and over and split the thin bladder of the drinkskin against the albino's nose.

Wine splattered and streamed. Blinded, the albino couldn't make his shot. Dragonard threw the drinkskin away, dug both hands into the albino's gun wrist. This time he didn't scruple. He applied quick pressure. Bone snapped.

The albino shrieked, Dragonard caught the blaster as it fell, adjusted controls with his thumb, shoved the muzzle against the albino's soaked tunic and fired.

A dazzle of light, a sudden stench of broiled flesh. He rolled out of the way as the albino pitched forward. The albino's middle resembled a huge crater of wet black glass.

Dragonard hitched himself back against the cabin's inner shell to give the albino room to die. The transpo shuddered. Its eight wheels drummed.

Dragonard watched without pity as the albino made feeble motions with his hands.

"Who . . . who are y—"

The last word turned into a bubble of blood between his lips. The bubble popped. The albino was dead.

Dragonard was shaking. This had gone wrong. But before he could dwell much on the consequences of this unexpected turn of things, the albino's corpse shuddered with a death-spasm. The man's left boot was jammed under the control panel. His heel hit the AUTO lever, kicked it off.

At that precise second the transpo was riding the center of the eight lanes, whipping through a curve into another banked turn. Dragonard glanced ahead, saw the front end start to yaw again.

A black pit was coming up fast. Even before Dragonard

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recognized it for what it was, the four front wheels struck the unrepaired hole, bounced in and out. Two wheels blew, on the left side. The transpo went into a screaming skid toward a wall of boulders.

Dragonard flung himself forward across the albino's body, clawed at the throttles with both hands. He dragged them all the way back. He heard the brakes lock, *ka-chunk*. The rocks loomed—

Speed only partially slacked, the transpo struck.

Dragonard bounced up against the blip like a doll, taking a savage jolt in his neck. The cowl crumpled, exploded in a soft pouf of blue-green flame as the auxiliary fuel pods ruptured.

Dragonard crawled through sudden smoke to the wildly winking display lights, groped for the switch marked EJECT, slammed it.

The blip cover blew apart into a rain of pulverized plasto. Dragonard went up and over the edge of the cabin opening and dove into the protection of the rocks as the main fuel pods blew.

Flame geysered straight up. The heat melted the rock against which Dragonard crouched. He drew his burned hand away with a groan. He heard the klaxons, caught the *drum-tramp* of men running. Red beacons crisscrossed the night sky over the mountains.

Running, he vanished back into the rocks away from the track. It was a tense game for the better part of an hour, but fortunately the track was large, and the guards assigned to it few.

At last Dragonard reached the farthest perimeter of the track. He crossed the deserted eight lanes well away from the nearest pylon-and-cupola, clambered up rocks, and gained the summit of the wall.

He rolled across the wall's wide top, miscalculating its width in his weariness. He found himself dropping suddenly into empty space.

He hit the shale outside the wall. A last, jarring spasm of pain seethed through him. He lay unmoving in the dark while the klaxons bayed on.

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XIV

For two days Dragonard lay in pain in his seamy room. At intervals he was treated by one of the physician-addicts from a quackorium in the slums.

The yellow-toothed, shaking old wreck was named Dr. Hercularis. Soft brown fur on his dewlaps and the backs of his hands suggested a strain of Rikovian blood. But he was basically of First Home stock, which accounted for his susceptibility to addiction.

"—once had a thriving aborto business on Muldoonsworld," the old fellow said when he visited at sunset on the second evening.

Asking no questions about Dragonard's bruises and cuts, Dr. Hercularis had sensed a commonality between himself and the big gold-eyed man: a commonality of criminal pursuits. He grew loquacious.

"But I got a shade too fond of light pursuits such as squiring young wenches to the drugdreamers. Before you knew it, I had the proverbial ampul on my back. Hold still, now."

"Make sure that damn thing's clean," Dragonard growled.

Dr. Hercularis cackled. "Never fear, mercantilist Dun. My qualifications may be spotty but my equipment is tiptop. All gray market, you know." He thrust the hyponeedle deep into Dragonard's bare arm. "There."

Dr. Hercularis threw the needle into the corner. "And now that we've massively dosed you with vital amines to promote your recovery and restore your virility—"

"I suppose you want your fee."

Dr. Hercularis licked his lips. "As after each visit, Dun, yes. Thankee kindly."

From the pile of clothing in one corner of the room Dragonard fetched the proper number of flimsy Genmotic Scrips. He felt better. He nearly hadn't made it on the long, tortuous trip down from the foothills after the transpo crash. He'd blacked out several times and the short journey had taken him nearly four hours. He had reeled into the yard of the inn and sent the landlord to the nearest quack-

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rium before he collapsed on his pallet. For all his chatter and raffish, filthy garb, Dr. Hercularis apparently knew what he was about.

Dragonard pointed to the Scrips.

"Going to spend all that at the nearest drugdreamer?"

"No, Dun, it's a special treat tonight. Going to visit some of my old friends at a place called the Brake-&Pin. Naturally they aren't my friends all the time, notably when I can't afford their wares. Tonight, sir, I can! A triple sniff of the finest Thramodian *bhango*. Why, it makes the potions one finds at a drugdreamer seem puerile. The hallucinations with *bhango*—absolutely no comparison! Tonight, sir, I shall feast my senses! Good health to you, mercantilist Dun. If you need further treatment, come around to the quackorium."

"Or," said Dragonard carefully, "the Brake-&Pin?"

"Of course, of course! I have many long-standing comrades around its hearth."

"So you said."

"Well, sir," Dr. Hercularis said, "good evening again. May all your profits be illegal, and may all the Regulators roast their hind ends."

Cheerily he waved and left. Dragonard splashed sour green water in a basin and washed. Then he dressed and took to the streets.

During the past two days he'd been gripped not only by pain but by frustration. The death of the albino originally seemed a major setback. Now he wasn't so sure. He walked a long while, thinking.

Next morning he resumed his shadowing of Jenny Sable. He picked her up as she was leaving the Brake-&Pin.

He could tell that the girl was visibly upset. She moved through the streets with taut, nervous strides. She went straight to the freightport. A new clerk was on duty. Jenny Sable talked with him for several minutes, passed a Scrip into his hand. After she left, Dragonard raised the ante to three Scrips.

For that price the clerk revealed that the young woman was indeed expecting a shipment. It had not yet arrived. She had asked to be notified by special messenger the moment it came in.

"What kind of shipment?" Dragonard wanted to know.

"Some sort of living creature from one of the other

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planets. She didn't go into detail. But it can't be human because it'll be coming through Z.C."

Dragonard nodded, left. He roamed the streets again that afternoon.

What use could Jenny Sable have for some alien entity that had to be checked through Zoological Customs? He had no idea. But he decided he'd better find out by direct action. The time for passive gathering of intelligence was over.

He changed to the best dress doublet and cloak in Wylie Dun's wardrobe. On his way out of his inn he thought about a flagon of wine. His palms itched. He fought back the thirst and hurried on into the twilight.

His nerves were wound up tight as he rang the bell at the quackorium and asked for Dr. Hercularis. He already held a sheaf of Genmotic Scrips in his hand.

The common room of the Brake-&-Pin clattered with noise. Dr. Hercularis led the way to the table, Dragonard right behind. This was critical. As they approached through the press of bare-breasted girls and fighting men from the out-back, Dragonard's pulses picked up.

He'd questioned Dr. Hercularis at the quackorium. Yes, said the doctor, he had indeed met Jenny Sable during one of his infrequent visits to the inn. Dragonard offered a sizable bribe for a favor—no questions asked. Dr. Hercularis was delighted to oblige.

The two people at the table had already noticed their approach.

The ferret-faced eraso with the unruly white hair and large eyes was cleaning his long fingernails with a dagger. He shoved the dagger into the tabletop point first as Dr. Hercularis bowed and doffed his foolscap.

"Good evening, my good friends. Hercularis is the name. Perhaps you remember our delightful chat over a tankard a few nights back?"

"We remember," said the man with the luminous eyes.

"Quite well," Jenny Sable added. She hauled her manboots off the table and sat up straight.

The dim lamplight reflected from the burnished bangles in her ears. Her waist-long black hair shone like a bird's wing. She put down her drinking mug. Dragonard kept his face impassive, neither friendly nor otherwise. He could

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see the strain around the girl's sea-foam eyes. She was a cool one. She waited for Hercularis to speak.

Finally he did. "May I present an acquaintance? His name is Wylie Dun. A—mercantilist of note. Dun, this is Jenny Sable, the young lady of whom you inquired. I believe her companion's name is—ah—"

The eraso brushed his purple-blotched hand across his eyes. "Lazaret."

"Ah, yes, I remember now, sir. Mercantilist Dun wanted to make himself known to you," the doctor added to the girl.

"Dun," she said. "Something about that name's familiar." And her eyes fixed him for a moment, very cold and emotionless.

Dragonard forced a coarse smile. Did she possibly remember him from that first time in the public market? He was relieved when she snapped her fingers.

"A few days ago, wasn't it? Theft of some emeralds. Rather badly handled, I heard."

"From my standpoint?" he replied. "Or the Regulators?"

Her eyes were still not friendly. "Both."

"I got free of them, as perhaps you also heard."

"I did. That's to your credit. You got caught first. That's not."

"The hell with this, Hercularis," Dragonard snarled. "Let's go somewhere and drink."

"Wait." Jenny touched the back of his hand with cool fingers. "You went to some trouble to get Hercularis to introduce you. Why?"

Dragonard shrugged, dropped into a chair opposite her, lowered his voice: "I need money. I was under the impression that you needed a man for—well, the details aren't public gossip."

"I'm very glad." Jenny's eyes slitted down. "Hercularis, you old wreck, how do we know we can trust this man?"

Dr. Hercularis bristled. "Would you trust me, madam?"

"Not very far," said Lazaret in his reedy voice. His huge eyes never left Dragonard's face.

"Then," exclaimed Hercularis, "anyone I recommend should be equally worthy of distrust—and therefore just the right sort for your enterprise, whatever it may be!"

"Don't talk like that, you damned old fool," Jenny whispered.

Dr. Hercularis blanched. "My apologies. I'll leave you to

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your devices and mutual profit." He wandered off, soon engrossed in conversation with a one-eyed peddler of Thramodian *bhango* over near the wine kegs.

Lazaret picked up his dagger and began to pare his long, pointed nails again. The silence at the table became uncomfortable.

"I'll buy a round," Dragonard said, indicating the girl's nearly empty tankard. He was taken with the combination of her pretty face and figure and her cold, thoughtful eyes. She was, he decided, like a beautiful knife.

"No drinks, thanks, until we find out what you want," Jenny told him.

"Really find out," Lazaret said. "We have ways."

Dragonard nodded. "I recognize the purple blotch. You were a police *esper* once."

That seemed to produce a little grudging respect from both of them. Jenny asked: "You heard I lost a man?"

"Yes. Exactly how—why you needed him—I don't know. Hell, I might not like it once I hear. But I thought I'd ask. It's better than pinching emeralds and getting laid on by the Regs."

"Your mercantilist activities aren't going well, Mr. Dun?"

"Not at all well."

She scrutinized him carefully. "You look strong."

He stared straight into her eyes. "Strong enough for anything you've got in mind."

Her cheeks darkened a little. He wondered whether she was as tough as she pretended. She lifted her tankard quickly, drained the last few drops. The gesture was meant to cover nervousness. A puzzling emotion began to plague him. Damned beautiful girl, she was. She—

He pulled back from the trap instantly. She was a thief. He had to remember.

At last she told him, "It's true that I did have a man called Nels Brix working for me. An albino. He was killed in a foolish accident just the other day. He had a passion for transpos. He got drunk, stole one at the test facility, went on a joyride and smashed the vehicle and himself apart. So I am a man short."

Dragonard said, "For what?"

Jenny Sable laughed. Her teeth were white and even. "Not quite so fast."

"How hungry are you, Dun?" the *eraso* wanted to know.

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The man's near-maniacal stare made Dragonard uneasy. "Very."

"Hungry enough to let me brain-probe you before we go any further?"

"I know about your arrest record," Jenny added. "But that's not quite good enough."

Lazaret said, "Well?"

Dragonard's belly was cold again. He wasn't sure that his training would be enough to enable him to keep the barriers of his mind in place during an exhaustive probe. He wasn't sure at all, given his mental and physical condition of late. The din of the common room seemed to beat at his eardrums. He was afraid.

Lazaret watched him with those huge lantern eyes. Dragonard answered because he had no choice:

"Hell yes, I can stand a brain-probe if that's what it takes."

With a fey smile Lazaret stood up. "Shall we find out?"

XV

A single dented lamp sat in the center of the flimsy taboret. The taboret occupied the center of a large, poorly furnished room under the eaves of the Brake-&-Pin. Jenny Sable circled the flickering lamp, indicated a seat for Dragonard.

"Have you ever gone through a probe before?" she asked.

"Never," Dragonard lied. His pulses worked faster.

"Well, almost nothing that's in your mind can hide from one."

She returned to the circle of lamplight with a small black kit. On the opposite side of the taboret Lazaret arranged his robes over his knees. He sat with his long-nailed hands clutching the arms of his chair.

He flinched noticeably as Jenny laid the black kit on the taboret. She opened it, took out a long ampul. She thrust Lazaret's right sleeve up above his elbow. She swabbed a spot on his spindly veined arm, then jabbed the tip of the ampul into his skin.

The eraso's lips slackened as blue-green fluid drained into his body. Dragonard saw that all of Lazaret's right inner

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forearm was marked with pinprick scabs. Because of the erasing procedures the Regulators had once employed on Lazaret, stimulants were necessary to free the precog facilities of his mind. The drugs took a considerable toll on the body's resources.

All at once Lazaret stiffened in his chair. His hands clamped tighter on the arms, turned white. Slowly his eyes closed. When they reopened they were dead and staring. A thin circle of white showed all around the pupils.

Lazaret's mouth dropped open. He let out a low shriek of pain, then clenched his teeth on his protruding tongue. The cloud-shaped blotch on the back of his hand looked nearly black.

"No secrets, now, mercantilist Dun," Jenny Sable said with a laugh, drifting away.

Rigid in his own chair, Dragonard tried to remember the hours and hours of exhaustive mental drills through which he'd been put years ago. The training was given to every Regulator in case he was ever exposed to a precog who'd gone to work on the wrong side of the law. Now Dragonard's mind seemed sluggish, unable to dredge up the lessons of the past. He wouldn't be able to keep Lazaret from discovering that he—*stop!* A bit of it came out. He thought of a red wall of light, visualized its length, height, thickness—

The lamp flame spat softly as the oil supply ran out. The flame changed to feeble yellow. Lazaret gripped his chair, stared at Dragonard with those huge, luminous, utterly dead eyes. Foam oozed between his clenched teeth and coated the tip of his tongue.

The red wall. Dragonard erected it at the forefront of his mind.

This wall is impenetrable. This blazing, shimmering wall of mind cannot be breached.

Behind his eyeballs Dragonard experienced a curl of cold. Lazaret was in his mind.

The caress of the cold, formless psyche brought excruciating pain. The red wall trembled, thinned to transparency. Dragonard's face streaked with sweat.

He stared at the dying flame of the lamp and rethought the wall.

Thought its vast length, running on for leagues and leagues.

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Thought its immense height, higher than heaven.

Thought its impenetrable depth, an unshatterable barrier behind which lurked the fatal thoughts:

My name is Wolf Dragonard.

I am a Regulator.

I am here to deceive you and thwart you.

Those were the thoughts Lazaret wanted to find.

The cold extension of Lazaret's mind encountered the face of the shining wall. There was astonishment, the friction of resistance meeting resistance.

Dragonard's forehead began to vibrate like a rung bell. He closed his eyes. He concentrated on the red wall.

Sliding, twisting, the cold nonmatter of Lazaret's mind slid over the wall's face, hunting a chink, a crack, the merest indication of an entry point. Dragonard felt the relentless mounting pressure of that search.

He thought of the red wall in its totality; saw it all; felt it all.

His body shook faintly, then more violently. The red wall trembled, shimmered—

A break! The cold of Lazaret's mind rushed toward it.

Frantically Dragonard thought the red wall solid again, closed the gap an instant before the chill mind-touch slipped against it, sought the way through, reacted with fury at being balked.

Dragonard strained to solidify the red wall end to end, top to bottom, through its entire depth. The icy, invisible mind chittered faster across the surface like an excited animal. It sensed that a passageway existed at last, if only it could find—

Think the wall. Hold the wall. Dragonard poured all the resources of his mind into that agonizing act of affirmation.

But he knew he was weakening.

The wall heaved again. Its outer surface rippled. The red hue shaded off to a lighter pink. The wall grew thin in several places. The mind of ice raced back and forth across the surface exultantly. . . .

Behind the wall there was squealing.

My name is Wolf Dragonard.

I am a Regulator.

I am here to deceive and thwart you.

Convulsions shook Dragonard's body. The pain in his

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forehead increased. The red of the wall grew less and less vivid.

He wanted to scream, strike out, hold his own wildly thrashing legs with his own trembling hands to still them.

A dough-like rip opened in the wall.

Another.

Another.

All over the wall's surface, gaps widened. The probing face fragmented itself, amoeba-like. A cold pseudopod raced over the wall's face toward one opening; another raced toward a different breach.

Think the wall! Hold the wall!

He hadn't practiced mind-defense in far too long. The shining red wall began to shred apart.

The cold mind plunged through the wall in a hundred places, flowed toward the secrets—

As Dragonard saw the red barrier collapse from end to end.

The mind-cold was reaching for the hidden, secret thoughts. Reaching to enfold them, swallow them whole. . . .

Leagues away, hammering began.

Suddenly the cold force of the encroaching mind receded a little, and diffused.

Dragonard fought the red wall back into place. He built it section by section by painful section.

Why was the mind-cold splitting into loose, cloudy sections? Why did it no longer press and probe just at the moment it had been nearest to discovery? His face ran with sweat. His lungs hurt from lack of air.

He opened his eyes.

The oath was far from ladylike. It was gutter fury. Dragonard wiped his eyes, swallowed hard.

Across the taboret where the lampwick was nothing more than a thumbnail of fire now, Lazaret sat with eyes closed. His head lolled on his shoulder. His jaws had relaxed. He moaned, began to roll his head from side to side. The hammering reduced itself to a common sound.

Someone was knocking at the door.

Jenny Sable hauled the door open to confront a man in a shabby uniform. The man's startled expression quickly turned to one of alarm.

"Why the hell do you have to make so much noise?" the girl demanded.

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The man slobbered an apology. "You Jenny Sable, please?"

"That's right." She moved to block the door opening with her body. Dragonard no longer saw the man, only heard him whine:

"Special messenger from the freightport. I was supposed to tell you—"

Jenny interrupted: "The shipment's arrived?"

"Y-yes. It'll clear Z.C. in an hour. The clerk said you paid to be notified—"

"All right. Now get out of here!" *Slam* went the door.

Jenny strode back to the center of the room. She gave Dragonard a sharp glance.

"Well, you didn't pass out. That's an encouraging sign."

There was a controlled excitement about her now. She seized an earthen jar, poured more oil into the lamp, pulled up the wick and relit it. When the center of the room brightened, she fetched her black kit and stabbed Lazaret's arm with another ampul. This one contained a colorless fluid. In a moment he began to come around.

Finally Lazaret's huge eyes opened. They flickered to Dragonard's face, then to Jenny. She stood with hands on her hips. There was high color in her cheeks. Her breasts were sharp with strain beneath her sleeveless blouse.

"The shipment's here," she said.

"Oh."

Lazaret blinked. His complexion had turned gray. His fingers twitched. He rubbed the blotched hand across his eyes. The movement seemed to cause him pain. He glanced at Dragonard again. Dragonard held his breath.

Lazaret said, "I thought I was onto something."

"Maybe it was the noise at the door that made you think so." Clearly she was pressing the eraso, wanting to get things moving.

Lazaret gnawed his lip. "I'm not sure. It could be that. I was disturbed. By something in Dun's mind, I thought. But I'm not sure."

"In other words you didn't actually discover anything wrong with him."

"I didn't," Lazaret agreed. He looked ill. It was obvious that the eraso couldn't live more than a few years. "I thought—ah, hell, Jenny. You're right; I found nothing." And he slumped in his chair, weary.

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Jenny Sable glanced at Dragonard. "All right, Wylie Dun. You pass the test."

Dragonard sloughed off his aches, managed a little mockery: "That's splendid. Do you mind telling me what the hell that entitles me to?"

Jenny Sable laughed and glided into the shadows. She returned with her cloak, whipped it around her shoulders. The copper bangles in her ears danced. Lazaret watched Dragonard with a curious, doubtful expression, as though he still wasn't satisfied with the results of the brain-probe. Dragonard kept his face blank. They didn't know how close they had come. How critically close.

In a merry voice Jenny said: "So you're curious about our little enterprise? Well, maybe I can shed some light at the freightport, Wylie Dun. Care to come along?"

"I wouldn't miss it," he said, with more feeling than they could ever appreciate.

XVI

Two freightport handlers jockeyed the crane. One man rode the crane cab high overhead. The other stood on the ground with a glowing wand, gesturing to show the operator where to position the huge plastocrate that hung between the handling pads.

Zoological Customs seals and inspection stamps decorated the walls of the crate. The operator lowered it slowly toward the bed of Jenny's rented cart.

"Go ahead, put her down," shouted the handler with the colored wand.

From the seat of the wagon Jenny cried, "Gently, you bastard, gently!"

The crate settled into place. The cart axles groaned. The huge scaled beast hitched to the vehicle shied and stamped. It had to be the stink, Dragonard thought.

Ever since the crane had trundled into the shed with the shipment, the air had been thick with an unspeakably foul odor. The ground handler made a face as he passed a manifest board to Jenny.

"Sign here."

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When the handlers had departed with the crane, Lazaret brushed his hand across his nose in a delicate gesture of disgust.

"Are you certain the filthy beast's still alive?"

Jenny swung from the cart seat to the wagon bed. "It couldn't have come through Z.C. otherwise. But let's have a look."

Lazaret shook his head and walked away, shivering. Dragonard jumped on the cart, crowded in beside Jenny as she lifted a spy port in the crate's side.

She moved back a little. "Can you see?" Her breast brushed Dragonard's arm.

He was conscious of the warmth of her body. For a moment their eyes locked. He felt again the surprising, puzzling emotion he'd felt the first time he saw her.

"Yes, very well." He moved a little, so that they no longer touched.

Jenny's glance lingered on his face a little longer than was absolutely necessary. He wondered whether it was the excitement of the moment or something else. He warned himself to be wary.

He looked in through the small port and retched.

"Not a very lovely investment, is it?" the girl breathed. "The Tank cost me a big percentage of my working capital. And you don't know how many purses I cut to put that fund together. Another big share of the credits goes for the ship. I've rented her so we can—but you don't even know what this thing is, do you, Dun?"

The unspeakable smell swirled all around. "I'm not sure I want to."

Inside the shipping crate was a transparent container filled with a viscous brown fluid. Within the fluid floated a huge creature that looked more or less like a mass of white slime. It stirred sluggishly in reaction to the light coming through the spy hole. Dragonard could discern no eyes, no maw, nothing.

Jenny slapped the examination port shut, climbed back to the cart seat. Dragonard sat beside her as she picked up the traces and hooted at the scaled beast. It shambled forward to the freight shed entrance. Lazaret stood there, still covering his mouth with his hand.

"I'll walk to the inn if you don't mind," he said.

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Jenny gave an irritated nod and clucked at the beast. It pulled the cart out into the thoroughfare.

Soon they were driving along the mean, cobbled ways in the seamy section of Fulldrive. Those passing on either side paid little attention. Jenny seemed much less tense than she had earlier.

"You know, Wylie, I've often found that the best place to discuss something private is in public. You want to know about the shipment. Very well. The creature is indigenous to the planet Godgul. Know where that is?"

He did, although he'd never been there; he said he had heard of it.

"Well, its correct classification is *Mtragens electromax rexforms*. Commonly called a Tank because of the liquid conductor environment in which it has to be kept when it's away from the syrup lakes on its home world. A Tank exists on and takes its nourishment from electronic power. In fact it absorbs gigantic electronic shocks the way we digest and absorb food." She hesitated only a little. "Shocks of the kind a human being would receive—and die from—if he tried to breach the electrowalls around Lord Genmo's summer palace on Whitepeake."

The cart rattled on through the noisy crowd. Ahead Dragonard spied The-Brake-&-Pin. He had a sense of finality, of a door being closed permanently. Jenny watched him as he simulated response: first a lack of understanding; then slow comprehension; then the shock and near-horror of a petty criminal exposed for the first time to a conspiracy of staggering magnitude.

"God," he said. "You can't mean—"

"I mean exactly that, Wylie Dun. I'm going to steal the Seven Stars."

"My God, that's—that's impossible."

"Not impossible. Merely difficult and very, very dangerous. Shall I stop the cart? Do you want off? If you do, I warn you, I'll have to send Lazaret after you and have him kill you."

"Why would you want to try a crazy scheme like going after the Stars? We could all be killed."

"Understatement of the century, my friend. But we could all be very rich if we succeed. I've been filthy poor long enough. Besides, I'm a citizen of the Free Territory. You didn't know that, I suppose. I want to see Lord Genmo

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squirm. Oh, don't worry. My little band isn't officially sanctioned by Engineer McIlhenny. He doesn't even know about it. But if he did, well, I think he'd be amused."

"My God," Dragonard repeated, hoping he wasn't overdoing it. "To steal the jewels of a Lord of the Exchange . . . you have to be insane even to plan it!"

She shrugged. "Maybe. On the other hand I happen to be a very good thief."

"If I come along with you—"

"If you don't, Wylie Dun, you're dead."

"Well, you're certainly clear about that."

"I have no choice. I'd hate to see you drop out now for another reason as well." There was no embarrassment or coquetry in her manner, merely a long, frank gaze. "You're an attractive man. I thought so from the first."

"You're an attractive woman," he replied. "But out of your mind."

"Is that fear talking?" she mocked.

He shook his head. "Good sense."

"I didn't think it was fear." She smiled.

She touched his hand briefly. He thought of Elena, felt guilt that was strangely, soon gone.

But he was distressed by the way things were going. He'd passed the first difficult obstacles, managed to penetrate the little band of thieves, was theoretically accomplishing the objective of his mission. Yet a new sense of apprehension was building inside him. Jenny Sable was a new, upsetting factor in the equation.

"There's the inn," she said. "I've arranged to store the Tank in the cellar. I rented an electrogenerator to feed it until we leave. You should understand one thing more, Wylie Dun. I hate to haggle over matters of money so let's dispense with it quickly. First, I won't minimize the risks. As you said, you may be killed. We may all be killed. But if we do succeed, I take forty percent of what we can realize from the Stars. Lazaret takes another forty. That leaves twenty for you. As the planner of this little enterprise, I'm in charge. Your role is physical. We need a man's strength to pull it off, but you'll have to remember exactly what your role is every minute. Don't try to overstep it."

"I take it," he said with some irritation, "you already know how you're going to break into Genmo's palace?"

With a laugh Jenny asked, "What the hell do you think

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Lazaret and I have been doing with most of our waking hours the past year and a half?"

She halted the cart at the gate of the inn, dropped the traces into her lap. Lazaret had already arrived. He watched them from the courtyard, one hand shielding his huge, bulging eyes.

Jenny turned to Dragonard. "Last chance, Wylie Dun. You might escape Lazaret if you ran now. You might."

In the slanted sunlight his gold eyes were hard as coins. He snatched up the traces from her lap, heard her tinkling laugh as he said, "Let's get this abomination to the cellar."

"You have the proper spirit, Wylie Dun. Twenty percent of dead is dead. But twenty percent of the Seven Stars is enough to make you a king."

Three days later they loaded the Tank aboard the reconditioned ship Jenny Sable had purchased. She was called the *Saxony Banner*. They filed a false flight plan for Bruckner-X but, once into space, scattered bright metal decoy chaff to bollix the monitors and changed heading.

On a completely illegal course, the *Saxony Banner* sped for the planet Whitepeake with all her running lights and ports blacked out.

Jenny sat at the controls, singing softly to herself. Lazaret dozed. The old rusting vessel reeked of the Tank's dungish effluvium. Dragonard had the feeling that all of this was not quite real.

But it was, of course.

And the worst lay ahead.

XVII

On the first morning out they began to rehearse the plan of the theft.

Certain things preceded the first meeting around the translucent projection table. They ate a meager meal in the deck room. Lazaret acted tense and worried. Jenny said little. When Dragonard asked whether she'd slept well, she snapped back that of course she hadn't. She'd been awake all night, thinking about the plan whose details they were about to study.

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Instantly she apologized for sharpness. But the apology was diffident. Jenny's tone indicated that apologizing to any man wasn't precisely her style.

"When you're raised up in the stews, Wylie," she told him, "begging pardon comes hard. To stay alive you concentrate on cupidity, not manners."

"Where were you raised?" he asked.

Her eyes flickered with sour memory. "I'd prefer to forget that, thanks."

"Do you have a family?" He knew he was prodding her. But something about this pretty, wiry, tough girl intrigued him. He felt a compulsive hunger to know everything about her.

Jenny drank the last of the nutrient from her mug. "My father was a thief and not a very good one. That's the best thing I can find to say about him. I never knew my mother. I have a feeling she was a prostitute. My father never said. He did tell me I wasn't legitimate. He died when I was eleven. By then I'd learned to cut a pursestring cleaner than he ever could." She dipped the mug toward the lion-and-phoenix ring on his right hand. "Is that the sign of your family?"

Dragonard nodded, weaving his lies. "My father disowned me when I was booted from the Jurisprudential Academy. I took up as a mercantilist. I've talked to none of my relatives since."

She smiled. "Then you're the right kind for this project."

"I'm glad you think so, Jenny." Dragonard stared into her eyes. He refused just then to remember what this girl stood for, and how she must be dealt with. Her eyes drowned the warning voices. He knew there'd be trouble because of it.

Jenny's response was clear from the quick color in her cheeks.

Before either could say more, Lazaret banged his mug on the table.

"God, Jenny, hurry up, can't you? I want to get the morning scan over with."

Jenny rose, pulled the napkin from the neck of her blouse. "We need to feed the Tank first."

"I'll wait here. I can't stand the stink of the thing."

They left the eraso sitting stoop-shouldered, lost in some disturbed introspection. His blotched hand crawled back

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and forth over the top of the table. Outside in the metal companionway Jenny said:

"I give him another five years before the drugs destroy him."

"Why does he keep it up? He could stop, couldn't he?"

"Of course. But the Regulators broke him. The only satisfaction left for him is to break every law he can find. By the way, you might as well be prepared for one thing. Periodically he has week-long spells when he screams in his sleep. Another side effect of the drugs."

The engines of the *Saxony Banner* drummed in a low, sustained rhythm. Jenny and Dragonard proceeded to the hold where the Tank was stowed, braced up from beneath by airlift casters and protected against violent shock by a suspension system of flexible cables wrapped around the transparent box of its conducting environment. Dragonard helped Jenny attach the clips of the electrogenerator to the nodes of the big box. She adjusted the controls. Dials glowed as high-level charges fed into the container.

Dragonard grew nauseated as the viscous brown liquid stirred and roiled. The Tank oozed itself to the transparent wall nearest the nodes. It flattened its globlike white body into a slimy disk that covered most of the inside of the wall. The creature heaved and quaked as it absorbed its dose of energy. Toward the end, the heavings grew faster.

Jenny noticed Dragonard's face. She laughed. "You'll get used to it."

"I'll never get used to the smell. Lazaret's right."

She consulted the dials and gauges again, shut down the power. With a sibilant lapping of the brown fluid the Tank sank out of sight in the depths of the container. Jenny walked up to Dragonard and, quite without warning, gave him a light teasing kiss.

"But the difference between you and Lazaret, Wylie Dun, is that you're a man who can and does stand something unpleasant. Lazaret runs away."

"Thank you, captain," he said with some sarcasm, and kissed her.

This time Jenny's mouth was neither light nor teasing. Dragonard's arms went around her middle. Suddenly it was no longer a game. Her body was tight against his. Her scented mouth demanded.

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He knotted his hands in her hair. She clung to him. She was the one who finally broke away.

"This is no damn good," she said with feeling.

"I rather enjoyed it." His light tone concealed intense emotion. He loved her. *Loved* her. What could be worse?

"I'm afraid I did too," Jenny said. "But there's no time for it. The plan's too important to let something like this jeopardize it." Her eyes grew hard. "We're going to wait, Wylie Dun. Until we take the Stars, I'm the one running things. That has to be clear."

"It is. But after we take them, it's different."

"I'm afraid you may be right," she said softly.

She touched his arm. "Lazaret's waiting."

She was in command of herself again. He was glad. The momentary reversal in their roles had unnerved him. He followed her back to the deck room. His throat felt parched. His hands began to shake a little. He succumbed to the old, nagging lack of confidence. He wanted a drink.

Lazaret accompanied them to the forward command cabin. Ahead, the dark of space swept away and away, interrupted now and again by the massive ball of a red giant or the purple corona of a dwarf. It was lonely here. The steady sound of the ship's engines only made it more so.

Jenny put Lazaret in the secondary command chair and injected his arm with an ampul of the blue-green fluid. Lazaret dropped into his trance, biting his own tongue and crooning.

In a whisper Jenny explained that Lazaret used his precog abilities twice daily to scan the lanes for Regulator prowboats. This morning, when he woke up at the end of about fifteen minutes, he had looked for six hours ahead and had seen nothing.

Jenny patted Lazaret's shuddering shoulders. "Rest for half an hour. Then join us at the projection table."

Dragonard looked a bit startled. "We're starting now?"

"Yes. The plan must be committed to memory by the time we land on Whitepeake."

"How soon will that be?"

"Twelve and a half days. Coming?"

While they waited for Lazaret, Jenny switched off all the lights and showed Dragonard the various materials she had assembled on projectable cells. The only illumination came

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from the red-lit rectangle of the tabletop, on which she laid out the first cell. Dragonard watched the ceiling screen and hid his astonishment.

"This is a series of twelve schematics," she said.

Another diagram appeared overhead. A third replaced it. Only Jenny's hands were visible and these redly, dimly, as she slid one cell out of the way, made room for the next.

"The twelve represent the structure of the three electro-walls around Genmo's summer palace. You'll be expected to memorize every single bit of information you see. Now here—"

Whisper went the red hands. A long chart of times coded against meaningless numbers appeared.

"—the guard schedules of the palace. We need to know where each man is stationed, or where he's moving, at precisely which minute. We'll use Lazaret's help when we actually get down to determining the whereabouts of everyone on the estate. But we'll still need to know these by heart."

The first table was replaced by eight more in succession. He couldn't believe all he saw. "I also have complete dimensograms of the congruent dimension where the Stars really are," she told him. "That's going to be your part, you know. It was the job of Nels Brix before you. Crawl through from *here* to *there*, disengage the Stars and bring them back. You'll know how to do it by the time we finish rehearsing. But it won't be easy. It's the most dangerous part of all."

His throat clogged again. His head buzzed. He thought of Elena; of how close he'd come to failure recently; of potential errors of timing and judgment that could have destroyed him.

On Collegium he'd come close to disaster when he struck Vondamm. What if his nerves betrayed him again? He had only one choice, he realized. Stop the conspiracy before it got as far as the actual theft.

He tried to convince himself this idea wasn't cowardice. He tried to reassure himself that it was just wise police practice. He wasn't fully convinced.

Dragonard said, "Most of what you've shown me is highly secret, isn't it?"

"All of it," she answered. "No one outside of Lord Genmo's own high staff would normally see what you've seen."

"But obviously you learned all the secrets."

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"We couldn't try the plan otherwise."

His neck prickled. "How did you learn?"

Was it a tiny laugh or only his imagination? "I might tell you, Wylie. Afterward. It wouldn't be wise for me to let you know that now."

It was precisely the information he needed most, though. And somehow had to get.

Lazaret arrived shortly. In the red-lit chamber, Jenny Sable began to outline the plan.

Dragonard hadn't really reckoned with all the steps that would ultimately be necessary if they were to break into the Lord's summer palace, penetrate to its heart and steal the Stars. His mind boggled at the risks. Yet Jenny seemed calm as she detailed each step, explaining it with references to the secret diagrams or schedules, or drawings that flicked one after another across the dark red ceiling.

They spent the best part of the day on a minute delineation of the plan. At day's end, Dragonard ate a small meal in the deck room with Lazaret. He was utterly weary.

The eraso was getting drunk. He mumbled to himself and sweated heavily. He ignored Dragonard's few questions, acted generally disoriented and vague.

Dragonard bid Jenny a quick good night in the forward command cabin. He didn't kiss her. She was sunk down in a command chair. She watched the stars moving slowly toward them out past the ship's prow. One boot was kicked up on the control bar in the center of the console.

"I'm getting the hell to bed to study," Dragonard said half-seriously.

"You'd better." Jenny swiveled around. "A fine idea. As you should have guessed by now, Wylie, this is no lark for me. This is what I've lived for, and worked for, and nothing's going to go wrong. While you sleep, the hypno-learner will feed the plan into your mind fifty times in five hours. We'll start early tomorrow, without the projection cells, to see how much you know."

Somewhere back in the *Saxony Banner*, a piercing shriek rang out. It dwindled away, then rose again, finally dropping to a sustained moan.

Jenny looked a little pale. "Damn. That's not good."

"You said he does it often."

"But it always affects his precog performance. Damn, damn."

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Dragonard left the cabin and returned to his sleeping cube. Unfortunately it was directly next to that of the eraso. Dragonard slid onto his couch, plugged the plug into his ears, set the various programming controls, stretched out, closed his eyes.

A neuter voice whispered, "Item one. Breach of the electrowalls at the summer palace. The following primary walls surround the entire estate: outer, with a maximum depth of—"

Through the bulkhead came Lazaret's voice, crying out in delirium. Dragonard adjusted the volume of the hypno-learner.

Better. He could just barely hear the screaming. He fell into an uneasy sleep with the neuter voice reciting the crime.

XVIII

All next day they rehearsed in the red chamber. Jenny Sable fired questions at Dragonard without giving him a moment to pause to think of the answer.

When he answered successfully—surprised, a little, at how much the hypnolearner had poured into his mind during the night—she complimented him. When he faltered, she shouted at him like a marketplace hag. She demanded that he write down the hypnolearner coordinates of each bit of information on which he'd stumbled, so that he could re-program the device that night to replay the appropriate passages. At the end of the day he had a list of eighty-six items. And a pain between his eyes like a needle.

He spent an hour setting up the programming of the learner. Then he went back to the deck room. Jenny hadn't returned from forward. Lazaret sprawled on a couch with a drinkskin at his lips. There was a bit more color in his cheeks. In fact he had acted fairly alert all day.

"Had anything to eat yet?" Dragonard asked.

"Yes. If you want any of that syntho garbage, help yourself."

Dragonard walked to the servomech, punched its dials, waited until a whey-like cake and a mug of nutrient popped

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from the rusted slot. He took these to the table near Lazaret's couch. The eraso watched him with his huge eyes.

"Feel like talking?" Dragonard asked as he sat down. "You didn't last night."

Lazaret's mouth jerked in a pastiche of humor. "I am informed by our leader that I screamed all night. I often do." He tilted the drinkskin. The brand on the back of his hand glistened with iridescent highlights.

Dragonard bit into the whey cake. Should he take the chance? Jenny might return any minute. Still, the eraso was smiling in a muzzy way. He might never have a better opportunity. But Lazaret spoke first.

"Jenny likes you, you know. That's a favorable sign. We might make it."

"There's no doubt in her mind about the outcome."

"I don't quite share her confidence, I'm afraid."

Dragonard's palms sweated. "It should be easy if we're careful. We've got so damn much information—"

● "A lucky thing, that," Lazaret mused. Wine drooled out a corner of his mouth and down his chin. He lay the drinkskin aside, turned his head so that he could watch deep space outside the port. Far off, a comet trailed fire. "We wouldn't have conceived the plan if we hadn't got all those diagrams almost by accident. A lucky thing," he repeated drowsily.

The gold eyes shifted. "Did you buy the information?"

"Of course not. You couldn't buy that kind of thing on any gray market in II."

"Then where did you get it?"

Silence.

Then engines drummed. The comet raced on and was lost. Lazaret let out a burbling moan. Another of his spells coming? Dragonard hunched forward.

Lazaret might be as cautious as Jenny about revealing the wellsprings of the plan. If so . . .

No. Dragonard's heart thumped harder. Lazaret's lips were working.

"From a whore. Isn't that amusing?"

Something ticked in Dragonard's mind. "Who was she?"

"A former mistress of Genmo I. A courtesan. She was discarded by the old fool, but not before she—"

Lazaret's right hand thrashed. His whole body echoed the movement with a quick convulsion. The spasm passed.

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"Not before she amassed all sorts of ill-gotten tidbits of information. She carried half a caseful of microsheets away with her when Genmo pensioned her off. I happened on her quite by chance. She was so bitter and furious with the Lord that she gave me all the information, all the secret data, in return for a promise that it would be used to hurt the Lord in any way I deemed suitable. Shortly thereafter I met Jenny. We—"

Again his speech was interrupted by a deep moan. His legs shook.

"What did the woman look like?" Dragonard asked.

"Look like?" Dazed, Lazaret watched the stars outside the port. "Beautiful. Hair like silver. Eyes . . . rather cold eyes, as I recall."

"Her name. Do you remember that?"

"It was—"

The spindly legs beat up and down. Lazaret's shoulders started to quake.

"Helene."

Dragonard's spine crawled.

"What was her last name?" he said.

"I think . . . let me se—"

Lazaret's jaw went rigid.

"Ah. As beautiful as she. It was—"

A bubble of saliva rose to his lips, popped.

"Brightstone."

Suddenly Lazaret laughed. He rolled off the couch with a jerk and shrieked.

Dragonard's hand jerked, struck his mug, overturned it. Lazaret kept on screaming.

XIX

Through most of the night Lazaret howled and gibbered in his sleeping cube. Dragonard got used to it after a while as he paced back and forth in his own tiny space.

The problem of what must be done occupied most of his thinking. As the night wore on, he grew less and less aware of the maniacal cries ringing through the bulkhead. He and Jenny had carried the eraso to his cube after he went into screaming convulsions in the deck room.

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Helene. She was the key. Helene of the silver hair and the cold eyes. There were forces which he didn't understand, but he sensed their immensity again. Helene had existed for him. Then, later, she hadn't existed at all.

But she had pointed him toward the conspiracy and suggested he join it.

And Helene—the same? another?—had provided Lazaret with the secret information to make possible the theft of the Stars. He began to feel the old, uncomfortable uncertainty as he walked back and forth in the confined space.

Lazaret's shrieks had died away, he realized. He consulted his pocket chron. The end of the night had come. But so had the best answer to this latest twist in the puzzle.

Echelon Director Arthur Yee needed this newest, curious fact about Helene.

With a careful step Dragonard moved into the corridor. He checked in both directions. Empty. Sucking in a breath, he slipped to the right, past Lazaret's sleeping cube and into the shadows surrounding the catwalk into the power room.

A pale green light radiated from the pile below. Dragonard climbed down the swaying ladder from the catwalk, trying to forget that Arthur Yee, too, had behaved inexplicably, ordering him to Blaze City and then denying it later. Dragonard's hands slicked with sweat as he approached the dark block of the pile.

Somewhere, somehow, manipulators were at work. Was Helene one of them? Was she even real? It was imperative that there be answers, and soon.

Dragonard hunched over the rodports of the block from which the pale green radiance leaked. He thought cynically that Jenny wouldn't appreciate what he was going to do for her. Probably she wouldn't even believe that unseen forces were at work, subtly arranging affairs, directing a few human beings through a strange maze of events to—what? Theft of the Seven Stars? Yes, but he had a hunch that it went much deeper.

Carefully Dragonard reached out, closed his fingers around one of the pile rods. He drew it out to the length of his longest finger. Then, as the sweat built up on his cheeks, he applied steady downward pressure until the rod bent just a little.

The pale green light made his face glisten. He thought

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he heard a noise up on the catwalk, spun. Imagination and tension had produced the sound. The catwalk was empty.

Carefully Dragonard bent the rod just a bit more. Then he put his palm against the end of it and thrust hard.

The rod dropped into the heart of the pile. A faint clang. Immediately the green light brightened. He jumped back from the sudden brilliance, turned and raced for the swaying ladder.

He hurried along the corridor to his cube. Through the vibrating metal under his feet he sensed the sudden shut-down of the powerplant. Alarm bells began to jangle as he darted into his cube. He slammed the hatch and leaned against it, sucking in long breaths.

Five minutes later, pretending to rub sleep out of his eyes, Dragonard again climbed down the swaying ladder in the pile chamber.

Bright overhead lights had come on. Jenny Sable, wearing a flamboyant orange sleeping kimo and nothing else, kneeled by the pile. She was peering into the port through which Dragonard had pushed the rod.

No light shone through the port now. Jenny looked furious.

"What happened?" Dragonard asked.

"The pile malfunctioned. I'll emasculate the sod who sold me this tin tub if I ever see him again."

Lazaret stumbled blearily onto the catwalk, came down the ladder to join them. "I heard the bells. Are we in trouble?"

"Yes." Jenny thrust an angry hand through her unbound hair. "We'll have to shut down half the plant and travel at fifty percent velocity."

Lazaret's moon eyes glistened. "That's too dangerous with Regulator prowboats out in these lanes."

"It's either that or go back to Fulldrive and have the pile rebuilt. Damn it, Lazaret, we've waited so long already. . . ." She shook her head, closer to crying than Dragonard had ever seen her.

The eraso thought a moment. "The Stars will wait a bit longer too. We'll never get them if we're picked up traveling these lanes illegally."

"Damn you," she said. "I know you're right."

Dragonard stood very still.

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One hour later, under half power, the *Saxony Banner* came about for Fulldrive.

The rusting metal of the repair yard craneboom creaked as the operator lowered the drag cones through the opening that had been cut into the ship's hull. A clank of contact; the boom pulleys reversed.

Held by the cones, the pile unit rose up and out of the ship. As it cleared the hull the craneboom swung slightly. The pile scraped the edge of the opening with a ferocious squeal.

"Be careful, you sod!" Jenny yelled. "This is costing me enough without you jacking the fee with your damn carelessness!"

The boom operator leaned out of the pod, made an obscene gesture, but handled the dangling burden with more care after that.

Dragonard stood beside the girl at the edge of the ramp where the *Saxony Banner* had docked. The craneboom swung the pile away. It passed over the burning disk of the sun and disappeared, lowered out of sight in the bustling repair area beyond the ship.

A morning wind blew in this huge, noisy yard at the edge of the city. Jenny's hair trailed out behind her as she stuck her hands in the pockets of her scarlet jacket and turned away from the injured ship. Lugging his valise, Dragonard followed.

"The yard master said she'd be tied up at least eight days," Jenny told him. She frowned at Dragonard's luggage. "I see you have plans for the interval?"

He nodded. His gold eyes looked opaque in the sunlight. Here it became critical again. He had to get away.

"Thought I'd look up some friends," he said. "Maybe turn a credit or two while we wait."

"A credit or two!" she exploded. "How the hell greedy are you, Wylie? There'll be credits enough when we finish what we're doing. I don't care to have you running around the city on other business. One drink too many, one careless word—no, it won't do. You stay aboard the *Banner* with Lazaret and the Tank and me."

"Look, my dear," he said with a faintly acid smile, "I'll stay where I please, go where I please, drink what I please."

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Her body was taut as she blocked his path. "You're forgetting who's in charge."

He didn't like this. On the return journey she'd been tense and irritable. Her eyes showed the strain of worry. He hated hurting her. But he had no choice.

"I haven't forgotten. You run things aboard ship and at our destination. But this is a temporary delay. I'm a free agent."

"Wylie, the stakes are too high for me to let you take chances—"

"It's not your decision, Jenny. I'm going."

"Maybe you shouldn't come back."

"Maybe I damn well won't."

She shielded her eyes against the sun. The air smelled of chemicals and bitter fuel. "Your attitude could jeopardize the whole operation. Maybe I should send Lazaret after you."

"Try that, Jenny. Just try that. I don't think he'd be much of a problem. Of course if you want Regulators sniffing around because of a killing, that's your affair."

Tears formed in her eyes. "You greedy son of a bitch."

"Isn't it the truth," he said, and turned his back.

Dragonard walked with his valise swinging from his right hand. He despised himself for treating her as he had. The feeling lingered long after he'd passed through the repair yard gate and into the twisting city streets. He leaned into the stiff wind and thought of her face, her sea-foam eyes.

How could he explain that what he was doing might save her life?

He wasn't sure it would, of course. He was sure of nothing, except that huge forces were stirring and shifting beneath the surface reality of the plot to steal the Stars. He believed that Jenny was being manipulated. As he had been manipulated on Korb and—yes, as Yee might have been manipulated too.

Why and by whom remained mysteries to be solved. But Jenny wouldn't care. Even if he was able to spell out the whole story of how she'd become a pawnpiece, he suspected she'd shoot him before he got out ten words.

What a damn mess! There had been strange, moving possibilities in his mind from the first time he saw her. Now he was forced to abandon them, kill them, and keep

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moving down the old streets under the loom of the peaks of Wheel.

At a public drinkstall he ordered a mug and held it in his hand, surveying the cobbled way down which he'd just come.

He watched for nearly half an hour. He saw no sign of Lazaret, or of any other pursuit. He threw down a coin, dumped the wine on the ground and set off. After sunset he entered the Regulator station by the back way.

XX

"This is Sectioner Dragonard. Give me a priority beam channel to Bromdaagar-8."

"Will comply, Sectioner," said the robot voice. "One moment."

The moment seemed endless. Dragonard slumped in a contour chair in the station's central communications room. The station chief hovered. Dragonard had said only that he required an immediate clear channel.

Now he watched the screen drifting with multicolored shapes as the beam shot across the gulf of space to the Regulators' headquarters planet. The shapes cleared, replaced by the youthful face of the duty officer.

"Bromdaagar-8 reception," said the officer. He recognized Dragonard, looked startled. Dragonard wondered whether Vondamm had been pushing more rumors in his absence.

"I'm calling from the planet Wheel. Give me immediate contact with Echelon Director Yee."

The officer glanced off camera. "Sir—ah . . ."

"I don't care if it is the middle of the night there. Wake him up and put me through."

The officer wiped his cheek with the back of his hand. "Sectioner, you don't know . . ."

"Don't know what? Say what you mean, mister."

"A little over forty-eight hours ago, Sectioner—that is, sir—Echelon Director Yee is dead."

Dragonard shot up out of the chair with a fierce ache in his middle. Then, like a fire going out, the pain was gone.

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It was replaced by a tired, futile sadness. He sat down again, kept his voice as level as he could.

"What happened?"

"I can give you Central Investigations, Sectioner. They'll report—"

"Goddam it, mister, if you know, tell me."

The officer blinked. "Yes, sir. It was an accident. The Echelon Director was leaving the base. A transpo ran over him. The vehicle cracked up right after the Echelon Director was hit. The driver was an official courier named Hodax. Apparently he was on assignment with the car, but the autop showed he'd visited a drugdreamer shortly before the incident. He was killed outright when the transpo crashed.

Hodax. An unknown name. A cipher. Probably some drug-hyped assassin.

Dragonard rubbed the bridge of his nose. He was building terrible suspicions, phantom theories of conspiracy. Was it that complicated? What if it had been a genuine accident? Somehow he couldn't bring himself to believe it. Arthur Yee was a careful man. Had someone discovered that Yee was investigating Helene?

There was a personal side to this as well. Arthur Yee had been his friend. And his only defense in the high orders of the Regulators against the maneuverings of Conrad Vondamm. Now that was all gone. Dragonard's head felt like sludge.

"Are you still there, Sectioner?" The officer's voice sounded distant.

"Yes, mister, I'm here. Question. How long did Yee live?"

"Not long, Sectioner. I believe I heard ten minutes. Perhaps Central Investigations can fill you in."

"I'll call them later." Dragonard slapped the lever that broke the beam. The officer's startled face dwindled to a whorl of color that the blackening screen swallowed.

The station chief said, "We've heard of Yee out here. A fine man, they say."

"The best." Dragonard turned, focused his shadowed gold eyes on the other. "I was on assignment for him. I'm wondering if Yee got too close at his end. We were both working on the—hell, you wouldn't believe it if I told you."

To relieve the strain, the station chief tried sympathetic small talk. "How old was Yee, Sectioner?"

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Dragonard replied tiredly that he didn't know, guessed that he was close to the mandatory retirement age of seventy-five. The chief digested this.

"Did he have a family?"

"No children, just a wife. She—"

Abruptly Dragonard sat up. He recalled the barracks jokes about Yee's close relationship with his wife, and he remembered the linked platinum communicators! Yee always carried one wherever he went.

Dragonard attacked the beam console like a madman, punching in signals until he was reconnected with Bromdaagar-8. To the same baffled young officer Dragonard described what he wanted, impressed the officer with the urgency of it, then sat back to wait. His fingers tightened up into fists.

A bell chimed somewhere on the headquarters planet. Within a moment or two, the colored shapes cleared. Dragonard saw a small section of an apartment swept with the glow of twilight. Foreground, looking much more tired than he had ever seen her, was a stout woman who had obviously been attractive in her youth.

"Wolf!"

"Tomira—my God, I'm sorry about Arthur. I only learned a little while ago."

She brushed at one eyebrow. "A stupid thing to happen. Such a fine man. He faced danger so many times doing his job. And then to be squashed by a runaway machine. It's unfair. We had so many plans to travel and be together when . . . well."

Dragonard spoke with sustained intensity: "Tomira, it could have been something besides an accident. I'm on the planet Wheel, in the Autus system. Arthur sent me here on a case, and I beamed tonight because I had to talk to him. Tomira, did Arthur discuss any of his current work with you?"

Her eyes grew thoughtful. "No. He was a Reg, Wolf. He lived by the rules. Especially the ones about security." She hesitated. "Lately, though, he did drop hints that something peculiar was happening. It bothered him, I know. He was sleeping badly. And he had those headaches. Of course he did mention you."

"In what connection?"

The frank eyes didn't evade the lens. "He said you were

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having problems. He wanted to help you. He was very fond of you. He once told me that he'd never met a better Sectioner. I gathered that his current worries had something to do with you, though I sense they went deeper."

"Much," Dragonard replied. He found this hard going. "Tomira, I called because I remembered the communicators you and Arthur carried. I understand he lived a few minutes after the accident. He didn't by any chance call you?"

"Of course he did." There was sadness in her voice. She brushed at her eyes. "I think he knew he was dying. He said goodbye. Then he gave me a message for you."

Wolf Dragonard swallowed. "Message?"

"A group of numbers and letters. He said you'd know the significance. Wait; I wrote them down."

She moved out of the frame, returned with a paper. The Fulldrive station chief snapped switches that set the recorders humming. Tomira Yee's voice carried through the speakers and onto the memory drums:

"Here they are. The first letter is P, followed by the word Quadrant. Then this: X, 1, 1, 4, B, an omega sign, a minus sign, 10 with a degree sign. Does it mean anything to you?"

Behind Dragonard, the station chief whispered, "Star-coordinates."

"Yes, Tomira, it does. I wish I could be there with you."

"I wish you could too. But make what you're doing a memorial to Arthur."

"I will," he said and broke the beam.

The station chief had already left. He returned shortly to say, "I programmed the coordinates. It may take a while. Do you want something to eat?"

Dragonard stared at the blank screen. "No thanks. I'll wait here."

The memory machines searched all night. A formidable job, Dragonard knew, because of the billions and billions of entries in the Regulator registry of known bodies in II Galaxy. Dragonard dozed.

When he awoke, the room was quite chilly. The station chief, who obviously had been up all night, had just come in.

"The coordinates identify an asteroid in the P quadrant, Sectioner. That's pretty far away. At the end of the galactic lens, nearly. The asteroid's small. It was only logged by a

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geospatial ship eight months ago, from a range of two hundred thousand miles. We can arrange a small lightship if you need to get there in a hurry."

Dragonard stretched. "An asteroid? I don't see the connection—is that all you've got on it?"

The station chief looked dismayed. "Just that and the registry code name."

"What's the code name?"

"Helene."

Dragonard blasted the single-man lightship off Fulldrive and into hyperspace three hours later.

XXI

The first of the bombs went off when he came out of the Blacke Shoot, a little less than sixty-three thousand miles from the asteroid. . . .

The Blacke Shoot was an imaginary route, a bow-shaped pattern of hyperdrive jumps that had been used for centuries by lightfreighters in these remote parts of II Galaxy.

Beginning just beyond the Khamzun worlds in O-minus-O-quadrant, a lightship could navigate the intervening parsecs to the populous planets of Q quadrant in around fourteen hours, realtime.

Dragonard slept the first four. He woke gritty-mouthed and unrefreshed. None of the prepped rations in the little galley sat well in his belly. He spent the remainder of the hyperspace trip brooding in the single command chair up in the prow.

All the craft's ports had been automatically opaqued at the first jump. The hull sang like a sorrowing woman from time to time, and gave short, thudding shudders whenever the autonavs retrieved it from one jump point and positioned it for the next. The interiors of the ports crawled with the oily spectrum of visible light that built up during passage. Strange greens and purples and yellows flickered like fire in the dim cabin. Dragonard sat like a statue. He watched the scan screens. Their gridlines were steady, uninterrupted by the radiated presence of any obstacle for parsecs on all sides of the ship.

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Lonely, this place. No wonder the long-dead lightcaptains in their quaint old tongue had likened it to a black chute. Dragonard thought of many things: Vondamm, Yee, the Stars, a drink, Jenny Sable, even Elena. He wondered how he'd come out of this one. He was a policeman, fitted for tough but routine assignments. This was more. Self-doubt seduced him.

The name Helene had to be a crazy coincidence. He'd find a floating chunk of rock without life. Later it would be entered into his record that he'd behaved like a madman, yelling for immediate action, routing out half the Fulldrive station to get this swift, well-armed little lightship ready in the shortest possible time. His tongue began to crawl with the need for a drink. He pressed his fingers hard against the top of his nose to ease a sudden pressure. He remembered something he'd seen.

In the galley there was a ration of therapeutic distillate marked MEDICINAL ONLY. He licked his lips, stood up, started to leave the cabin.

Chimes rang. The console dials blinked. The lightship shuddered. The oily spectrums disappeared from the ports. The cabin filled with the hummings of the regular guidance systems. He swallowed and turned back.

Near thing, that. He wanted to say the hell with it all. He was in over his head, but that wasn't the worst. The worst was the thought of how he'd hurt Jenny if he kept on.

Forcing himself into habituated patterns of movements, he walked past the main console and checked readings one by one. Concentration helped break up his tension. He noted that the locators were still locked securely on Helene's star-coordinates. The ship slipped smoothly ahead toward the destination.

On the largest scan screen a halated red ball had appeared. That was the asteroid. The gridlines in the screen's center touched the ball on all four sides and gave off a low crackling. Perfect alignment. He checked to see whether the console included a long-d spectro, considered running a spec. He was certain he'd find just rock.

The cabin's light level had risen when the ship came out of hyperdrive. A few distant orange and white points pricked the black of space. He turned to note the distance as the digits revolved with a click: 62,900.

A puff of flame sheeted up in front of the ship's prow.

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The clap of sound knocked him off balance, sent him spinning against the rear bulkhead. The explosion died away, overlaid by the howl of the internal distress monitors. The deck began to lurch back and forth. The scream of the monitors increased.

She was ruptured on the ventral surface. Blazing red lights on the console indicated moderate to severe damage. He crawled forward. He dragged himself up in the command chair, kicked the pedal that unlocked the autonavs. The ship began to spin bow over stern.

There was no time for anything but purely automatic response. Kick of his boot—the manuals shot out the lower console. He slid his hands into the response gloves mounted to the main bars. His gold eyes flicked back and forth, noting pressures, levels, the quick change of red warnings to blue. The repair systems had breached the rupture. He decelerated to halfspeed, peered ahead through the port.

Nothing out there. Nothing but dark. Helene was still—he glanced at the moving digits—53,700 miles away.

What the hell had nearly blown him up? He rejected the idea of a seeker-mine. Such sophisticated weaponry was usually launched from another vessel. But the scan screen indicated nothing within range, nothing but the asteroid itself, a red ball growing steadily larger on the grid squares.

He peered at that brilliant ball on the frosted screen, noticed what he should have noticed sooner. Hands in the gloves, he wrenched the bars. The tiny white spot to the left of the red ball increased in size.

The lightship banked so steeply that the plates of the hull rattled. A faint orange smudge fell away to starboard. He dragged his left hand out of the glove, searched the console. Sweat rivered down his cheek. The console seemed a glowing jumble.

God, where was it? Surely the ship was equipped—yes.

The orange smudge was racing in at him again.

He hit EVADE-DESTRUCT, held his breath for the instant in which it issued its complex signals. The orange smudge grew and grew, surely no more than eight to ten miles off his starboard and tracking him as fast as he climbed. Too close, too close—

The seeker-mine blew up. The hull took the impact with a crash but no damage.

Who was firing? Someone on the asteroid? He checked

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the scan screens, saw three white spots in a triangular pattern around the red ball. Three more, coming at once.

From the asteroid. It had to be from the asteroid.

He hit the EVADE-DESTRUCT button three times in a row, jammed his free hand back into the glove and sent the lightship into a crazy zigzagging course.

Ten minutes later, exhausted, Dragonard dropped the acceleration rate to one-quarter.

Helene was 22,400 miles off. He'd destructed the last of the twelve seeker-mines four minutes ago. They usually fired in pods of a dozen. He let the ship drift for twenty minutes. No more white spots appeared around the glowing red ball.

Life on the asteroid, then? It seemed incredible, this far from the regular space lanes. But much that would have struck him as incredible a month ago no longer did. He eased his hands out of the gloves. The skin of his palms was broken in a number of places and oozed blood. He wiped his hands against the side of the command chair and moved to the long-d spectro.

He snapped dials. A piercing whine filled the cabin. In five more minutes he was goggling at bands whose colors he couldn't believe.

Helene was made of metals. All metals. Alloys. Manufactured.

The long-d also revealed no sign of life.

Dragonard took a quick walking tour of the damage area. It was safely and effectively sealed. He slipped back into the chair, put his hands in the gloves, sent the lightship ahead. Soon a small sphere loomed across the prow. It gleamed like chrome.

The sphere increased in size as the digits tocked down below the 1,000 mile range. At 500, with no further sign of hostility, Dragonard took a calibration. Diameter of Helene: approximately one mile.

A cold, manufactured sphere drifting nowhere at the edge of space.

But armed. Fully armed to repel the curious.

Sweating hard now, he jockeyed the lightship up alongside the polished triangular cellplates that formed the asteroid's exterior. He had to stop thinking of it in those terms. It was not an asteroid. It was a station, a floating station. He put on a three-layer suit, plugged in the hel-

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met, eased himself out of the lock on the side of the ship away from the sphere. His faceplate fogged from his own sweat as he clanked back to the top of his vessel.

He snapped on the headbeam in his helmet. He ranged it over the polished surface of the sphere, saw many closed firing ports. The seeker-mines had been launched from one or more of them.

Carefully he stepped from his ship to the gleaming plates. His magnaboots grabbed as he walked to the nearest port. He crouched at the edge. With an insulated glove he reached down, touched the port's seal.

Thin silver blades sprang out all around the port.

One of the blades ripped the knee of his suit. He jumped back, felt the pressure begin to change. His throat clogged. His mind blurred. He slapped his palm against this side, broke the built-in blister of sealant, mashed it against the rent in his knee as he staggered back across the top of the lightship. By the time he dropped through the lock he knew that the blade had only nicked the suit's outer layer. Had it penetrated the other two, he would have died out there.

As he stripped the suit off in the lock he shuddered involuntarily. Helene was turning out to be something of a homicidal slut.

He proceeded to the opposite lock of his ship, the one he had positioned against what visual reckoning told him was the sphere's main lock. He brought a cutter into his lock, thought better of it. He laid the cutter aside, undogged his lock hatch so that he was up against the polished surface of the sphere. He returned inside the ship, fetched back a wad of malleable blowup with a timer. He affixed the explosive to the polished metal and got out of the lock fast.

He sealed the lock, peered into it through the three-inch window. With a puff the blow-up went off. The lock absorbed all sound. The sphere's polished hatch was gone.

The interior of the sphere's lock boiled with gray gas.

After several minutes, pumps inside the sphere sucked the gas away. The sphere's inner hatch opened. Dragonard waited another ten minutes to be sure all the gas was gone from both locks.

On the floor of his lock, all that remained of the cutter was a tiny pile of glittering white granules.

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Helene was open, but he could see little. A changing light spilled from the one lock into his own. The light indicated machines in there, banks of them, working to keep out unwanted visitors. Dragonard wondered how many more traps there'd be.

He closed his right hand on his blaster, unsealed his lock, waited.

Nothing happened.

He stepped into his lock, waited.

Nothing happened.

He began walking slowly toward the oval door at the far end of the other lock. Buzzings and hummings, ratcheting and clickings suggested furious mechanical activity.

He took another step.

Another.

His hands were icy. His pulse ran low and thready. He approached the oval door.

Cautiously he lifted his right boot over the threshold.

Set it down on the other side.

Stepped through.

Alive and still sweating, he stood in Helene's clicking heart.

XXII

Dragonard spent the first quarter-hour prowling the artificial asteroid top to bottom.

The interior consisted of three levels, all very compactly arranged. The main level, on which he'd entered, was the most spacious. Octagonal, it contained much complex equipment. One wall consisted of vertical racks in which were stored hundreds of thick sensory tapedrums.

Another wall of the octagon was filled by the banks of servomechs that maintained the sphere's temperature and breathable atmosphere. These banks were the ones that glowed and pinged and emitted a ratcheting noise from time to time. Relays of lights flashed across their surfaces, constantly changing color.

The remainder of the equipment baffled him, including banks of gauges and readouts with the nameplates of the

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manufacturing houses carefully burned away. A good deal of the machinery was connected by thick, colored conduits to a padded couch-like affair at one side of the chamber.

The curved couch rose from a large ceramic pedestal. It was adjustable, hinged in a dozen places. Dragonard examined it more closely, let out a low grunt of surprise.

Along the seam where the upper foam padding joined the contoured pedestal was a continuous row of tiny capped ports. He pried up one cap with his fingernail. The tube beneath the cap, concealed with the body of the pedestal, housed a neurostatic needle. Some of the other receptacles around the couch's circumference held similar needles. Others housed electroclamps.

The device was much like the hypnochair that had been used by the Regulators to question suspects in the previous century. But this version was far more sophisticated. Dragonard estimated that if all the needles and clamps were attached to a subject lying on the couch, there would be something on the order of one hundred and fifty hook-ups.

His gaze traveled from the ceramic pedestal, where all the colored conduits were received, back to the main machinery banks from whose lower faceplates the conduits emerged.

What was fed from that equipment, through the gleaming needles and clamps, into the subject on the couch? He had a crawling feeling that he already knew.

He discovered a ladder leading downward. The lower level housed food storage and preparation, equipment, plus the sphere's air filtration equipment. The third level above the octagonal chamber was nothing more than a series of small but well-furnished sleeping cubes. They opened off a small balcony that circled the top of the octagon. This level was likewise reached by a light ladder running up one wall to an opening in the balcony floor.

Finally Dragonard went back to the racks of tapedrums. Each drum was marked with magnetic coding. In addition, some human hand had fashioned its own, simpler code with a gaudy red stylus. An entire rack of drums carried variations of the letter H. He pulled out one at random. H-14.

He fed the drum into the playhead on the console, activated the power switches. The main screen suffused with

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gray. The screen was perhaps four feet on a side, and canted away from him. Light from it accented the harsh planes of his face. He gripped the edges of the console as the drum unspooled, fed in. . . .

On the screen a woman appeared against a limbo background. Her hair was a peak of silver. She was beautiful in a simple but costly tunic of silverlink.

She stared out at him, a two-dimensional projection. Then, slowly, the image of Helene Brightstone turned, walked out of the frame.

She reappeared a moment later.

She smiled.

A pause.

She frowned.

She nodded her head in a coquettish way.

Pause.

Something flickered across the screen faster than vision could comprehend it.

A splice in the sequence of taped images.

Dragonard's skin crawled. He began to understand.

He was looking at a two-d projection of dimensional stock footage of a woman who, very likely, never existed except for a few hours in some quack plasto-surgeon's shop and immediately afterward went before the camera lenses where these master tapes had been prepared.

The cost of it, though! The immense cost to create such a library of actions, poses, expressions, attitudes, all of which could be hacked up and edited into a total experience a subject under drugs could receive and absorb as if it were reality itself.

Dragonard knew enough about mind-tampering to know how damnably feasible it was. He turned to stare at the conduits running from the equipment baseplates to the contour couch. Did the neuroneedles and electroclamps carry the stimuli into the subject's brain and being? That had to be it. A complete illusion, carefully edited together from this library of images, could be programmed into a man's mind.

On the silent screen Helene Brightstone kneeled.

A pause.

She reached out with her right hand, as if caressing someone. Dragonard's mouth wrenched. He jerked another drum from the storage rack.

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In the next hours he went through dozens of them. Helene clothed. Helene naked. Helene running. Helene sleeping. He went through sound tapes carrying the voice of a girl repeating word after word, with an editing pause between each, like an audio dictionary. He went through background tapes, both visual and aural. He recognized many of the individual bits.

He listened with an ugly face while the forlorn music of an ancient stringharp reverberated from the console. It was the music the robot harpist had played, that last night at the villa.

No sense going on. He knew now that he had been brought here to Helene, probably under narco injections, laid in that contour couch and fed the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches of a dream.

All for the purpose of informing him of a plot to steal the Seven Stars.

The same must have happened to Lazaret: the same abduction into this mechanical environment where, sleeping, a man could dream truth. Yes, surely that must have happened to Lazaret too.

But for a different purpose. Lazaret must have been given the secret information he needed to launch his colossal plan of theft.

Plan of theft and plan to thwart it both sprang from the same source. That source a sphere whirling in space, parsecs off the traveled lanes. Isolated here, obviously, because of the nature of the project.

Someone of immense power, immense wealth, immense cleverness had arranged all this. One hammering, tormenting question remained.

Why?

Why spend literally billions—surely it must have taken at least several to equip this remote and secret station—to plan a monumental theft and at the same time activate the machinery to foil it? The whole notion was mad.

But assume a gigantic conspiracy, motivation unknown. What was the next step?

Think, policeman. Or are you over your head now? Will you quit now?

His hand shook. His tongue itched. He rubbed his watering right eye, turned, stared in a baffled way at all the cold, costly devices waiting in the silence for—whose hand?

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High up on the bank of servomechs, a red flasher began to blink.

Dragonard dashed to the console, read the gauges. A heat sensitometer and a scope combined to show the approach of some kind of ship. Yet there were no sirens, no alarms. Just the steady, red flashing.

He watched it a minute longer. Then he dodged back through both air locks into his own ship. He ran forward to where he could look out a port.

Minutes went by. He kept waiting for the first faraway flame-and-blast of a seeker-mine dealing with the interloper. Space lay dark, undisturbed.

More time passed. There were no explosions.

Dragonard's belly hurt. Either the new arrival knew how to get through the defenses by outmaneuvering them, or he knew how to turn them off.

Shortly Dragonard spotted the craft coming in. He cursed aloud.

It was a Regulator skysled, modified for hyperdrive travel.

He grew violently angry. What incredible foul-up had sent the Regulators trailing after him? Was the station commander on Fulldrive responsible? Had the man grown suspicious of his erratic behavior? Damn, lengthy explanations could wreck everything now. If he had to go before a high board, there might be a leak. He had to get back to Jenny Sable so that the theft could proceed. Otherwise he'd never learn who in all of II Galaxy had financed this incredible space station, and planned the scheme to—

Wait. He was being both illogical and forgetful.

How could the Regulators get through Helene's defenses without activating them?

They couldn't.

Someone was coming who knew the sphere's protective mechanisms, and could control them.

Breathing fast, Dragonard hurried back into the sphere. He clambered up to the little balcony, crouched down, waited.

Presently a hull clanged against the outer plates. A second lock opened opposite the one by which he had entered. Boots rang on metal. A man walked into the octagonal chamber.

The man's black cape swirled as he stopped, raised his

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head, listened. A strange smile moved the scar-pucker of his mouth. The red flasher went on and off, on and off, shining from the three polished plates in the man's face.

"Sectioner? Just where in hell have you got to?" Conrad Vondamm called.

XXIII

Slowly Dragonard reached for his belt. He drew his blaster. From his hiding place he could see that Interrogation Agent Vondamm carried a regulation sidearm on his black belt. But it was still in its scabbard, butt first.

Dragonard rose slowly, aimed down at Vondamm's black doublet.

"Here, Conrad," he said.

Vondamm hardly troubled to give him a glance. The slim agent strolled to the bank of servomech controls, began throwing switches, extinguishing lighted dials.

"I knew you'd be somewhere aboard, Sectioner. Would you like to come down so we can talk in a civilized way?" *Snap-snick* went a switch, another. "You needn't be worried. I'm quite alone."

Dragonard waved the blaster, edged toward the opening in the balcony floor. "Stand over there where I can watch you, Conrad."

Vondamm obeyed with an indifferent shrug. Dragonard started down the ladder using just one hand. The red flasher still blinked on and off. Vondamm watched him with calculated amusement.

Dragonard reached the floor, walked toward the Interrogation Agent. Vondamm's posture was relaxed. His effeminate hands were folded at his waist. But he was enjoying himself immensely.

"An unexpected visit, Conrad," Dragonard said.

"Isn't it? I wasn't certain I'd find you alive. But you do have a certain brutish skill at dealing with physical hazards." Vondamm's hand fluttered. "How do you like our little facility? Quite expensive and, as you've probably deduced, quite complete for its purpose."

"Which was to put two sets of information into the heads of two different people."

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"Ah, you know about the eraso."

"Yes. He met a woman named Helene too."

Vondamm licked a corner of his lips. "We may have been a shade careless there. It did seem perfectly sensible to save expenses and develop one fictitious female personality, however. Perhaps we should have given her two different names. A distressing oversight. I wasn't in charge of that phase of the operation."

Dragonard had to concentrate on Vondamm's eyes. Otherwise he saw his own reflection in the polished plates, a sick, melting-wax image of himself that unnerved him. He was very hot. He wished he knew why Vondamm acted so relaxed.

"Don't call it an operation, Conrad. Call it a conspiracy."

"Call it whatever melodramatic name you wish." The Interrogation Agent shrugged. "It has served its purpose to this point. Unfortunately you proved a bit more clever than I had anticipated. So I came on your trail, you see. To prevent you from carrying word of any of this"—another fluttering wave—"to quarters in which it might do damage."

"To the Regulators."

"Yes. You have gotten a shade too close, Sectioner."

"Too close to the truth?"

"Exactly. Arthur Yee made that mistake. You know what it earned him."

A vein in Dragonard's head bulged. "You son of a bitch, you killed him!"

"Not quite. I arranged it. As I arranged the death of his wife. It happened just before I left to come after you. A fall from a sixth level pedway, poor woman." Vondamm chuckled. "The stakes are substantial in this game, Sectioner. Or have you deduced that too?"

Rage built inside Dragonard at the thought of Tomira Yee murdered. He fought to keep control. He wanted to open Vondamm's middle with a single blaster beam and have done. He couldn't. Not until he found out what he had to know.

"What made you come after me?" Dragonard asked. "I mean specifically."

"After Yee was killed I was disturbed by one thought. Perhaps he had left some information behind for you. I placed a surreptitious day-night communications monitor on

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his wife. When I was informed that you were back on Fulldrive and had been in contact with her, I knew he had unearthed something about Helene. But let's go back a bit. Do you want to know how I decided to remove him? I was away from Bromdaagar-8, handling a case on Fextus. I got word from one of my sources about the nature of a secret investigation Yee was conducting. Something to do with locating a woman called Helene Brightstone. The informant said he'd also picked up word that Echelon Director Yee knew Helene wasn't a real person. I had no more information. I reported it, and recommended that Yee be removed. It was done. Unfortunately a hack assassin handled the job. Yee's corpse was reclaimed too fast for us to get hold of it and probe it for residual memories. Thus we didn't know how much he might have discovered. At that point, you may be sure, my worries began in earnest. I placed the monitor on Tomira Yee. Sure enough, I learned that you'd come back to Fulldrive and gotten in contact with her via beam. I reasoned that it was entirely possible that Yee could have left some vital facts with his wife. He lived a short time after the accident, and his proclivity for sharing information with Mrs. Yee was a joke in every station in this section of II. I watched matters from Fextus, kept working on my case. After all, I must preserve my cover. I was beamed the news that you had departed in a commandeered ship, destination unrecorded. Suppose Yee *had* located this installation. I could afford to take no chances. I falsified a set of orders, commandeered a ship myself for a spurious mission, and came here a rather roundabout way. I knew my suspicions were correct when I saw your boat docked to the hull."

Vondamm picked at his mangled lip with one soft finger. He added in a thoughtful way, "There's really nothing to do now but make sure no one knows what you've seen. I wish I had the time to dispatch you slowly, as you deserve. The press of the situation dictates otherwise. Quick, efficient. You understand." And his mouth broke into a smile of such false sincerity that Dragonard could fairly feel the man's hate.

After a minute Dragonard asked, "What got you involved, Conrad?"

Vondamm's wrath spilled: "You arrogant piece of dung!

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You've got the guts to ask me that when it doesn't make a bit of difference to the Regulator hierarchy whether a man has talent? If there's another man already posted to a higher rank, a man of talent can stew in his own filth to the end of his days. I was passed over once too often."

"If you were passed over, it's because you're a sick man."

Vondamm giggled. "I'll remember that when you're dying, Wolf."

"Not Sectioner any more?"

"No, not Sectioner. Even though you've got that blaster, no."

The hate between them was almost a tangible thing. Dragonard struggled to act and react with the rationality the predicament demanded.

"All right, Conrad. Answer a few more questions. I figure I was brought here."

"Correct."

"And filled full of what I thought happened on Korb."

"Correct. You were drugged. An ampul shoved into your arm at the Blaze City racecourse—" A shrug.

"How did you get me to Korb in the first place?"

Vondamm grinned. "Didn't Echelon Director Yee recommend it?"

"Later he denied it."

Vondamm touched his lips again. "A suggesto cube, you imbecile."

Dragonard's eyes flared open. "The headaches—!"

"Of course. We took Yee out of action one night exactly as we did you: an ampul surreptitiously injected in a crowd. While he was unconscious we operated a suggesto cube into his brain. The cube was programmed with the thought that you should take restleave at Blaze City. Would a police officer have sent you there otherwise?"

Dragonard's mind reeled a little at the thought of the immense resources which must buttress this plot. He wiped his upper lip with his sleeve. Helene sang a murmurous mechanical song. The red flasher went on and off, on and off.

"How long have you been part of the conspiracy, Conrad?"

"A year or two. They needed an inside man."

"And still you preferred charges against me."

The Interrogation Agent stared at him. "I have personal feelings."

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Why was it so damnably hot in here? Dragonard pointed the blaster at Vondamm's face. "Maybe we'd better move on to the really important questions, Conrad. You keep using words like we and they. I want names."

Vondamm's faceplates flashed as he shook his head. "I'm sorry. You won't get that information, not even a minute before you die. I am going to kill you, by the way."

Dragonard wiggled the blaster. "Haven't you got it reversed?"

"A temporary advantage, nothing more. Excuse me, do you mind if I sit?"

Before Dragonard could answer, the Interrogation Agent started to brush by. Dragonard took a step back. Without warning Vondamm twisted his head. His head was close to Dragonard's. The red flasher shone directly into Vondamm's faceplates. Reflected starbursts made Dragonard suddenly blind.

He jerked aside, blinking furiously. Red coronas danced in his eyes. Vondamm caught hold of the blaster with both hands.

Dragonard pulled back. Vondamm loosed one of his hands, jabbed his thumb into Dragonard's left eye. Dragonard yelled.

Vondamm applied strategic pressure to nerves in Dragonard's wrist. Dragonard felt his fingers go lax. The blaster spun away.

Somewhere beyond the fading red haze, Vondamm chuckled. Dragonard lunged forward with both hands extended. Vondamm darted away. Still not seeing clearly, Dragonard crashed into a balcony support.

Still out of range, Vondamm tittered again.

"It's very amusing to watch you hop and prance that way. You're a stupid, clumsy animal; do you know that?"

Dragonard turned toward the sound. His eyes cleared. He saw Vondamm on the far side of the octagonal chamber, blaster in hand.

Instead of hurling himself at the I.A. Dragonard dissembled. He thrust out his hands, blinked his eyes until they watered. Conrad Vondamm's ridged cheeks flushed with merriment.

"You're a clumsy bear, Wolf. You're a vile, witless beast." In a high-pitched voice Vondamm called Dragonard filthy names.

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Dragonard lunged one way, another, bobbing his head, grunting, pretending total confusion. Vondamm shook with amusement. He spoke in squeals:

"I—really—hate—having to—shoot you—while—you're—so amusing—"

His laughter dulled his judgment.

Dragonard got closer.

Struck.

One hand to Vondamm's throat. He closed it with full force.

Other hand to Vondamm's own blaster.

Dragonard tore it out. Vondamm brought the other blaster up between them.

Nightmarish, Dragonard saw his own multiplied face in polished metal. He jammed Vondamm's blaster against the belly of the man's black doublet, pulled the firing bar.

He leaped out of the way as the other blaster went off. Vondamm's shot crisped a smoking hole in the servomech bank. Relays shorted out. There were two quick, muffled explosions. Orange sparks showered. The stink of burning arose.

Conrad Vondamm dropped to his knees. His belly was burned open. A ruin of red gristle drained down over his groin and thighs. Vondamm began to weep.

Tears shone like little gems on his cheekplates. Vondamm sobbed like a woman as he careened over on his face. In the back of his black doublet there was a large charred mess in which broken chunks of spine shone like white islands in a sea of black and red.

In a minute or so the weeping stopped.

Dragonard bit his teeth together to keep the vomit down. He threw Vondamm's blaster away. There was no accomplishment to killing a maniacal animal.

Half an hour later he broke his lightship free of Helene, fired the thrusters. He felt drained, defeated.

We. They. To discover the faces behind the words, he would have to go ahead. Vondamm had known but Vondamm was dead.

There had been no real choice. Vondamm would have killed him if he hadn't fired first. Yet he'd been so stinking close.

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Bitter and frustrated, Dragonard guided the little lightship into a long turn so that he didn't have to watch the artificial asteroid dropping away behind, a round and silver mockery.

XXIV

On the journey through the Blacke Shoote back to Full-drive, he thought things out.

One fact loomed plainest of all. Someone was *causing* the theft of the Seven Stars to happen. At the same time, the same person or persons were manipulating events to cause discovery of the theft by the Regulators. And as Vondamm had said, Dragonard had come too close to knowledge of the conspiracy. *They* didn't want the plot discovered by a Regulator who was aware of hands pushing and shoving the actors and scenery.

The question remained—whose hands were they? And why were they working?

As the little lightship carried him through the Blacke Shoote, he realized that he now had additional compelling reasons for discovering the answers himself. He owed it to Echelon Director Arthur Yee, murdered. To Tomira Yee, murdered. And he still had to find out if he was so shaky that he was finished as a policeman.

How skillfully Vondamm had maneuvered him into the trap with blazing red light. What an obvious trick. Yet Dragonard had completely overlooked it. That hurt.

All right. Calmly, now. Think about what comes next.

Should he leave Helene undisturbed where she drifted?

He decided that he should. Vondamm inferred that he and he alone knew Dragonard had gone to the sphere. Therefore Vondamm's death might not be discovered for some time. In that interval, Dragonard might learn the answers by going ahead with the theft of the Seven Stars.

The little lightship went into hyperdrive. The ports danced with iridescent fire. Dragonard said half-aloud, "You god-dam thief, you."

He almost laughed.

Almost.

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With his cheeks cosmetically stubbled and his valise in his hand, Dragonard knocked on the door.

A rustling inside. "Who is it?"

"Wylie Dun."

The door opened. He couldn't control what he felt when he saw her there, her hair unbound and wearing nothing except a clean sleeveless tunic that reached halfway down her thighs. Behind her he saw a mussed pallet, a wineskin, a little lamp flickering on a stool.

It was the end of the night but uproar still climbed the stairs from the common room of the Brake-&Pin. Stealing in out of the chill, Dragonard had passed Lazaret dozing next to the hearth. Now he struggled to look properly chagrined.

"Hello, Jenny. The pickings weren't quite as fat as I expected."

She had mastered her surprise. Her sea-foam eyes were hidden by shadow.

She turned a little, blocking the entrance. He saw her eyes at last. Smudged by tiredness, by worry.

"So you've come back to beg me, Wylie?"

"Not to beg, Jenny. Just to say I'm available if you haven't anyone else." He set down his valise, took both her shoulders, held them. "I don't think you have, truly. But you can say it if it gives you any satisfaction. I learned some things about myself while I was gone. My old friends don't matter a damn. Not much matters but you, Jenny."

She laughed. It wasn't unfriendly. A spaceman came lurching up the stairs. He belched twice, waved and blundered on down the sour hall. A door slammed. Jenny's eyes grew strangely warm.

"I thought you'd be back, Wylie. As a matter of fact, I wanted you back. It pains me to say that. I do have a certain pride. Or I used to."

She raised herself on her toes and kissed him. Then she pressed her cheek to his. He smelled the clean-washed fragrance of her hair. He loved her. He knew he loved her.

"For God's sake come in," she breathed against his ear. "I loathe the people who make love in public."

At week's end, the repaired *Saxony Banner* took off for Whitepeake. Jenny Sable commanded her. The Tank was aboard, and Lazaret, and Dragonard.

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He'd tried to tell her a dozen times. Every time, he'd failed.

She smiled at him often while they went over and over and over the plan until he hated it, was numb with it, could recite it by rote, in total or in part, at the merest suggestion of a cue word, a cue situation.

At night Jenny laughed and kissed him and talked of how wealthy they'd all be. He smiled like a mechanical man and hid the agony eroding him inside.

She still called him Wylie Dun. She probably would until the hour he had to betray her.

XXV

They came into Whitepeake's thin atmosphere at what should have been earliest dawn. Dragonard had been unable to sleep. Lazaret screamed most of the night. He was still screaming as Dragonard stumbled into the forward command cabin. Jenny was sitting in the command chair.

"Can't you sleep either?" he said.

She smiled; he knew that even though she didn't turn around. "I haven't tried since midnight. Sit here next to me, Wylie. This is a beautiful world. I've only seen projections before. We'll see the real thing in a minute."

He eased up beside her. Jenny turned her head just a fraction, smiled. He looked away.

In other circumstances this would have been a woman to take and to keep. Now he felt shabby, unclean. The color climbing in her cheeks wasn't entirely caused by the closeness of their goal. Since the soft closing of her door back on Fulldrive, a bond had tightened between them. He hated every sign of its presence. Most of all he hated himself.

The *Saxony Banner* was dropping through the thin upper layers of Whitepeake's atmosphere. Drops of moisture like pearls congealed on the hot outer surfaces of the ports.

Jenny calculated their altitude, struck a control. Something aft clattered.

"There goes the decoy chaff," she said. "In case Lord Genmo has patrol boats out."

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"According to your information, there shouldn't be any."

"No point taking a risk. You're right, though. Lord Genmo is secure by the very nature of his rank. Who would dare land on Whitepeake unless they landed at the stages of the summer residence? There's no reason for anyone to land anywhere else. The planet's a wasteland."

"But a beautiful one?"

"Don't be so cynical, Wylie. You'll see."

The ship was dropping through clouds. They churned past, scattered behind like ripped gray flags. Suddenly the clouds shaded off to black again. They burst out through the underbelly and Dragonard sucked in a breath of astonishment and delight.

The ship coasted in at reduced power over a wild, forlorn landscape of bone white pumice. The plain swept away unbroken in three directions. It offered a glaring white contrast to the solid covering of dark clouds that rolled swiftly overhead. A few larger chunks of white rock dotted the plain. The rest was emptiness.

On one quarter of the horizon, peaks like freshly cleaned teeth poked up. That was the Lafcaddo Range, named for an early explorer. In those nearer foothills, some twenty leagues away, stood Lord Genmo's summer palace.

Even as he watched Dragonard thought he saw a silver speck in the sky above the mountains. A new shipload of courtiers arriving to join the practically nonstop revelry conducted by the lower echelons of the court?

The thrusters guttered. Jenny leveled the ship horizontal, brought it down on the vertical tubes. To the rear, Lazaret was still screaming. The dung-like miasma of the Tank was everywhere. Dragonard would be glad to wash it out of his nose with fresh air.

Jenny checked coordinates in a console glass. "Perfect navigation, or hadn't you noticed?"

Dragonard smiled. "That's a good little computer we have aboard."

She touched her knuckles to his chin. "Lout."

"I'm going back and strangle that damn esper. His yelling drives me crazy."

The ship settled closer to the pumice. Jenny frowned. "I hope he lives through this. He's worked and planned for so long. The drugs don't make it easy on a man like that."

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"He isn't a man," Dragonard said, his gold eyes hard. "He's a freak and a criminal."

Suddenly he realized he'd been caught off guard; voiced the instinctive reaction of a Regulator. It was a small but worrisome lesson on the strain of this undertaking.

Jenny looked at him a long moment. "Aren't we all, Wylie?" she said at last.

He muttered. "I just don't like anything that smacks of police."

In the excitement of landing, Jenny didn't question his somewhat too glib reply. She jockeyed the controls, a flush heightening in her cheeks. At last the vessel touched down, rocked, came to rest.

She slapped the studs and bars to damp all power except the standby generators. She glanced at the large, old-fashioned chron strapped to her wrist with an antiquated woven band of black. Her manner had changed. She was no longer relaxed. She was in charge.

"I'll wake Lazaret. You open the hold. From now on we stick to the schedule."

"Fifteen minutes to unload, pack up and raise the shields."

"Yes. Don't forget to change your clothes." She was gone, running.

In his cube he put on tight white trousers and boots, a white jersey and a white helmet of a light synthetic material. During the trip they had painted the exterior surfaces of the Tank's carrier with a reflective white pigment. The three human beings would all wear the white garments. In the event that a patrol boat came near them, they would stand a better chance of being camouflaged against the glaring pumice of the plain.

After changing, Dragonard pulled on the carry-pack that contained his personal food and water supply, a few first aid items, and one blaster. The pack encumbered him but they each had to carry one. In addition, Jenny would wear an extra belt around her waist. In it were the tools and probes that would be necessary inside the summer palace.

Dragonard left the ship by the main hatch. The atmosphere of Whitepeake bit into his nose and mouth with a cool, dusty tang. He unfastened the dogging of the cargo hatch, wrinkled his nose against the foul aroma, climbed up inside and took a knife to the flexible suspension cables supporting the transparent carrier.

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The Tank was a white slimy disk fastened to one inner wall of its box-like environment. It stirred sluggishly as the cables were cut. The carrier settled onto its airlift caster. The electrogenerator had been mounted at one end of the caster. Dragonard made certain the level of energy feeding through the conductor tubes was adequate. Then he inflated the pad somewhat more, turned on the self-contained thruster mounted at the end away from the generator.

The slight thrust nudged the big box and its supporting pad toward the hatchway. Dragonard had little more to do than glide. He thumbed a green button beside the hatch. A ramp folded down to the stark white ground. He shoved the Tank, pad and all, onto the ramp.

The forward end of the box tilted down suddenly. The cushion of air limited its fall. Dragonard squeezed outside, guided the box from the front, backing down the ramp a step at a time. The viscous brown liquid sloshed inside the box, the painted surfaces of the enclosure turned a milky color in the daylight.

Dragonard had the box halfway down the ramp when Jenny appeared in the main hatch. She'd changed to white, wore her pack and tool belt. She looked slender and strange with her hair hidden beneath the white helmet.

She hurried toward him. "I'd offer to help but you're three minutes ahead of schedule."

About to reply, Dragonard caught the corner of the box as it skewed wildly off the bottom of the ramp. The airlift caster curled up, deflated.

Dragonard dropped to his knees, yelled, "Better shut down the power till I see what the hell—here's the trouble."

Bending up the flexible caster pad, he reached into the aperture of an air exhaust duct. On contact with the ground the duct had become clogged with pumice.

Jenny killed the pad thruster. The Tank teetered awkwardly, half on and half off the ramp. Dragonard's fingers worked clumsily in the duct. Finally he peeled off his glove. He had better luck maneuvering his bare hand up inside the small opening. His crooking fingers pulled out a sizable accumulation of white particles.

"Must have gotten a reverse suction effect," he grunted. "There's more up in there."

Jenny bent close. "I hope to God there's no permanent damage."

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"If there is we're out of business. We can't pull this monster twenty leagues across rough terrain. Airlift's the only way—no, wait. I think I'm getting it."

From behind them a voice squealed, "*Patroll*"

Dragonard cursed. Jenny broke and ran for the forward hatch where Lazaret, white helmet, white tunic, white boots, pointed one spindly hand toward the Lafcaddo Range. A steady wink of yellow and green lights indicated a craft approaching them fast at a low level.

"They'll be on us right away," Dragonard shouted.

Jenny knocked Lazaret aside, turned in the hatch. "I'll put up the shields."

"I can't get this damned thing unplugged. Will the shield cover it if we can't move it?"

"The shield will cover just about half. We'll have to chance it." Jenny vanished inside the ship.

Dragonard attacked the air caster duct again. On his knees, his position was awkward. He gashed the back of his hand on one of the vanes inside the duct. Blood ran down into his cuff. The rising roar of the approaching craft warned him of seconds running out.

A low whistling sprang up around him. The front of his face tingled. He glanced up, saw the hull of the *Saxony Banner* waver and disappear.

Lazaret's leg appeared through the generated shield, then the rest of him. He ran to Dragonard.

"Get inside the shield," Lazaret ordered. "Stand flat against the hull."

"I've got to get this damn thing unplugged and back out of sight."

"We'll have to rely on the paint, Dun. There's no time."

Dragonard kept working. Lazaret seized his shoulder.

"I tell you there's no more—"

Dragonard slashed Lazaret's wrist with the blade of his hand. In a moment he regretted his rage but the damage had been done. He staggered to his feet, mumbled an apology. Lazaret watched him with huge, morose eyes. Then he turned and stepped back through the field, vanishing.

Half the ramp and half the Tank were still quite visible, shading off to an uncertain mistiness at the point where they intersected the shield surrounding the ship. Scarcely five leagues away, the craft came chattering on across the sky.

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Dragonard scowled. That wasn't any kind of Regulator patrol ship. Of course there were no Regulators posted to Whitepeake; he remembered that. Still, he would have expected Lord Genmo's soldiers to have somewhat more modern equipment. The oversized flyer was an outmoded design. It actually had half a dozen functionless six-bladed propellers mounted at its stern. The propellers whirled in pretty silver circles while a stuttering pile provided the motive power.

Dragonard spun, jumped through the shield. He ran to the hull and braced his back against it. The flyer puttered straight toward them. It would be just a short distance above their heads when it passed over.

XXVI

His palms crawled with sweat. He knew that he couldn't be seen behind the shield, even though he could look out. But the outline of the queerly bisected bulk of the Tank was plainly visible. The special paint only blurred the details.

Surely the occupants of the flyer would notice the unusual shape just below. The *Saxony Banner* might stay hidden, as it was meant to stay hidden for all the time they were on Whitepeake. Yet the telltale Tank would certainly give them away to the watching soldiers up in the—

Ah. They might have a chance after all.

For the first time Dragonard noticed that the forward end of the craft was wildly ornamented. Fluorescent paints formed the jaws and head of a flying fish. The hull's sides bowed outward to accommodate huge oval windows of crystal. Inside these windows lanterns winked, golden yellow, a clear emerald. Shadows passed back and forth across the lantern-beams.

There had to be at least a hundred people aboard the craft. They were caught up in some kind of frantic activity. Dragonard held his breath as Jenny touched his shoulder with hers. Lazaret's ruined face was turned skyward too.

The flyer puttered on toward them, casting a running shadow beneath it. The antique propellers creaked and squealed.

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Now the craft was almost on top of them. A few white faces peered indifferently through the crystal windows.

The shadow of the flyer passed across Dragonard's face, flickered up and over the spine of the *Saxony Banner*.

"A party," Jenny breathed. "Just an excursion flyer!"

"With every one of the bastards drunk, it looks like," Dragonard said. He was rather surprised at the anger in his voice; at the antipathy he felt toward Lord Genmo's courtiers.

"They're either drunk or drugged," Jenny agreed. "Otherwise they'd see the Tank."

"Genmo collects a fine lot at his summer palace, I've heard," Lazaret whispered. "Sots and addicts and loose women. Licentiousness, filth—" He shuddered and closed his huge eyes a moment. Then his lips twitched in a smile. "But all to our benefit, it seems."

The eraso noticed Dragonard staring at him. His face lost even the pretense of humor.

"I'm sorry about hitting you that way," Dragonard said. "My damn nerves, I guess."

"We can't afford to lose control for a single minute," Jenny warned him.

"There are just three of us," Lazaret added. "Three of us against a planet. Against a Lord of the Exchange."

Jenny glanced at Dragonard, then at Lazaret. "Both of you remember. I'll tolerate no squabbling."

Lazaret gave a weary, exquisite shrug. Then he touched his wrist where Dragonard had struck it. He said softly. "It's a bad beginning, that's all."

Dragonard felt the same way. He said nothing. After the flyer was safely out of range he went back to the task of scooping the pumice out of the duct. When he was finished they powered up the small thruster and maneuvered the Tank and caster all the way off the ramp.

Jenny operated the controls that closed the cargo hatch. She sealed the forward hatch with a small remote unit which she slipped back into her tool belt. Dragonard walked a dozen paces across the white rock, turned around.

A stark vista of rock stretched to the horizon line. Above the horizon spread a narrow band of black sky and, above that, the steadily racing cover of cloud. Except for a barely detectable blue suggesting the outline of the vessel, it was

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impossible to tell that there was a shield-protected ship anywhere on the plain.

Dragonard increased the power level of the thruster. The Tank shot off at an angle. He ran after it.

What the hell was wrong? The powered caster should have carried the Tank in a straight line. Theoretically the humans would only have to guide.

He caught the Tank, powered the thruster down again. He went to his knees, bent the corner back to inspect the damaged duct. His skin itched and crawled inside the tight-fitting white clothing.

He probed and poked inside the duct with his gashed hand. At last he drew his fingers out, stood up, dusted his palms. His expression was grim.

"One of the vanes is damaged. The pad will tend to veer."

"Can we still move it?" Jenny asked.

"Yes, but it's going to be a hell of a lot harder."

Jenny glanced at her chron, at the smoking clouds rolling through the sky. Little lines appeared around her mouth.

"Let's get started. We're two and a half minutes behind."

"A bad beginning all around," Lazaret said under his breath.

Jenny whirled on him. "Shut your damned mouth."

A moment later she apologized. But Dragonard, pushing with his shoulder to guide the veering Tank and pad, had to agree that the eraso was right.

The Lafcaddo Range shone in the distance like white teeth. They toiled toward it, falling further and further behind schedule.

The light level on Whitepeake remained constant, an uninterrupted glare. As the day advanced they broiled inside their white suits. Dragonard knew it must be the exertion of handling the Tank. All of them used their shoulders, their hands, their weight to keep the sloshing box moving forward in the general direction of the Range. Left on its own for more than seconds, the damaged caster carried the Tank away in the wrong direction.

Evening came. The glare drained from the bitter landscape. They were far from even the meager shelter of one of the large white rocks dotting the plain. They huddled together beside the Tank, each opening a pack to pull out a few yeasty, tasteless mouthfuls of ration. They cracked open

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small drinking globes of nutrient fluid and made their meal in silence.

"Two hours for sleeping," Jenny announced in the dark. "Then we must move."

"How far have we come?" Lazaret asked.

"Three and a half leagues. We have to reach the electrowalls by this time tomorrow night."

"What the hell," Dragonard grumbled. "We could take an extra day."

"No!" Jenny's voice was a lash. "If we get sloppy now, we'll get sloppy inside the walls and that'll be the end. We'll make it up."

"By sleeping two hours instead of six."

"Yes, Wylie, you've got the idea."

A mist of tiredness blurred Dragonard's eyes. He saw pastel lights winking in the foothills of the Lafcaddo Range. They seemed to appear and vanish at random intervals. He came to the conclusion the lights were inside his head.

His mouth began to crawl from wanting a drink. He found his hand shaking.

These two were criminals. Criminals! And he was actually identifying with them. Sharing their fear, making it his fear, his anguish. God, how mixed up things got. And on top of everything else there was the craving to drink.

"Time," Jenny called from far away. He lifted his head.

He'd dozed. Her helmet rested against his shoulder. He wanted to touch her hand. Guilty, he couldn't.

They got up and began to stumble ahead, guiding the Tank on its erratic caster.

At noon the next day they reached the foothills.

At nightfall, exhausted but undetected, they staggered up through a gully strewn with white rocks, pushing and shoving at the Tank. Just ahead, a shimmering gold fire, rose the killing electrowalls.

XXVII

The three of them lay on their stomachs at the upper end of the gully. Dragonard judged the distance to the electrowalls to be about a quarter of a league. Beyond the

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first softly pulsing curtain of force a second could be seen. A third further inside completed the ring of defenses.

Dragonard's nostrils were clogged with white dust. His mouth tasted ashy. Darkness was coming on. The white garments, valuable when Autus shone through the steadily rolling clouds, were a liability at night. The suits could be easily spotted by one of Lord Genmo's patrol boats that circled the electrowall perimeter on a regular schedule. Each boat took slightly less than six minutes for a circuit of the huge triple ring. They might be detected by one of the boats. They—

Damn. He wiped sweat from his cheek. He was letting his nerves take over again, inventing reasons why they couldn't bring it off.

That kind of attitude caused accidents. Yet he couldn't shake it. Even Jenny to his left and Lazaret on his other side breathed a little stridently.

They all watched the electrowalls. The walls were gleaming semitransparent curtains of force that rose to a height about twice Dragonard's own. Through the triple barrier fluted pavilions could be glimpsed in the distance, with dark gardens intervening. The summer palace was still a long, long distance away.

Lazaret plucked his sleeve. "Hear?"

Off to the right along the golden perimeter, thrusters droned. Soon a small, sleek patrol boat swept into sight. It followed the line of the walls, traveling just above them. The boat's fins and cluster of aft rockets stood out in dim silhouette against the last light.

The patrol boat passed the section of electrowall directly in front of them, glided on.

Jenny clicked her chron. "Synched. I'll prepare the cables until it comes back and we see whether the information about a six-minute interval was right. You two get ready with the Tank."

She unreeled flexible silver cables from the belt at her waist. Each cable ended in a small glass-like globe.

The six minutes went by like a tenth of that. Dragonard and Lazaret maneuvered the Tank's caster to the head of the gully. Lazaret donned special protective gloves, unhooked the connectors of the electrogenerator.

Using a strip of abrasive he polished the copper nodes on the box until they shone. Inside the box the Tank writhed

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and flung its white-slime body back and forth. Disconnected from the generating unit, it was no longer being fed. Its anger registered in the frantic sloshing and a sudden increase of its stink.

Full darkness now. The muted pastel gleams of the far pavilions showed them their ultimate destination. The three golden electrowalls seemed to pulse and crawl with a peculiar life of their own. Along the perimeter from the right chattered the patrol boat, completing its circuit.

They flattened again. Jenny's face was a pale oval framed by her helmet. The patrol boat turned on a bow light to illuminate the ground below. The intense beam washed out the electrowalls to a faint gold glow. Dragonard knew the optical trick meant nothing. The force in those gold curtains could destroy a battalion of men on contact, and the load level would drop only slightly.

Bow light probing, the patrol boat passed by. In its forward command blister three helmeted black heads stood out briefly. The stern swung slowly toward the three people in the gully. The boat moved around the perimeter.

"Five minutes forty-eight," Jenny breathed.

"We have exactly that much time to get through all three walls," Lazaret whined.

"Shut up and go." Jenny was already on her feet.

Dragonard slapped the controls of the pad thruster, jumped ahead to catch the Tank as it lurched off at an angle. He threw the strength of his back and arms against the weight of the transparent box, drove it onto a straight course.

Shoving and tugging, he and Lazaret maneuvered the caster near the wall. Dragonard's temples ached. He felt—or imagined he felt—the cold golden heat seething around him.

"Call off the time," he growled.

"Minute gone," Jenny replied.

She worked with great speed, fastening the two flexible silver cables to the newly-brightened nodes at the rear of the Tank's container. Then, holding one of the globes carefully in each hand, she walked toward the first wall.

A knot thickened in Dragonard's windpipe. He watched each step. One stumble and she'd pitch headfirst into the shimmering curtain. Headfirst, and her skull would pop before he could even recognize that it had. Her body would—*Christ, stop.*

Delicately, Jenny Sable thrust the globes forward.

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The outer bulge of each glove touched the wall.

So fast Dragonard hardly saw it, Jenny whipped her hands back. She dropped to her knees. She had carried the cables forward with her body between them. Now she crawled underneath the right cable, stood up.

The globes sizzled and turned a phosphorescent yellow. They did not fall. They were suspended by the force of the electrowall.

Inside the transparent container a faint yellow radiance etched the slimed edges of the Tank. The creature skated from side to side in the heavy medium, beat itself against the walls. The container shook.

The intensity of the gold curtain of light lessened a little.

"Two minutes gone," Jenny called. "Drag it through!"

Lazaret's eyes bulged. "The wall's still up. I can see it!"

"Damn you, the Tank's taking the lethal charge!" the girl shot back. "Wylie—move him!"

With a shove Dragonard got Lazaret going. They hauled at the front edge of the caster, dragged it steadily toward the golden wall. The tingling deep in Dragonard's bones intensified.

He bit down on his lower lip. They were six steps away, moving the Tank with fair ease. He didn't want to pass through that film of light. The Tank couldn't possibly absorb that much energy. . . .

Four steps.

Three.

Two.

His backbone ached. He didn't look over his shoulder. He faced the Tank, pulled on the caster. Suddenly his spine turned cool. His head buzzed. Weird yellow lights sprang up at the corners of his eyes.

Lazaret's face floated nearby, slack-mouthed. The Tank banged and battered back and forth inside its prison. It glowed a brighter and brighter yellow.

Dragonard backed another step.

One more.

The Tank was half through. Three more steps to go.

Jenny walked alongside the Tank as it came the rest of the way through, pulled between the two cables that now stretched from its back end to the inside of the first wall.

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The caster cleared the cables again, and Jenny ducked back between them. She seized them and pulled hard.

The globes popped free, darkened. The electrowall flared to its previous intensity.

Dragonard leaned on the Tank, panting.

"Less than three minutes," Jenny warned. "Keep moving."

At the second electrowall they repeated the process without mishaps. Jenny walked forward, between the cables, placed the globes. Dragonard and Lazaret maneuvered the caster through the wall. It was harder this time. The overtaxed thrust mechanism at the rear of the pad began to whine and beep erratically. When they got through, Lazaret began to whimper. Jenny slapped him.

"We have exactly one minute and fifty-three seconds left till the patrol boat comes back. Hurry!"

By now Dragonard had to force himself. He hauled and pulled on the caster like a madman, cursing at Lazaret to urge the eraso to do the same. Jenny placed the globes with less than a minute to spare.

The Tank slammed the walls of the transparent box. Was it imagination or did Dragonard hear a rattle of thrusters? He didn't take the time to look.

The Tank inched through the golden wall. It seemed to be stuck. The terrain inside the third wall was uneven.

"Get it through!" Jenny said in a blistering whisper. "Forty seconds!"

Dragonard ran to the rear of the Tank, dragged at the pad where it had been impaled on a small sharp rock. He worked the pad free. He was conscious of a new light source behind him. The patrol boat was on the way, sweeping down the perimeter straight at them.

"Pull, goddammit!" he yelled to Lazaret. "Pull!"

He drove his shoulder against the Tank but Lazaret wasn't ready at the other end. The caster skidded ahead, carrying the Tank with it as it cleared the wall. The sudden movement made the cables strain. The globes shuddered, started to spring loose from the transparent curtain.

Jenny was passing through the wall. Dragonard seized her arm, wrenched her inside as the globes popped free. The globes struck the rocky ground and smashed.

Jenny sprawled on top of him and lay with her chin alongside his nose. The bow light of the patrol boat picked its

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way toward them. The electrowall shone with full intensity.

A year passed.

A century.

Dragonard hoped to God the reflective paint and the special suiting would hide—

The boat passed over.

Jenny's hand climbed to Dragonard's face, pressed there. She trembled with the violent after-shock of what had almost happened.

They lay another three or four minutes until her trembling subsided. Then they got up, dragged the caster further into the darkness toward the dark gardens and the lighted pavilions of bronze latticework beyond.

They were inside the ground of Lord Genmo's summer palace. There was nothing between them and the Seven Stars but nine hundred and fifty armed men.

XXVIII

"How do you feel?" Jenny said to Lazaret.

"Sick. Like vomiting. I—something's wrong. Everything's turned cold."

They spoke in whispers. The eraso faced them, his bulging eyes picking up the gold of the electrowalls. His face looked pasty in the confinement of his white helmet. His lip jerked with tics.

Dragonard guessed what was wrong. Already weakened by the drugs he used to restore his precog powers, Lazaret was succumbing to the nervous frenzy generated by their dash through the walls.

"Let him take off the helmet, why don't you?" Dragonard suggested.

"God, yes, the thing's strangling me."

Lazaret tore the throat-piece away. His hand blurred briefly across his face. The iridescent blotch gleamed on his hand as he ripped the helmet off, flung it onto the white pumice. Lazaret's wispy hair blew in the wind.

Jenny said nothing. She picked up the helmet, folded it, shoved it in her belt. Then she consulted her chron again.

"We need to give you the ampul, Lazaret. But not here."

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Remembering the plan, Dragonard said, "Do we really have to drag the Tank all the way? Its main purpose was to get us through the walls—"

Jenny turned on him. "There won't be one deviation from the plan, not one."

He grunted something unpleasant. "Let's move the damn thing, then."

"We'll go halfway to the gardens," Jenny said. "There we'll give him the drug."

Lazaret gave another feeble little whimper. Dragonard was beginning to be very concerned about whether the eraso would last. If the ex-esper folded, they'd be caught without their major means of checking the guard patterns. . . .

God, what was happening? Here he was, still worrying about the outcome of the theft, worrying about these two. This girl. This—*thief*.

Jenny's voice cracked his thoughts. "What are you staring at, Wylie? Let's move."

With three minutes remaining before the prow boat returned, they tried to adjust the pad thruster, and got the Tank started again. Dragonard did most of the pushing and guiding. Lazaret leaned his shoulder into the job but fell frequently. When he did, he cursed in a voice that grew progressively more shrill.

Twice Jenny turned on him with anger, ordering him to silence. The last time Lazaret turned on her in kind, spat out a filthy oath. A moment later he uttered a weak apology.

Dragonard's back ached like hell. Sweat inside his white suit transformed his body to something moist, unclean. They toiled on across the pumice until Jenny called a halt.

Ahead rose the clipped, fantastic shapes of black shrubs in the formal gardens. Occasionally a stick-figure passed in the dark.

Further on he saw interconnected pavilions with conical roofs and walls of lattice that shimmered like bronze. Whirling figures jammed one of the largest, away to the left. Harps and timbrels threaded a stately, rhythmic tune into the night. Courtiers weaved in and out, making complicated patterns beneath pastel light-balls that floated high up inside the pavilion.

Dragonard slumped against the Tank. They were totally committed now. They couldn't get out until they had the Stars.

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They? He didn't belong here. He was police. Why didn't he just arrest them?

But he'd find no answers that way.

"Any better?" Jenny breathed somewhere.

"A little." That was Lazaret. "Can't we get this over?"

"Give the poor bastard a drink," Dragonard said. He reached over his shoulder, caught his index finger in the ring of his carry-pack. Jenny grabbed his wrist.

"Stop it, Wylie. That's the last thing Lazaret needs."

"We brought drink globes. Why not use them?"

"He doesn't need anything. Do you?"

Suddenly a little sliver of panic bored into him. "What makes you think that?"

"You have a drinking problem, Wylie."

My God, what had he done? What had he unwittingly admitted? Stone-faced, he said, "The hell."

"Let's not argue. I heard you talking in your sleep two nights running."

He licked his lips. "Just exactly what did I say?"

Jenny used a small knife to slit the right shoulder of Lazaret's tunic. She peeled down the fabric to expose his arm, replied, "Mostly you screamed that you needed alcohol and someone wouldn't let you have it."

Me, he thought wildly. I wouldn't let myself have it. What else did I say?

The exchange seemed to bring Lazaret out of his lethargy. He snickered.

"And you were complaining about my yelling?"

"No drinks," Jenny ordered. "That's final. Hold your arm over for the swab."

Lazaret obeyed. Dragonard's throat began to itch. He was dogged and deviled by the old insecurity, the old lack of confidence, heightened a hundred times by their situation.

Ever since Elena was killed, the machine hadn't functioned right. And he knew that part of his reason for coming this far with thieves was his own need to see whether he could still get through such an ordeal, in control of his own nerves and body. He wasn't sure now. Overhead the night clouds sailed like phantoms. They were alone. Surrounded by death.

Jenny finished swabbing the eraso's arm. From her belt she took one of the long ampuls containing the blue-green drug.

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She jabbed the tip into flesh near one of Lazaret's distended veins. The stimulant drained into his blood.

Jenny tucked the ampul neatly out of sight. Lazaret's eyelids drooped.

"Remember," she said to him. "We want to see six hours ahead. The end of the night."

"I'll try."

His eyes closed. A pause.

Lazaret's eyes flew open like windows. Circles of white showed around his pupils. Jenny was already wrapping a clean linen kerchief around and around his jaws. When it came, his shriek of pain was muffled.

Lazaret's teeth shut on his protruding tongue. Dragonard's spine crawled.

The eraso stared into the dark like one dead. Jenny squatted beyond him. Her eyes met Dragonard's. He forced a smile. She didn't respond.

The timbrels beat in the great pavilion. Dragonard located another, somewhat smaller pavilion and far to the right at the opposite end of the estate. According to the maps, that was the rotunda of the Stars.

Jenny touched Lazaret's shoulder. "Are you there?"

The voice seeping between Lazaret's teeth sounded like a child's. "Eeeee."

Jenny pressed her mouth against the eraso's ear. "Are you there?"

"Eeeee, ah, ah, ah ah!" The reedy cry turned to deep coughing. Then, huskily: "Y-yes. There."

"Where is Lord Genmo? Sleeping?"

"N-no. Not here tonight. Away."

"Where?"

"Can't tell."

"How many soldiers?" Jenny whispered.

"Nine hundred forty six."

"Three less than the estimates," she said under her breath. "Lazaret—how many sleeping?"

His eyes were huge as he saw the end of the night six hours away. Dragonard wondered how he managed it. Did he send his mind ranging across space once it had bridged the temporal difference and arrived in the hours-from-now? Whatever the twisted chemistry, the strain of the effort was apparent. Lazaret shook continuously.

"All . . . sleeping . . . but thirty."

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"The guests, Lazaret. Is the dancing finished?" They hadn't planned for courtiers having a fete on the night of the theft.

"All . . . finished. Lights . . . dimmed in the . . . great pavilion. All . . . guests in their . . . chambers except . . . four women, three men. Drugged and lying together in the dark hall . . ."

"They won't bother us," Jenny whispered. "The thirty guards, Lazaret. Where are they?"

"Patrolling. Gardens. Four in teams of . . . two. In . . . the gardens."

Jenny's face was a white blur as she turned to Dragonard. "That fits the prior information. It will work, Wylie. It will!"

He remembered, calculated. Yes. The late-night foot patrols were following—would follow in six hours, he corrected himself—the same schedules that had been outlined in the information leaked to Lazaret by Helene. Jenny's voice blurred on, asking Lazaret for the number of guards stationed at the rotunda where the Stars revolved. The answer should be four.

But the answer didn't come. Lazaret was crying that high-pitched *eeee* again. His hands slashed at the pumice. Suddenly he pitched over on his side, in convulsions.

Dragonard jumped forward. "What the hell's wrong with him?"

"I don't know," Jenny gasped. "The drugs may have been too much. I'll try the counteractant."

From her belt she pulled another ampul. She thrust it into Lazaret's veined arm. His high keening cry became a moan. The convulsions eased a little. Suddenly he gave one long, awful groan.

"He's badly hurt," Jenny cried, crawling to him.

They rolled him over gently. Dragonard could see on Lazaret's right temple a dark, flower-shaped splotch formed beneath the dermal layer. The splotch shifted, expanded, crawled beneath the skin with a slow, sickening motion. Something like black cloud began to fill Lazaret's right eyeball. Both enlarged pupil and bulging white vanished.

"Hemorrhage," Dragonard whispered. "The damn drugs got him."

"Lazaret?" Jenny shook his shoulder lightly. "Lazaret, can you understand me?"

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The eraso's trembling stopped. His head lifted. One eye looked alert, though the other was choked internally with black fluid. He answered Jenny in a voice that sounded exactly like a small girl's.

"Woman? Woman, I can't see you."

"Oh dear God," Jenny sobbed.

"Woman?" Lazaret's right hand plucked air. "Woman, I know you're close but I can't see you."

"He's useless," Dragonard told her. "We'll have to leave him."

"We can't leave him! It isn't safe."

"Look at his left side, for God's sake!"

Jenny thrust her knuckles to her mouth. Lazaret's left hand rested in his lap, oddly bent. She picked it up, released it. The hand fell back like a weight.

Dragonard ran his fingers down Lazaret's left leg, pinched. Nothing.

"Paralysis," Jenny said.

Well, Dragonard thought, erasos knew that if they tried to restore their powers, over the long run they'd only induce damage like this, possibly fatal damage which—but why was he moralizing? He was a criminal running with criminals. This problem was his problem.

"We'll have to go in without him," Jenny said finally.

"Without knowing whether there will be four or four hundred soldiers stationed in the rotunda." He sounded bitter. "Up till now we haven't taken chances like that."

"What choice do we have? In six hours we go in."

"I wonder if we'll get out."

Jenny didn't answer.

A bad beginning was turning into a calamitous ending. But they were trapped in a maze, forced to run. They settled down to wait. The music from the fete wailed on.

XXIX

In a hushed voice Jenny Sable said, "Almost time."

Dragonard's eyes flickered open. He'd been dozing again. He stretched, stiff.

He glanced around cautiously and stood up. Off to his

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left the ornamental shrubs in the gardens souged in a cool, dry wind that had risen after midnight. A single light-ball floated lazily behind the lattices of the pavilion where the fete had been held.

What had Lazaret said about this hour? All the courtiers gone to their chambers except a few men and women lying together in the debris of the celebration. The vast estate had a dead, disused air. Lonely outpost lanterns gleamed here and there. All but one of the pavilions had disappeared in shadows.

The pavilion was to his right past the gardens. From under its conical roof a blue-white brilliance glared. The phosphor-impregnated ceiling, floor and piers of the open rotunda of the Stars shone that way every hour of every thirty-hour day.

They would have to steal into the open, lighted pavilion and do their work unhidden.

Dragonard tried to remember the timetable. Yes. Jenny had allotted a little less than ten minutes for his descent into the congruent spatio-temporal dimension. During that time he had to dislodge the Stars from their mounting sockets.

And after that, policeman? Arrest her?

He blocked out the question even though answering was inevitable. The inevitability became more crushing with every second that ticked by.

Jenny adjusted her white helmet. "I injected Lazaret with a sleeper a while ago. We'll come back for him."

The eraso was still slumped against the Tank, unconscious. The whole right side of his forehead was covered with something that resembled a black birthmark in the poor light.

"Do you think it's fatal?" Dragonard asked.

Jenny's voice caught. "Probably."

"How long has he got?"

"I don't know. It would be soon if we took him with us."

"Do you mind changing the plan that much?" He no longer mocked her on this point.

"Hell yes, I mind. It disturbs the factors. And we'll have to leave the Tank since it took both of you to maneuver it."

A slow nod from Dragonard. "It's just us."

"Just us. We can do it, Wylie. I'll handle the cable. You go in for the Stars."

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"Just the way we planned. Except that we won't have Lazaret on watch for us."

His mouth itched, ferociously dry for a—no.

Jenny unfolded a flap of her tool belt, reached into a pocket, passed six small, round plastic spheres into his hand. One by one he inserted the spheres into the little hollows of skin where his fingers joined, three for each hand.

Jenny finished fitting six spheres between her fingers as he had done. Then she gave him a swift, hard kiss.

"We're very close to succeeding, Wylie. We can't let anything stop us."

"But all at once I'm not sure whether I prefer being rich and dead or poor and alive."

She sensed his weary cynicism, gave a soft laugh. She ticked a finger against the chron on her wrist. They moved away from the Tank and the unconscious eraso, walking side by side toward the formal gardens.

Against the bright backdrop of the rotunda of the Stars, the tops of the hedges stood out in artful silhouette: pyramids and cones, flyers and transpos, men and women in lewd embrace. Jenny and Dragonard reached the edge of the garden which extended ahead of them, he recalled, for three-quarters of a league. Both he and the girl had committed the maze-like paths to memory.

"How far to the cross intersection?" She was testing him.

"Nineteen long steps, left three, right six."

"We'll have half a minute to spare when we get there."

"Yes."

They moved as they talked. There was a certain assurance in this recitation of the timetables over which they had labored so hard. Their steps were virtually silent, but apart from this precaution, they did not hesitate. It was vital that they reach the intersection of paths ahead of the guard team that would pass it on schedule.

The hedges closed in around them, shifting in the wind. Dragonard suddenly felt like a trapped animal. It was more than the darkness that filtered out even the glare of the rotunda of the Stars. He sensed a danger he couldn't formalize or understand. His old training, his years as a Regulator, warned him of it. The feeling deepened with each step.

The clouds raced overhead. Above him a shrub shaped into a nude woman writhed in the wind. They reached the inter-

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section of paths. Jenny glanced both ways. Nearby an ornamental pool splashed and tinkled. The two walks were faintly visible because their marble flakes contrasted with the black of the surrounding turf.

Jenny counted off the seconds. "Ten left. Now."

He knelt, opened his fingers, let two spheres fall to the ground after he cracked one between thumb and forefinger of each hand. He jumped back as white gas gushed from the pellets.

The spheres emitted a tiny whistle sound. The gas lost its color in the open air. Jenny and Dragonard crowded back against the shrubs, covered their noses and mouths with both hands. He listened.

He imagined he heard the crunch of boots as the team of guards came down one of the paths from the left. Right on schedule. Jenny had this all down perfectly. He started to grin—

There was panic in her voice as she whispered, "Five seconds overdue."

His ears had tricked him. He listened and heard windy silence.

The guards should have appeared by now. They should already have walked across the pellets hidden by the darkness. The gas should have penetrated the pores of their legs and they should be down, fallen, silent, immobilized for twelve hours.

The paths remained empty.

The whistling of the little spheres gradually died away. The wind keened. A hedge clipped into a starburst shivered and rattled.

"What the hell's wrong?" he growled. "Where are they?"

"Let's wait another minute." She sounded edgy now.

They waited.

No guards came walking on their rounds.

Somehow the plan had gone wrong.

"I don't understand, Wylie," she breathed. "Six hours ago Lazaret looked ahead to this very moment. The guards were here! On schedule!"

All he could say was, "Something went wrong six hours ago."

"What?"

He shook his head. He struggled to remember some of

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the problems that police espers encountered. One seemed to suggest an answer.

"There are always alternate realities existing simultaneously, some clearer, more probable than others. Maybe the drugs slid Lazaret's mind to the wrong one. He saw a possible reality where the guards were on schedule. But the opposite reality was the one he should have seen, the one that's actually come to pass. Maybe in his state he couldn't tell the difference."

Jenny said nothing. Dragonard's mind churned.

Six hours ago Lazaret had looked ahead and seen what he thought was the actual future. Perhaps the false clarity with which he'd seen it was the fault of the drugs and his already overtaxed body and mind. Or perhaps his vision had been influenced by his own rehearsal of the plan. Perhaps he'd seen the reality he wanted to see.

It could have happened that way. But it was a surface explanation at best. What tortured Dragonard was the existence of this other reality, one in which a decision had been made to pull off the guards.

Why? By whom? Dragonard's forehead began to hurt.

"We have to go ahead and check the next site," Jenny whispered.

They plunged on down the routes they had memorized so carefully. They were behind schedule by a full minute. Trying to make up the difference, they ran.

They reached the place where a path curved by a series of oval benches made of stone. Following the plan, Dragonard and Jenny broke their spheres, dropped them, leaped back.

A minute passed. Another. Two more guards were due. Then overdue.

No one came.

They moved on, neither one speaking.

They neared the edge of the formal gardens, found the last path, the one that would take them out into the open. Dragonard hurried to the end of the hedges, crouched down.

A dark sward sloped away from him. The grass rippled in the night wind. He was almost afraid to look at the brightly lighted area beneath the cone roof of the large circular opening in the center of the rotunda floor—

Jenny gave a soft cry as she crowded up behind him.

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In the well of blackness in the rotunda floor, the Seven Stars turned slowly.

But no guards walked. The rotunda was empty.

XXX

For a long moment Dragonard stared at the elegant display of gems. In the center the faceted white oon, representing the star Autus, revolved most slowly of all, its cut faces flashing with a snowy sheen. Around it turned the other synthetic jewels: the orangyx of Wheel, fat as Dragonard's own fisted hand; the gently radiant purple paladine of Muldoonsworld; the scintillant scanth of Valleja throwing off prismatic light; the cold green manerald that was Whitepeake; the carmine carnel, amber-streaked, that symbolized Bruckner-X; and the intense firestone of Gobineaux, bleeding its scarlet light in flashes that lingered on Dragonard's retinas.

The Seven Stars, suspended in a well of darker-than-dark, burning and glaring with colors of intense saturation. Priceless.

And around the low coping that circled the black well, not a single soldier.

"Damn it to hell," Jenny whispered. "Someone's set a trap."

"How could they?" Dragonard answered. "No one knows about us."

The lie was gall in his mouth. Someone knew. Someone who had programmed Helene parsecs out in space. Someone who had fed the plans to Lazaret, and the news of an impending theft to Sectioner Dragonard of the Regulators.

"We can still go back, Wylie," she said.

He had to find his answers. He said, "No."

She tried a smile. "All right, then. Let's take the damn things."

Moving swiftly, they left the cover of the hedges, faced down the dark sward and under the roof of the pavilion. The huge octagonal tiles of the floor glowed with inner light. They ran across them to the low coping at the edge of the well.

Jenny unlaced her tool belt, laid it on the coping. She

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opened flaps and pockets, took out pieces of equipment. First a small chamois bag on a strong chain. Dragonard slipped the chain over his head.

His leg began to shake. He put his weight on it, hard. The tremor kept up. A muscle leaped wildly beneath the skin.

His mouth was hot and raw. He wanted a drink. God, how he did. He kept looking at the brilliant jewels that seemed so real, so solid, out there past the coping. All he had to do was reach out and seize them, but he knew that was an illusion. He was looking at a reflection of the real Stars hanging much closer together in—his eyes went down to the well of black—that warped, empty *otherness*.

Jenny passed a slim blue rod into his hand. At one end there was a sculptured socket, at the other, a handgrip. Just above the grip, a curved slide-switch fitted the ball of his thumb. He put the rod between his teeth.

From the belt Jenny pulled out a small piece of equipment shaped somewhat like a blaster, only much more compact. She fitted the fan-shaped muzzle with a small cylindrical load, pressed the muzzle against the vertical side of the coping, triggered. *Ka-chuff*.

She lifted the muzzle away. A gleaming silver pin had been driven into the stone. There was a loop at the end of the pin. Through this loop Jenny threaded one end of a long length of tensilsteel rope.

Dragonard looked around the pavilion. Brilliantly lighted, it was undecorated, spartan. There was light in plenty, but no sign of life. Out past the perimeter the hedges in the gardens soughed and groaned.

"Feet," Jenny said.

Dragonard sat on the coping. She wrapped a cuff of linked metal around his ankles. Then she looped the free end of the cable through an eye on the cuff. Out of the tool belt came a minitorch. Jenny pulled on goggles. Dragonard twisted his head to one side to avoid looking at the beam that sprang hissing from the torch's aperture. With quick motions she melted the cable and coping pin-eye into a single mass of metal. She repeated the procedure with the cable and the eye attached to the cuff.

Her face was gray in the bright light. She didn't look at him. "Over," she said.

Dragonard swallowed. He stared at her, his gold eyes vacant.

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Jenny's teeth clenched. "*Over.*"

This was the moment he'd dreaded. His mouth began to work but he made no sound.

Elena. Something to drink. Can't pull it off. Sectioner Dragonard all finished. The end. Forget. Something to drink.

Damn it, he was burned out! There were no resources left!

In her sea-foam eyes he saw the first glimmers of uncertainty. Contempt . . .

All at once he thought of Arthur Yee, dead. Tomira Yee, dead.

The trembling broke inside of him. There was a cool, flooding sense of relief.

Goddamn it, he'd make it. *A Dragonard always made it. Remember that.*

With a quick flip of his body, he went off the coping and fell down in the dark.

Before he fell far he twisted his legs, tucked his head under. The tool was cold between his teeth. Darkness rushed past his eyes, his throat, his shoulders. He felt like he was diving headfirst into frozen oil.

Suddenly his body was flaccid, slow-moving. He was surrounded by an emptiness that clung and impeded him. He fell and fell.

The Seven Stars shifted their coloration, fused together, split apart, became blurs of radiance. Down he fell headfirst, the cable unreeling through the ultracold of that other dimension where he saw no sign of life except the smears of color that were the Stars. They seemed to be retreating, speeding away across an infinity of syrupy blackness.

With a savage jerk he reached the cable's end. His neck flashed with pain.

Slowly, head down, he swung back and forth like a pendulum and came to rest.

All around, the viscous darkness pressed. He knew it ran on and on and on to—forever. Yet its touch was oppressive, almost *solid*.

He wrenched his head around, looked back upward. Fear gibbered and clawed inside him.

From his waist upward, there was only the dark. His legs and feet were gone.

He closed his eyes, fought the fear. The chamois bag hung down in front of his face. He could feel the links

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of the chain scraping lightly against the side of his nose. He opened his eyes.

He stretched out his left hand as the firestone of Gobineaux went moving by. He felt a tingle against his palm as he physically arrested the passage of the jewel.

It was no larger than the ball of his thumb. The other six Stars were all quite close together here, easily within reach. He stopped the firestone with his palm while, using his right hand, he took the rod from his teeth and slid his thumb against the slide-switch.

The rod hummed. He touched the sculptured socket to the firestone. There was a sudden tug as the gem leaped against the rod's end. Off to his right, a red flash. In the flash, he saw huge prisms, a whole system of them. Then the flash faded and the prisms did too.

A grinding, crunching began. The delicate optical-mechanical equipment that held and regulated the Stars had been thrown out of adjustment by the sudden plucking of the firestone from its suspending field. There were more clickings, whirrings, weird repeating light-flashes. Some seemed close enough to touch. Others looked leagues away. The cold-oil weight of *otherspace* pressed his face, his chest, his back as he hung head down within it. Carefully he opened the small chamois bag, moved the rod above the opening, slid the switch back the other way.

The firestone dropped into the bag. Its light vanished like a drowned ember.

He fastened the carnel and dropped it in the bag.

He loosed the manerald.

Then the scanth.

The palladine came free. Its purple radiance hid inside the bag as it fell, clinking.

He took the oon next. Its whiteness was so intense that when he dropped it into the bag, light flickered through the thick chamois.

The prisms leaped into view with regularity now. More lights blinked on every side. They were without form, huge splotches of color whose pattern and significance he couldn't interpret. The grindings and wheezings of machinery grew louder.

His hand shook as he extended the rod toward the last, biggest Star, the orangyx of Wheel.

The gem was so large it barely fitted against the socket

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of the rod. He thumbed the slide-switch. His sweaty skin made a bad contact, slipped. The orangyx jumped against the socket, dropped away when the contact failed.

The orangyx fell slowly from the rod's end.

Terrified, Dragonard shot out his free hand. He couldn't move it fast enough in the viscous dark.

His hand roared with pain as he forced it out and away from him, fingers opening, slipping beneath the slowly dropping jewel.

The orangyx bumped the edge of his palm, started to roll past.

Dragonard's head wailed with weird sounds as he wrenched his hand to the side and down.

The orangyx plumped into his palm.

He closed his fingers, panting.

The gem seemed to weigh as much as a planet. Slowly, he raised his hand toward the bag.

Dragonard released the rod with no further need for it. Tumbling end over end, it vanished below. He heard a smash, a soft explosion. A sequence of gray lights rippled on. He had a surrealistic glimpse of a whole sequence of prisms suddenly frosting, cracking on all their surfaces. Then everything went dark.

The rod had disrupted the optical system. Smoke blew across his eyes. Other lights flashed on and off, firebursts, multicolored.

Savagely he wrenched the legs he couldn't see. He whipped them, created a whining vibration in the cable of tensilsteel.

Somewhere above, Jenny affixed the little powerwind to the cable.

Lights battered his eyes, blinded them. The roaring and sputtering of ruined equipment grew louder. A prism blew apart; shards of it skated across his cheeks, sliced the flesh. Blood drained into his eyes.

He was drawn up and up, a slow, painful bit at a time.

He saw the cold-oil dark, prisms bursting and shattering, smoke trailing and whipping, alarm lights blooming and glaring. The urge to scream clawed higher in his throat—

Then he was out.

Jenny dragged him onto the coping. He lay like a beached fish, his mouth going open and shut as he sucked air. Her eyes were luminous, searching.

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All at once she saw the bag hanging around his neck. And for no damn reason at all, Dragonard laughed and laughed, just like a wild man laughing.

XXXI

Jenny worked swiftly with the minitorch. In a moment she'd melted the cuff that bound his ankles together. In another, the cuff dropped off, clinked against the coping.

Dragonard kept laughing. Somehow he couldn't help himself. Jenny realized how much noise he was making, shushed him with a hand to her lips.

He stopped laughing finally. Jenny twisted the calibrated end of the minitorch, damped the frame. Then she smiled in a giddy, almost drunken way.

Her hand flew to the chamois bag at his throat. She clutched it tightly. There was a wild joy in her sea-foam eyes. "We've got them, Wylie. We've got the Stars."

He took a keen physical and mental pleasure in this moment of accomplishment and release. He grinned.

"I'll be damned. So we have. Now all we have to do is get out of here, then find a way to get rid of them."

Jenny's excitement made her speak in a rush. "That part doesn't matter."

"Trading them in for credits? Why doesn't it?"

"Don't you understand what we've done?"

"Sure. Something nobody else had guts to try."

"It's more than that. It's striking at a Lord."

She postured, put on a pompous, comical face. Dragonard knew they shouldn't be carrying on this way, yet he was caught up in it. She mugged. "Lord Genmo the First! Master of the Autus worlds! Supreme authority and Lord of the Exchange—take a damn good look at us! Here we are, two common human beings from the Free Territory, spitting in your facet!"

She threw her arms around Dragonard's neck, hugged him fiercely.

"Wylie Dun, I love you madly."

He kissed her ear. "You should. That wasn't easy, going down in that hole."

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"I know. I know." Her mouth slid against his cheek, caressed. "But you did it."

"Damned if I didn't," he said, giving her another quick, savage hug.

The tender feel of her body made him ache. God, this was all wrong. He was actually taking pleasure in a criminal act! Dropping headfirst into that congruent reality had somehow restored all the confidence the past months had leached away.

Finally he broke the embrace. His enthusiasm cooled a little. He had an uneasy feeling that they'd wasted precious time. "We're still inside the Lord's preserve, remember."

She glanced at her chron. "Not long till morning. It'll take at least an hour to go back the way we came."

She surveyed the empty rotunda. The phosphor-impregnated floor and ceiling bathed them in steady white light. Outside the darkness pressed close. Dragonard thought he heard a stirring off toward the formal gardens. Then he decided it was the wind in the ornamental hedges.

He reached for the metal pin in the coping. Jenny pulled his hand back.

"Leave that. Let them wonder about it."

With a nod he followed her. They started across the rotunda floor, hurrying.

Like gigantic eyes, quartzlights lit up out in the dark.

Jenny screamed. Dragonard stiffened, growled at the pain when he accidentally stared straight into the sizzling element behind one of the huge lenses. There were at least a dozen quartzlights out there, completely ringing the rotunda.

Dragonard's instinct told him to run. He checked the impulse. Lights were wheeled up; there would be men—

The men broke from behind the lights, streamed toward the rotunda. The capes of the soldiers blew and flapped like wings as they ran. Twenty poured in from one direction, twenty from another, then twenty more and twenty after that.

The soldiers wore goggles to protect their eyes from the crisscrossing beams. The shoulders of their capes bore the wheel design, mark of the House of Genmo.

Dragonard and Jenny waited back to back as the soldiers converged. Their boots hammered the floor. Their blasters and goggles reflected highlights from the huge projectors

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that had been silently, secretly wheeled up around the pavilion.

Dragonard's exhilaration was gone. In its place came depression. He knew what had to be done.

Against his back he felt Jenny's body, tense as a caught animal's. She trembled. With fear or wrath, he couldn't be sure.

Now was the time to find out who had implemented this capture, and for what reason.

An officer in a lacquered helmet and goggles shoved through the ring of men.

"Identify yourselves!"

Jenny, Wolf Dragonard thought, I'm sorry.

XXXII

The glare of the quartzlights washed out the color in Jenny's face as she turned to the officer. She was shaking visibly. Yet her voice remained strong.

"Jenny Sable."

"Credentials?"

"Are you out of your damned mind? You think I'm carrying any?"

"System of origin, then," the officer demanded.

Dragonard didn't like these questions. They were too glib. Normally prisoners would have been stunned into helplessness and interrogated later.

Jenny's chin came up. "Citizen of the Free Territory."

That touched off whispers among the soldiers. Even the officer reacted, stiffening. The presence of a thief from the rival planetary system was diplomatic dynamite, and every man there knew it.

The officer pointed a gauntlet at Dragonard. "You."

He hesitated only a moment. "This girl knows me by the name of Wylie Dun. My real name is Wolf Dragonard."

Jenny gasped. He didn't look at her as he went on: "I'm a Sectioner of the Regulators. You can confirm that by a beam to headquarters planet, Bromdaagar-8. I'm not carrying credentials either."

Then, inevitably, he had to face her. Jenny's sea-foam eyes were hurt and baffled.

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"Jenny . . ."

"A policeman? A damn *policeman*?"

Screaming, she was on him.

She slashed at his face. The officer bawled an order. Half a dozen soldiers surged forward, caught Jenny's shoulders, hauled her back. In the struggle her white helmet came off. Her hair spilled across her shoulders.

She twisted and kicked at her captors. They were stronger, more numerous. They wrenched her arms behind her back, made her cry out with pain. She dropped to her knees.

The officer raised a gauntlet in warning. The soldiers released the pressure, allowed her to stand. Dragonard's gut ached. He saw loathing harden on her lovely face.

"I fail to understand this," the officer said to Dragonard without courtesy. "You helped this woman take the Stars?"

"Let me see if I can make it clear to you. I came here because the Regulators were informed that this theft was going to take place."

"Informed?" Jenny cried. "Informed by whom?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out!" he shouted. "Damn it, girl, you've been played for a fool since the beginning. Someone gave Lazaret all the information he needed—all the electrowall schematics, all the guard schedules, everything. They did it with a satellite programmed to—but that doesn't matter. The point is, they did it. And at the same time, the Regulators were told the theft was going to happen. The information was leaked. That's why I'm here. That's why I posed as a mercantilist and came along. Don't you see it, Jenny? Someone *wanted* the Stars stolen—and wanted the theft discovered at the same time. Someone wants trouble between Genmo's house and the Free Territory."

She spat out a single word: "Why?"

Dragonard shook his head. "That's what I don't know yet." To the officer: "You knew we were coming here tonight?"

"I'm not required to answer your—"

"What the hell difference does it make now? You've got us, haven't you? Humor me! Did you know we were coming after the Stars tonight?"

"The summer palace forces were placed on alert an hour ago. We were ordered to move the quartzlights into position, set up the filmex units—"

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"You've got all this filmed?" Jenny exclaimed.

The officer smiled unpleasantly. "Certainly. Three filmex blisters recorded the theft from three different directions."

Dragonard studied the officer's face. It was impossible to tell what the man was thinking. He was a professional, probably unwilling to take any unusual responsibility. Dragonard remembered names from his initial conversation with Arthur Yee. A nasty suspicion troubled him. He asked:

"Who put you on alert status? Lord Genmo himself?"

"Lord Genmo is away from the estate on a mineralogical expedition. He will not return until midday at the earliest."

"Then who's in command? Who set the trap?"

"We are under the command of Marshal Ian Waterloo."

Waterloo. The name rang like a bell in Dragonard's mind. He kept his eyes on the officer, not wanting to look at Jenny, not wanting to see the hatred and disgust in her eyes. He remembered Echelon Director Yee telling him that in case he needed assistance, Genmo's military commander would be a more likely source than the man who handled finances, Controller Bludblom. It was Waterloo he wanted.

"Get the Marshal here, please," he said. "I'll explain to him."

The officer debated this in silence, finally gave a quick nod. He whispered to one of his soldiers. The man raced away. An uneasy silence settled.

Jenny stared at Dragonard. "A filthy policeman. Planning to sell us out all along, weren't you?"

"Don't, Jenny. Someone's been manipulating this whole affair. I had to go through with the theft to find out who—"

"You had to put us all on the block, did you? Because of your damn policeman's sense of duty? Was making love part of the game too?"

A lewd snicker ran around the ring of men. Dragonard's face darkened. "This isn't the place to—"

"The hell. I want them to know what a dirty bastard you are."

She was right, of course. He should have told her long ago. The elation he'd felt after coming out of the dark well was gone. He was no closer to a solution than he had been when he first started the case.

But Marshal Waterloo could help. If he could convince Waterloo of the truth of what he said, the Marshal could throw the entire resources of the House of Genmo into the

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search for the guilty ones. Dragonard was convinced that the responsible parties were hiding somewhere at Genmo's court. They would have to be, to have all the information Lazaret had received.

A group of men marched into the rotunda. The ring of soldiers parted. Half a dozen high-level officers with silver boots and enameled breastplates accompanied the tall, gaunt man who walked straight up to Wolf Dragonard and stopped.

The tall man carried a fluted ivory baton. Dragonard remembered the face: handsome in a swaggering way, with a strong, sharp nose and a mouth that was too perfectly formed to be quite masculine. Marshal Ian Waterloo's eyes were deep-set. They glared with a feverish amusement.

The Marshal's uniform and cape were white. Over his left breast he wore the wheel device of Genmo's house. He gave a cursory nod to his men. He had a roosterish comb of graying hair at his forehead, and long grizzled sideburns.

"Sectioner Dragonard," he said without ceremony. His slim fingers played with the ivory baton.

Dragonard frowned. "You've already confirmed from headquarters . . . ?"

"Of course I haven't confirmed it. I know who you are."

"Marshal, I was told by my superiors that I could turn to you for help."

"They would think that, yes," Waterloo said with a nod. "Go on."

Quickly Dragonard summarized the story he had told the officer. Marshal Waterloo's eyes moved restlessly around the rotunda. He paid scarcely any attention. Dragonard found himself growing angry as he concluded:

"I could have prevented this girl and the others from coming here. I didn't because—"

"Ah, yes, the others," Waterloo interrupted. "We have them under surveillance out in the gardens. That eraso, and the creature you call the Tank. The eraso may be dead by now. We'll bring them in." A slight gesture sent half a dozen men off toward the maze of hedges. Dragonard resumed:

"I didn't tell them what was happening because I wanted to find out who was staging this theft."

Marshal Waterloo looked even more amused. "And have you found that out?"

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"Not yet. But with your assistance—"

"I wouldn't count on that overmuch," Waterloo said with an odd smile.

"But this girl and the eraso have got to be held blameless! They didn't know who I was. I duped them so I could carry out an authorized criminal investigation!"

Marshal Waterloo waved. "Please don't bore me with your fictions."

"Fictions? Goddam it, Marshal, if you'll check with headquarters planet—"

"I do not intend to check with the Regulators," returned the Marshal, "until the appropriate time. I have no intention of letting your superior know you are here just now. This slut and the eraso are citizens of the Free Territory. They have conceived and executed a scheme to sully the honor of the House of Genmo. Your role will be revealed at the proper time. It's as clear as that, don't you see?"

Lightly he tapped Dragonard's shoulder with the ivory wand. There was a bright, concentrated madness in his eyes. How had Yee described him? *Aggressive. Even tending to be paranoid.* Dragonard felt the trap close tighter.

"Where's Lord Genmo?" he said. "I want an audience."

"The Lord is away, searching for rock specimens for his collection. It keeps him entertained."

"Get him here. Beam him. I demand—"

Waterloo lashed Dragonard's face with the wand. Dragonard lunged away, growled. He started for the Marshal. Three soldiers seized him from behind, held him fast.

"You are in no position to demand anything," Marshal Waterloo told him. "You are my prisoner." His face glistened suddenly with sweat, and his roostercomb of gray hair ruffled in the night wind. "The conspirators from Free Territory have come here in a piratical attempt to steal the Seven Stars. That sort of affront to the House of Genmo cannot be brooked. There will be retaliation."

• "You're the one!" Dragonard roared.

Marshal Ian Waterloo bobbed his head. "Yes, I'm the one. You of course already know my code name for the entire operation. Helene."

And he reached and ripped the chamois bag from Dragonard's neck.

The breaking chain tore his skin, started blood running. Dragonard didn't understand all of it yet, but he understood

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enough to know that the trap had finally, irrevocably clashed shut.

Marshal Waterloo gestured with his baton. "Take these people to detention." He started off, then glanced back. "At the moment I am rather too occupied with appropriate measures against the Free Territory to execute you. But it won't be long, I promise."

His white cape belled as he walked away. The soldiers closed around Jenny and Dragonard.

XXXIII

"You still don't believe I wanted to protect you," Dragonard said.

"Protect me, hell." Jenny spat.

The long hours in the grimy cell had frayed his nerves. "Yes dammit, protect you. At the beginning—all right, I admit I meant to pull you in sometime. But the deeper we got into this, the more I realized someone was setting you up and the Regulators too, the more I knew I couldn't do it."

Jenny's face was tired. She paced. "I don't believe you."

"I don't blame you for being bitter," he said. "But I did intend to tell you."

"Afterward?" she mocked. "After your guilty one tipped his hand?"

"Yes."

"You lying bastard."

"Jenny, I swear to God—"

"That night when you came back to the Brake-&Pin I should have cut your rotten throat."

"I'm in this as deeply as you!" he yelled. "Didn't the Marshal's actions make that plain?"

"Oh, they'll pull you out of here soon enough."

Jenny folded her arms, turned her back on him, leaned against the plastalloy wall and stared fixedly up at the translite near the ceiling.

The cut out translite provided the chamber's only illumination. Not much could be seen out there except the blowing clouds. By the slant of the light Dragonard judged that it was already well past midday.

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The Tank had been stored in a room down the corridor. Lazaret was in the cell with them. He lay on a theracouch that had been moved in by complaining guards. Needles fed solutions into his arms and legs. The black blotch on the right side of his forehead was bigger than ever. His right eye resembled a piece of wet ebony.

But his left eye followed Dragonard every minute.

Dragonard wasn't sure Lazaret would live much longer. He knew enough about police medicine to know that the theracouch was palliative only.

He tried again. "They're not going to take me out of here, Jenny. If there's any getting out, we'll have to do it together."

"With that electrowall around this place?" She snorted.

She had a point. The block building in which they had been imprisoned was directly adjacent to the transpo dock on the perimeter of the estate. A small, impregnable building built with functional ugliness, it was completely surrounded by an electrowall to the level of its roofline.

Dragonard tried to think of a new angle of attack to breach Jenny's stubborn rage. He was exhausted, and couldn't. All he could do was say, "Jenny, believe me. I'm not party to the Marshal's scheme, whatever the hell it is. I am not in this cell as an informer. I'm locked up just as tightly as you."

"We've been over it and over it," Jenny said, weary, furious.

"For hours," Lazaret said. His clear eye blazed. "Get a new story, you son of a bitch policeman."

"If I had a weapon, I'd kill you," Jenny said. "Does that tell you how much I believe you?"

Cursing, Dragonard turned away. He stamped over to the low stone pillar in the center of the cell. Chained to it were several drinking basins full of a vile-looking greenish nutrient fluid. His throat was parched. He lifted one of the basins, smelled the brew, set the basin aside. He walked the cell in a circle. After a few minutes he stopped. Lazaret's clear eye kept following him. Watching. Watching and hating.

Jenny tucked her legs under her, sat in a corner staring up at the translite. The air in the cell grew heavy with the stink of unwashed bodies.

Pacing again, Dragonard flogged his mind for an an-

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swer to the problem. Lord Genmo represented his only chance. But that was no chance at all. Genmo was off the estate, although of course that might only be the Marshal's convenient lie. But still, they were effectively separated from the Lord of the Exchange by armed guards in the building, and by the electrowall.

One other gigantic enigma remained: Why had Ian Waterloo plotted so long, so comprehensively? Obviously the reason had something to do with the Free Territory. But what?

The answer came sooner than he expected. The light was failing behind the racing clouds when the door whined. Dragonard lifted himself wearily from a corner opposite Jenny. Execution?

The whining intensified. The door swung open and the whining stopped. A uniformed guard pulled the magnokey, a hemisphere of metal, away from its contact point on the door's outer surface.

"All rise for his Excellence, Marshal Waterloo," the guard said in a monotone.

Dragonard was too tired even to attempt to laugh.

Waterloo swept into the cell. He still carried his baton. He waved it at the guard. "You may leave that open. But don't stray too far away."

"Will comply, Excellence." The guard vanished.

Marshal Waterloo's comb of gray hair looked windblown. His cheeks were flushed. He surveyed the three inmates of the cell, careful not to move too far from the doorway.

"I thought I might now take a moment for an explanation," he remarked at last. "Especially for you, Regulator Dragonard. The last few hours have been quite busy."

The tall officer stowed the fluted baton in the sash of his white uniform. From a pocket he pulled the chamois bag containing the Stars. He tossed this up, caught it, tossed it and caught it again.

"Plans are proceeding quite well, actually. One thousand, three hundred ships of the Imperial Fleet of the Lord Genmo I are on their way to the Free Territory."

Jenny's face bleached out. "Thirteen hundred ships?"

"From dreadnought to subfleet class. All but our essential defense reserves."

"Why the hell did you launch an armada like that?" Dragonard asked.

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Marshal Waterloo's rather delicate lips pursed. "Why, to obliterate Engineer McIlhenny's planetary bases, naturally."

"*Obliterate—!*" Dragonard choked.

"You heard correctly, Sectioner. As Marshal, I am empowered to launch a prevstrike—"

"Surprise attack, you mean," Jenny snarled.

"Prevstrike," repeated the Marshal calmly. "I am empowered with the authority to retaliate for any militaro-criminal act perpetrated against the Genmotic territories or possessions. Certainly there could be no more outrageous militaro-criminal act than the attempted theft of these—"

Toss, up went the bag. Waterloo caught it with a supple motion.

"—the very symbols of the Lord's authority."

Horror overwhelmed Dragonard. "It was all staged so you could start a goddammed war?"

Marshal Waterloo's shrug was exquisite. His eyes shone like polished stones.

"Yes."

"You hate the Free Territory that much?" Dragonard breathed.

"I despise its arrogance. I have long advised Lord Genmo to be wary of the increasing militaro-economic power of the traitor McIlhenny. I have advocated a prevstrike ever since it became apparent that McIlhenny's industrial complexes were beginning to pose a serious competitive threat to the manufacturies of my Lord. Two years ago I completely detailed an excellent prevstrike attack plan. I have presented it to my Lord on various occasions but each time it was rebuffed. The cause, of course, is twofold. Lord Genmo is growing old. He is halfway to his nine-hundredth year. All his faculties are not what they were. Further"—here Waterloo's eyes shone with a sudden, incomprehensible intensity—"he has had unwise counsel."

Dragonard made a guess. "From his financial adviser?"

Waterloo colored. "Yes, Controller Bludblom." Waterloo couldn't conceal his hatred.

Dragonard enjoyed twisting the knife. "In other words, the Lord listened to your rival—"

"Bludblom turned the Lord's head with nonsensical, self-seeking advice! I know the Controller has privately advised Lord Genmo that it would be imprudent to launch a prevstrike. I have found myself facing a deaf ear."

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"And losing out to your rival in the race for succession?"

Waterloo colored even more. "I'll have your filthy tongue torn out!"

"Don't bother. We can't do you much harm here."

But he was beginning to wonder whether they might. He, Jenny, Lazaret if he didn't die.

All at once the masks were falling. The intricacies behind the scheme were being laid bare. Dragonard was beginning to realize how completely he himself had been duped, and to what end. Thirteen hundred ships in a warfleet, armed and rocketing toward the Free Territory. Now. *Right now.*

Marshal Waterloo thought over Dragonard's remark. He seemed convinced that the big man's resigned attitude was genuine.

"I agree with you. The fleet will make initial contact sometime before midnight Whitepeake mean time." A glance at the darkening square of the translite. "That's not many hours from now. In the end, Lord Genmo will thank me."

"For acting on your own initiative to butcher billions of people," Jenny said.

"For wiping out a threat to the Genmotic empire! In the light of reflection, when it's too late for Bludblom's twisted advice to effect a change, the Lord will understand that I was right. That I have been right for years!"

Somberly Dragonard thought, *Right. Or mad. More likely the latter.*

He pointed to the chamois bag Waterloo clutched in his slim fingers. "You engineered the theft to justify the strike."

"Correct. With the full resources of the military wing of the Lord's house at my disposal it was not difficult. Expensive, but not difficult. I also made judicious use of a number of overly-ambitious men who were willing to trade untenable situations for handsome creditary balances."

"Vondamm was one, wasn't he?"

"The Interrogation Agent? Quite right. He planted a suggestocube in your superior to make certain you went to Blaze City and—ah, but I see you know that. By manipulating certain of the financial computers in the military wing, we were able to build and program the artificial asteroid Helene in secret. I consider the effort well worth it. I expect my own cause to be looked on with favor

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by my Lord when the strike is successfully completed," Waterloo concluded. Jenny covered her mouth.

"Genmo is away from the estate—" Dragonard began.

"And will not return from his mineralogical expedition, it now turns out, until at least after sunset."

"And you don't need his authority to launch thirteen hundred ships?"

A toss of the bag. "Not when the act of aggression is militaro-criminal. The decision is mine."

"Why was I brought into it?"

"You personally? By chance. We merely wanted Yee to assign a top man to vacation on Korb so that the Regulators could be apprised of the impending theft."

"But why tell the police at all?"

"Sectioner! I thought you were more clever than that. To authenticate the whole affair, of course! We shall shoot you this evening. I shall then personally present your corpse to Lord Genmo. I shall identify you as Sectioner Wolf Dragonard, a valiant police agent with whom I was working in an attempt to stop these thieves. You, of course, were discovered and lost your life. I think we'll say the girl shot you. Your role in the investigation will be confirmed by certain forged reports planted months ago in Regulator records by Conrad Vondamm."

Dragonard said, "Vondamm's dead. I killed him."

Waterloo didn't seem disturbed. "May I ask when and where?"

"I found Helene, boarded her. Vondamm followed me. But he died before he could tell me anything."

A chuckle from the Marshal. "You got a bit too close, then. No harm was done. Additional records will be found in your personal files. I scanned the drafts of one or two. There are many references to the need for such monstrous criminals to be obliterated permanently. Rather purple, but obviously written with conviction. The reports are deliberately set up to lead any subsequent investigators to dead ends. No mention is made of Helene. Besides, your superiors won't be overly curious about how you penetrated the ring. Your death will occupy their attention nicely."

The Marshal scratched one of his grizzled sideburns and cocked his head, as if waiting for a compliment. Dragonard wanted to believe such a scheme couldn't work. He

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was dismally certain that, given Waterloo's rank and financial resources, it could.

"Have you any more questions?" Waterloo asked with a charming smile.

"You posturing butcher—" Dragonard began.

"Nonsense." Waterloo laughed. "I merely pursue the most sensible course under the circumstances." He gestured to the basins filled with green liquid. "May I suggest you enjoy a little nourishment while you may? I've spent more time here than I intended. I must check on the progress of the fleet. In an hour or less we'll take care of the executions. I want to have you all good and dead before the Lord lands."

Waterloo marched toward the open doorway, turned back with a quizzical smile.

"I fail to understand your extreme anger, Sectioner. I was informed that you were practically finished in the Regulators when you took this case. Drunkenness and emotional imbalance, wasn't it? Now your grave will probably be decorated. A splendid notion. I'll see to it myself. And perhaps there should be a posthumous medal, even a fund established in your honor on behalf of deserving—"

Screaming, Dragonard lunged with both hands out like claws.

Marshal Waterloo was light on his feet. He sidestepped through the doorway, slid out of range even as he cried for the guard. In a moment the door shut. Dragonard pounded on the unyielding surface until his bones ached.

Lazaret had risen on one elbow. Some of the needles had ripped out of his arm. In his right eye little red threads stirred in the clotted black.

"Now," Dragonard said, his voice raw. "Now—" All the rage and anger in him was released in the brutal smack of his palm against Jenny's face. "Now tell me who's been duped!"

Jenny's sea-foam eyes locked with his a moment.

"Oh my God," she said, and drove her head against his chest and sobbed.

He held her in his arms, tried to calm her. Lazaret cursed in an obscene monotone. The clouds sailed past the high translite. The cell grew darker.

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XXXIV

When he told them what he wanted to do, they stared in disbelief.

Dragonard made a wide, slashing gesture with one big hand. "Hell, there's no other way! The Lord is due back after sunset. From then till around midnight is all the time we have. Nobody can stop the attack but the Lord himself. We either get to Genmo with the truth or let the Free Territory blow up."

Torn with weariness, Jenny showed her uncertainty. "But we're locked up and guarded. . . ."

"We got into this estate, didn't we? Then we can get out of this building!" Dragonard shot back.

And suddenly he felt a surge of manic confidence. Unjustified, probably, but exhilarating after the weeks and months of hanging onto the edge of doubt. Perhaps he felt so reckless because there was no other alternative. The optional endings were quite clear. They would either succeed or be killed.

Jenny said nothing. The translite darkened moment by moment as night came on. Dragonard tried sarcasm:

"Are you expert thieves or aren't you?"

"That's a bastardly tactic," Jenny said. All at once, she smiled in a quick nervous way. "All right, why not? There's not much to lose."

Dragonard walked to Lazaret on the theracouch. "You're the one taking the biggest risk."

"Jenny will have to give me an ampul."

The girl patted her waist. "They took the belt, remember?"

"Then I can't—"

"You can if you want," Dragonard cut in. "I know a little about erasos. You can handle it for a short time."

Lazaret's thin fingers brushed at his damaged eye. Just under the surface blood twisted slowly, like oil in a pool. "I don't know. I don't know."

Dragonard knelt down, spoke low and rapidly. "All we need is the mind of one guard under control, Lazaret. Under control for as long as it takes to get him to the door

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and make him apply the magnokey. Once the door seal breaks I'll take care of him."

"You ought to understand the risks," Jenny said. "You could die making the effort."

The eraso's mouth wrenched. "I suppose it makes no difference. I can't live very long in any case and we all know it."

Uneasy silence. Dragonard watched the slim man twist on the couch, obviously in great pain. Finally Lazaret gave a brief nod. "Tell me when to begin." On his cheek beneath his unclotted eye, a single tear ran down.

Dragonard swung to Jenny, quickly outlined the plan again. He finished:

"I don't think there are more than three or four guards in the building."

"They trust the electrowall," she said. "So would I."

"The guard with the magnokey has a blaster. I saw it. And we have the Tank."

"Yes. All right. Let's try it." Then her features smoothed out: she was under control now. This was the Jenny Sable he remembered from Fulldrive. Assured, quietly angry, determined that nothing short of death would stop her.

"Where should I stand?" she asked.

He told her. Then he positioned himself next to the sealed door. It was difficult to see in the cell because of the darkness. Outside, merclamps had been lit but their glow was feeble.

He tried to concentrate on the moment. Too much dwelling on the stakes—the billions and billions of lives that would be lost if the prevstrike got through—could throw his reaction time off. *Think about the way out*, he told himself. *Only the way out, not the why.*

"Lazaret?" he said, barely whispering.

It was awful to watch. First the eraso disconnected all the needles from his body. Then he stretched out on his back, his hands at his sides. He closed both eyes, thrust out his tongue, bit down hard.

His back jerked suddenly, bowing. With a bubbly moan he began to roll from side to side.

"He's got the guard," Jenny breathed. "He's in contact."

Dragonard choked out a warning. She ran forward, thrust out her hands in time to keep the eraso from hurling him-

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self off the couch. She held him gently while his body thrashed.

Dragonard leaned to the wall. He could hear nothing. Too thick.

The backs of Lazaret's hands turned white as bone. Jenny looked at Dragonard, half-pleading for an end to the agony. He shook his head.

Lazaret's lips ran with foam. The blotch under the skin of his forehead was widening once more, expanding down around his eye socket.

What was happening in the corridor? If the eraso was linked with the guard's mind, and controlling it, was he exerting enough force to compel the guard to turn, walk to the cell door and place the hemispherical magnokey against the outer plate?

Lazaret began to writhe up and down. Jenny had trouble holding him. He lashed his head from side to side. Dragonard remained immobile against the wall. Jenny's eyes filled with tears. She looked at Dragonard again, silently begging him to be merciful.

He thought of thirteen hundred ships riding the dark toward the Free Territory, lopping off the parsecs hour by hour, streaking in for mass kill. He thought of that and turned his head so that he didn't have to see Jenny's eyes.

"He's dying," she said.

"The door's still closed."

"You're an animal! You're worse than Waterloo!"

Dragonard's jaw was studded with sweat. He watched the sealed edge of the door. His gold eyes were almost maniacal. "Shut up."

She whispered something to Lazaret. He stiffened again, squealed like a gored beast. Spittle flew from his lips, struck her face.

"Oh!" She jumped back. "His—his face is all black from blood. He's nearly dead—"

Dragonard turned to see. The eraso gave one last, heaving shudder. A ghastly smile locked his mouth. His hand flopped over the edge of the theracouch. Blood trickled from his right eardrum in a black stream.

Uncontrollably, Dragonard felt like weeping. He started forward. On the other side of the door, something whined.

Dragonard flattened back against the wall. He sucked

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in his breath, held it. The seal cracked. The whining intensified. Lazaret rolled off the theracouch and lay on his face.

Dragonard's hands came up, huge, like claws. The door swung back. Dragonard jumped.

He shot his hands toward the slack face of the guard, who stood there like an automaton, pupils rolled halfway up in their sockets, one shaking hand pressing the magnok-key to the contact point. The mental link broke as Lazaret died. The guard's eyes focused as Dragonard's hands closed on his throat.

Dragonard's fingers bit into certain spots he'd been taught about in training. The guard crumpled. Dragonard snatched his blaster, motioned for Jenny to run behind him.

They started down the corridor toward a lever-controlled grille gate at the end. The hallway was lit with ceiling panels that glowed. A guard lurched from a small dayroom. With one blaster charge Dragonard gunned him into a wet, smelling mess.

By that time two more guards had pelted out of the dayroom, blasters unlimbered. Dragonard thrust Jenny away. She hit the wall as Dragonard leaped the other way. A beam pulsed between them, its light intense, hurting his eyes.

He blinked away the afterglow, used his free hand to widen his own beam as he fired.

The guards stumbled against one another, silhouetted by crackling energy. The flesh of one melted fast. His skull showed through before he struck the floor. The other fell on top of him, the two bodies running together.

Dragonard burned the grille gate open. That set off sirens, and a sudden intensification in the light level of the electrowall. Men shouted in the distance.

Dragonard ran into the storage room. He dashed around behind the Tank, kicked in the thruster. With Jenny helping by tugging at the front, he skidded the Tank into the hall.

There they turned it, rammed it straight out through the grille gate into the night air.

Overhead the solid ceiling of cloud moved and flowed. Just a short distance away, the golden electrowall pulsed. Something beyond caught his attention—

A long, sleek transpo ablaze with lights was gliding

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into a dock. The lightballs hanging above the dock platform made the transpo's upper surface glitter. At one end of the platform a guard was running a wheel ensign up a gravpole and peering toward the prison at the same time.

The dark ensign snapped out in the breeze. The transpo's twelve wheels struck the bumpers in the dock bed. An exit stair began to unfold from high up on the curved hull. Finally, finally, they'd had a little luck . . .

Dragonard hardened his heart, rammed the thruster lever to full advance, shoved the Tank.

It weaved and wobbled on the ruptured air caster. Jenny clutched his arm. Her face was agony. She knew there was a living organism inside the transparent box, as he did.

The Tank began to lash the walls of the container as the caster careened it toward the golden light. It sensed the engorging flow of energy near, very near—

The Tank struck the electrowall. Its box exploded.

A splinter hit Dragonard's cheek, made him close his eyes just as the wall foamed up blindingly. The air reeked of ozone.

Quick darkness, then. Dragonard ran ahead, slipping and skidding through the brown fluid all over the ground. The Tank too had blown apart. Each bit of its body was round and fat, like a white balloon. The wind blew the swollen things this way, that way—

Dragonard ran past the line where the electrowall had burned out. Its generating sockets spurted smoke. On the transpo a pair of soldiers appeared at the head of the exit stairs. Between them tottered a spindly figure in flapping robes.

The old man took one unsteady step down the stair. Shouts rang out from far on the right. A platoon of Genmo's soldiers was racing in beneath the merclamps. From the other direction a small, open transpo cut a twisting course toward the dock. A white cloak blew around the shoulders of the long rider in the rear seat. An ivory baton flashed.

"Run!" Dragonard panted to Jenny. "Waterloo's coming!"

Side by side they pounded toward the rail separating them from the dock platform. Abruptly Jenny screamed, pivoted, dropped behind as someone in the charging platoon fired a blaster.

Jenny's right side was haloed with light. She went down, taking the charge meant for him.

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A lunatic's scream ripped out of his throat. He reached the rail, vaulted over. The lightballs above made his eyes burn like medallions.

He ran to the foot of the exit stair, heard the platoon leader shout, "Hold fire! 'Ware the Lord!"

In the lighted oblong of the transpo hatch, Genmo I, Lord of the Exchange, stood unmoving, frail, rather insignificant. He was obviously taken aback at the sight of the dirty, wild-eyed man below.

Dragonard lunged up the steps two at a time, expecting Marshal Waterloo to open his back with a blaster at any instant.

XXXV

As he climbed, Dragonard glanced back. Marshal Waterloo's vehicle had nearly reached the dock.

The soldiers at the top of the stairs stepped in front of the Lord, aimed their blasters down at Dragonard. He halted halfway up, cried into the wind.

"Lord, my name is Wolf Dragonard. I'm a Sectioner of the Regulators. I beg an audience. I've been imprisoned illegally by your Marshal—" He was shouting now, hoping the old despot had sharp ears. "Unless you hear me out—"

The small transpo howled up to the dock. "Kill that man before he attacks the Lord!" Waterloo yelled.

Dragonard was still yelling too: "—you'll have responsibility for the deaths of every citizen of the Free Territory!"

"Kill him!" Waterloo screamed. "You imbeciles! Give me the damn blaster!"

The soldiers shielding Genmo moved to obey the order. Waterloo clumped toward the bottom of the stairs, his crest of white hair bright as silver under the lightballs. Beyond the platform rail, the platoon stumbled, deployed in loose formation, some kneeling, some standing. They were ready to kill but no one was quite ready to fire the first blast toward the transpo.

Dragonard climbed two steps higher. "Excellence, give me half an hour to tell you—"

"That's enough," said the Lord of the Exchange. His voice was like pebbles rattling.

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Dragonard turned pale. All his life he had believed there were no greater sources of authority than the Lords. And here he was, howling at one like an arrogant street-fighter. He was in a Lord's presence. *My God.*

Swiftly he made the ritual gesture.

"You may also lay your weapon down at your feet," Lord Genmo said.

Dragonard put the blaster down.

"Move in, platoon," Waterloo shouted. "Fire from the oblique!"

"No firing!" Genmo's voice stilled all but the wind.

Dragonard searched the ground out past the platform. He couldn't see Jenny anywhere. Was she down out there dying? Or dead already?

A dry, veined hand slipped between the shoulders of the guards at the head of the stairs.

Lord Genmo thrust forward and the soldiers sprang back. Other men gathered in the lighted hatch behind him. Most wore helmets. One was cowed.

Genmo came down the stairs haltingly. He clutched the rail for support. He had a small, triangular face, a slight frame. On the breast of his garment the wheel emblem was sewn in needle-of-silver, his only bit of ostentation.

The wind framed back his voluminous sleeves. His arms were thin as an infant's. His lips moved continuously, and his stringy hair blew every which way. That hair was black, cosmetically treated. In contrast to the rest of him it was ludicrous. But Dragonard could never have laughed.

This was a Lord.

And though he might be 850 years of age, his eyes were awake and clever and penetrating.

"Show us your credentials, if Sectioner you are."

"I have none, Lord. But I'll submit to a physiocheck which you can verify by direct beam to Bromdaagar-8—"

"You forget yourself." The rattling voice could sting. "We verify nothing."

Dragonard flushed. "Pardon, Lord. Of course. Your servants can verify it."

Genmo waved. "Later, perhaps. Our Marshal is standing down there waiting to shoot you. Before we allow him, let us hear what you have to say. We have seen and done much—" Was it malice, or senile amusement, or something else that made the little eyes gleam?

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"—but never have we been promised the guilt for obliterating an entire system. You say we would be responsible for the deaths of every citizen in the Free Territory. That is such an outrageous statement, you are either insane or correct, with no group between."

"I swear it's the truth, Excellence. The Marshal has launched a prevstrike that will reach the Free Territory within hours."

"Yes!" Waterloo howled from below. "A justified prevstrike, Lord. That man is an agent of the Free Territory. He was sent here to—"

"Be silent!" Genmo exclaimed. *Silent, silent, silent* echoed the wind.

Without looking over his shoulder the old man whispered, "Status of the fleet."

Men in the hatch turned, ran back into the operating centers of the transpo. Genmo fixed Dragonard with a careful, cruel stare. If he failed now, he was dead.

The Lord said, "Tell."

Dragonard did, a rush of words. He tried to include everything, from his first visit to the planet Korb at the peculiar insistence of Yee, to his encounter with Helene and all the rest. He didn't spare himself concerning Conrad Vondamm, and he described as best he could the artificial asteroid programmed by Waterloo and his fellow conspirators.

Genmo continued to clutch the rail of the stair. His head didn't move. Neither did his eyes. They were awls into Dragonard's soul.

At the end, Dragonard said, "And when we had the Stars—"

"Where are they now?" Genmo interrupted.

"The Marshal took them. He imprisoned us and described how he'd launched the prevstrike to convince you that he was right all along."

A high officer returned to the hatch. "Excellence."

"Vice-marshal?"

"It's true." Did the voice quaver a little? "Thirteen hundred vessels are en route."

"Armed?"

"Fully armed, Lord. They are pre-gearing for the first attack wave now."

Dragonard was weary beyond words. He knew he'd

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failed to convince this splendid ruler. Genmo I picked at a mole on his chin.

"Your effrontery in accosting us this way merits immediate execution. Do you know that?"

"Lord I only wanted to warn you—"

"By means of a most fantastical story."

"Lord, I swear—"

"Yes, yes, we heard. But even if we were sufficiently intrigued to investigate your wild statement—even if we were disturbed that our Marshal has launched a prevstrike which he has every right to launch in the event of a militaro-criminal act—and theft of the Stars most certainly is that—well, even granting our vaguest interest in your hysterical tale, can you not understand our inclination to disbelieve you?"

Dragonard's head was foggy. "No, Lord, I don't underst—"

"Your word, Sectioner, if Sectioner you are. Against my Marshal's? Whom shall we most surely believe?"

Dragonard knew then that it was over.

"Lord?"

Genmo I turned to peer at the cowed figure in the hatch. The man stood with arms folded in his sleeves.

"Did you wish our leave to speak, Controller?"

Bludblom, Waterloo's rival? His voice was heavy, measured, pedantic.

"I submit, Excellence, that there is a curious core to this man's tale which bears looking into. The Marshal's militaristic proposals—"

Genmo waved again. "Stay. No personalities here."

Bludblom's face was hidden in the cowl, but he sounded old, and thorough, and sure of himself. He gave a low cough to signify compliance, resumed:

"Several months ago I undertook a meticulous and continuing study of the fiscal affairs of the military wing. I have audited the tapes of Marshal Waterloo's financial computers on a daily basis. Two months ago I discovered a puzzling series of fund-account transfers. I have conducted an investigation. I have the engineering graphs and other documents to confirm at least one part of this man's account. Marshal Waterloo and certain associates have secretly funded and constructed a most unusual installation."

Genmo craned his head over like a curious bird. "What sort of installation?"

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Almost with a sigh, Controller Bludblom said, "An artificial asteroid, Lord. Its purpose—indeed its very existence—is undocumented in the records of the military wing. Members of my staff were only able to determine its nature and location by applying discreet pressure on the contracting houses which the Marshal's aides hired to build the asteroid in space. The asteroid is located at approximately the point in space where this man claims it is located. A further investigation is certainly merited to—"

"*Warel*!" shouted a soldier next to Bludblom, and raced down the stairs and threw himself against the Lord and knocked him over.

Confusion at the hatch. Men scrambled. Dragonard spun. A long, baying scream rose up.

Running across the dock platform, Marshal Waterloo screamed again, and fired his blaster straight at Dragonard.

XXXVI

There was precious little time. Dragonard bent swiftly, reached for the blaster he'd put down, heard the crackle of the Marshal's weapon. He was still holding onto the stair rail with his left hand. Waterloo's beam sliced into his wrist.

Dragonard almost pitched on his face. Pain surged through him. Waterloo's beam had demolished the rail and part of the exit stair as well. The stair creaked and wrenched beneath him. He got hold of his own blaster as the stair started to shear in half.

He saw Ian Waterloo down on the platform, concentrated on that one flushed face as the stair swayed. His right hand manipulated the blaster controls by feel. He turned the weapon on max intensity. Marshal Waterloo fired a second time, missed. Dragonard fired back.

Waterloo's sideburns smoked and sparked. His head shone like a silver coin, haloed with light. He opened his mouth, screamed. His teeth glowed.

The exit stair buckled around Dragonard, a wrenching, ripping chaos of metal. A torn extrusion gashed his head open, sent blood gushing down into his eyes. He had a last,

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dazed glimpse of the Marshal burning where he stood, dying with his body limned in fire. He fell with the wreckage.

The world twisted and squealed like ruined metal. He was buried in the dark of his own pain, the infinity of pain at the end of his left arm—

And as the black took him, he cried a single word:

"Jenny?"

Sectioner of the Regulators Wolf Dragonard awoke half submerged in a soothing blue fluid contained by a clear plastoshell. The shell resembled half of an egg sliced along its long axis.

The fluid sloshed gently as he stirred. It had a mint odor, not unpleasant. He was naked except for a large surgical pad thrown across his middle.

His left arm rested in a padded cutout in the edge of the shell. His hand hung outside the shell, surrounded by a huge mitten of white foam.

Hand? He couldn't feel a hand inside the mitten. . . .

Wolf Dragonard screamed.

Massive crystal lenses descended from the glowing ceiling. Men in pale blue tunics rushed in, administered an injection. Dragonard flopped like a gaffed fish in the tank of liquid. The ampul shot some unknown medication into his blood. His arms and legs relaxed. He had no further desire to move.

He ached only superficially. But he was overwhelmed by despair.

God. He'd murdered a Marshal.

He'd lost his hand and that was worse.

The blue-smocked men retreated hastily as an oval door hushed aside. Dragonard turned, surprised. The old man in the voluminous robe stared down at him.

Genmo's lips moved without sound. On his breast the needle-of-silver wheel glistened. His tiny eyes never left Dragonard's face.

"Lord—" Dragonard began.

"We acknowledge your greeting. Rest easily."

A second figure glided into the chamber: a man with the cowl of his robe thrown back. The ascetic, emaciated face was dominated by intense, almost hallucinated eyes. The eyes were an unpleasant reddish brown, but somehow they did not seem unfriendly.

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The robed man stood at a respectful distance behind the Lord of the Exchange. He kept his hands hidden in his sleeves.

"They cut off my hand," Dragonard said.

"You lost it when Marshal Waterloo fired at you. You will be given an alloy device."

"The Marshal . . . is he . . . ?"

"Dead," said Controller Bludblom.

Dragonard lost all hope.

"We have been waiting four days for you to recover from antishock therapy," the old Lord told him. Genmo's hands were spiderish, restless, plucking at his robe in a senile way. "We have been anxious to commend you for your service to our House, Sectioner Dragonard. Your forceful, if antic, behavior the other evening prevented a disaster of major proportion."

Contoller Bludblom said, "The prevstrike was aborted in time."

"And the Controller now has complete evidence of Marshal Waterloo's duplicity. His various co-traitors are in detention." A malicious sparkle lit the Lord's small eyes. "Or dead."

"The girl, Jenny Sable," Dragonard said in a hoarse voice. "What about her?"

"Alive and repaired, it pleases us to say," the Lord told him.

Dragonard breathed deeply. Then: "Will she be charged?"

"Naturally not. When you are both recovered, you will be allowed to leave the summer palace secretly. We are anxious to minimize the news of the near-catastrophe. We wish none to know of it, except those who were a party to its revealing." Genmo paused. His tongue darted over his old lips. "Silence is the price of your freedom, Sectioner Dragonard. It is a price we shall enforce no matter how long you live or where you travel in II Galaxy."

"Paid," he said. "And gladly."

Now with his old, sere lips curling in an odd smile, Genmo seemed to find what he wanted among the folds of his robe. He pulled the chamois bag from a capacious pocket. Spindly fingers clasped around it, and he shook it. The bag rattled.

So small a thing, Dragonard thought. We came so far to get it—and it nearly caused so much ruin.

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Genmo seemed bemused by the rattling bag. Dragonard looked at the huge foam mitten at the end of his left arm.

A Regulator without a hand. He'd never serve on line again. There was no way for him to avoid a medical cashiering, either. The Regs were explicit.

Controller Bludblom spoke: "The Lord has been most anxious to make certain you understood the extent of the service you performed, Sectioner."

Genmo shook the chamois bag, *click-click, click-tick*. "True, quite true. You see, Sectioner, we have known for a full century that other Lords rankle at the control our House exercises on the supply of transportation equipment. Governing Engineer McIlhenny, whom the Marshal was so anxious to destroy, did not revolt and flee our House of his own accord. Ah, no. It was not his inspiration to set up the competitive system of manufacturies that now exists in the Free Territory. The rebellion of Engineer McIlhenny was carefully planned and executed by us. That is, ourself and Controller Bludblom. The dispute over conceptual patent rights was staged. The threats of retaliation were mummery." And while Controller Bludblom smiled; Lord Genmo added with an almost child-like sincerity, "You see, Sectioner, competition is quite an excellent thing when one arranges it to suit one's self."

Aghast, Dragonard said, "McIlhenny is your agent?"

"Not so," Genmo corrected. "He operates quite independently. And he was not averse to the idea of establishing a free market. We permitted and encouraged him so that our House would not be the sole possessor of transportation technology. Had it continued to be, we would eventually have been subject to attack by certain of the more intemperate Lords. As it is, we enjoy harmonious relationships on most every hand, while McIlhenny's existence placates those dissident elements who once thought us too powerful."

"Did the Marshal know all this?" Dragonard asked.

"Permit me to answer," said Bludblom. "He did not. I imagine, however, that even if he had known, he would still have contrived his prevstrike. His mind was going. He was beginning to see everyone and everything as enemy. In my case—"

Bludblom hesitated a moment. His smile grew bitter and thin.

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"—he was of course quite correct."

Lord Genmo wagged a finger under Dragonard's nose. "Secrecy, Sectioner! Secrecy till the end of your days."

"That probably won't be long. I'm done with the Regulators. They won't have a man who isn't whole."

"I am afraid that is true," Bludblom agreed.

Genmo's eyes watered as he blinked. "Oh? We hadn't realized. Ah, well—" He yawned without covering his mouth. Dragonard had an urge to laugh.

This bone-bag one of the mightiest of rulers? Still, something about the old man compelled him to keep his cynicism to himself.

Genmo, meantime, reached over and poked an untrimmed nail against the ring on the last finger of Dragonard's right hand. The old, brittle nail scraped across the gold setting, across the oval black stone with its images of the snarling lion, the rising phoenix. "You should be capable of working out a suitable future, young man. You come of a good house, as we learned while you slept. There have been Dragonards who have traded in far realms, and managed cities, and built respectable fortunes in various commercial enterprises."

"I'll find something," Dragonard said, but without much heart.

"We hope it is so. We bid you good day and swift recovery. Other matters press."

And, just like that, the Lord of the Exchange dropped the chamois bag, *plop*, back into his robe pocket. That was the last Wolf Dragonard ever saw of the fantastic fortune he'd stolen.

Stolen successfully. Dammit.

He'd come through the personal crisis. But what of it? He was less than a man. The foam mitten was an obscenity at the end of his arm.

Clucking to himself, Lord Genmo I departed. Controller Bludblom followed. The technicians in blue returned to test him with various pieces of equipment. Then they left too. Dragonard dozed, raised his head when he heard the hushing of the oval door.

Jenny was there, bending down.

He turned his head away.

"Look at me, Wolf."

He did, with reluctance.

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"I'm trying to get used to that first name of yours. We did it, didn't we? Took the Stars. Even if we did have to give them back."

"Why don't you get out of here?"

"That's a miserable attitude." She smiled. Her sea-foam eyes shone.

He held up the foam mitten in defiance.

"Oh, that." She patted the mitten. "In a way I'm happy about that. Do you suppose I could tag after a policeman the rest of my life? I was raised a thief."

Leaning down so that her hair fell on his cheeks and the sewn scar across his forehead, Jenny Sable kissed him. All at once Dragonard felt better. Maybe they would find their place one day, under some star they could safely take for their own.