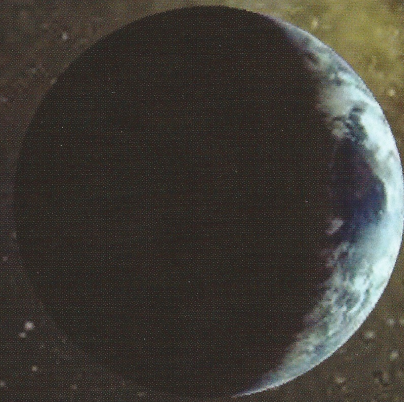


NO ONE
GOES
THERE
NOW



WILLIAM WALLING

No One Goes There Now

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Prologue

Throughout the bright hours of morning, the glossy warmth of midday and slow-paced afternoon, Polct the younger had persevered by practicing dutiful patience. Near sunset, however, boredom and a gnawing sense of uneasiness conspired to overcome hitherto unshakable faith in the elder's precognitive powers. The resolve not to be bothersome weakened into indecision. For a time inquisitiveness waged a silent battle with intellect. Inevitably, curiosity won.

Polct squelched all lingering doubt and dipped surreptitiously into the surface ripple of its companion's thought stream. Sorting the swirl of vivid color, the flashing images, it compared what was perceived with the elder's fleeting sensory impressions.

Swollen and round near the horizon, the system's blood-red primary etched frothy whorls of saffron and bronze in a bank of receding thunderheads. Clear, rust-colored light plying deftly through a lofty brake of trees on the rim of forest cast lengthening shadows across lush meadowland pocked here and there with hummocks of dark loam unearthed by timid burrowing creatures. Pendant foliage, wax green and dewy, returned a sea of glistening highlights. One flashing cameo evoked a thrill of pleasure: a grass blade bowed by a raindrop diamond.

Polct learned little from the intrusive venture, and disengaged with supposed finesse. Realizing the elder's true consciousness ranged the arching cerulean sky above that remained immaculate, rain-washed and empty, Polct reflected upon the unwisdom of having disturbed the elder. Determined yet uncomfortable after a lengthy period of introspection, it directed a tentative thought. *The afternoon wanes.*

The conversational overture was met with chill mental silence. *Darkness*, Polct dared to add, *will soon overtake all that lies before us.*

All too aware of the apprentice's youthful prying, Tanis the elder was reluctant to abandon the confluence of impending events it had been laboring to integrate. Raising a dark, pipe stem appendage toward the flaring sunset, it's imperious thoughts rang in Polct's consciousness. *Attune thy senses! Even a babe might form predictions about such fiercely living egos as these. You sense naught?*

My ineptness mortifies admitted the chastened apprentice.

The elder's elongated head turned slowly. It circumspectly regarded the neophyte with limpid elliptical eyes. *Guardianship is a solemn responsibility one learns to cherish. For an apprentice, the newness of such responsibility tends to inhibit effectiveness. Do you fail to sense the impending change now all but upon us?*

Change for good, O Tanis, or ill?

A meaningless query withal. We shall act as poorly endowed agents of the guardians during this coming encounter. Assessing abstractions like goodness and ill must forever remain forever within the purview of Higher Ones.

My ignorance is insurmountable.

As may be. The tenor of the elder's thoughts grew more amiable. *Be not overwrought, youngling. One judges your anxiety well predicated, though undigested and sorely misconstrued. The source of perturbation stems from without, not from within. Savor the tension, follow to its root. One cannot help but sense wildness, a drive.*

Perhaps this poor creature senses impending change subliminally. What shall be done?

Done . . ? Unpredictability is a universal attribute of all emergent species. Since cope we must, we shall cope with the selected newcomers to the limit of our ability. We shall guide their steps should they stoop to invite our humble guidance. Cloaked by the wisdom of Higher Ones, we shall exercise due diligence by devoting our energies to to the assigned task, and may well accomplish something of value. For the nonce, let us abide with folded hands and searching minds, jointly pursuing the matter as one.

Polct mulled the elder's sagacity as, twin sentinels erect in the gathering dusk, the pair searched the fading sky.

In deeper twilight their vigil was rewarded. A glistening pearl swept high across the heavens to vanish silent as dust behind a copse of towering trees. If either watcher noted the passage, no comment was forthcoming.

Time passed. Nocturnal voices began to speak in the gloaming — hushed chitterings, faint barks, the whirr of flying insects. The crisp air dimmed, gradually lost its opacity. Little by little in the gloaming, faint pinpricks in the dome of deep azure gave evidence of a few diamond glints able to penetrate the darkening, oxygen-rich atmosphere.

The intruder reappeared at the zenith, a snick of brilliance that rapidly swelled into a roaring, apocalyptic jet of fire. White noise inundated the meadow. Multiple exhaust cones touched, splashed on moist turf, sputtered and winked out. Thunderous reverberations chased one another in diminishing volleys around the meadow's arboreal perimeter. Forest and meadowland gradually trembled into hushed, unnatural stillness.

The afterglow dwindled along the horizon. Unfamiliar constellations looked down upon the ogive prow of a vessel dimly silhouetted against trees swaying in the night wind as if to withdraw from the uninvited presence.

Polct the younger's parting thought bristled with excitement. *They are come.*

They are come, echoed the elder. *Are you prepared, O Polct?*

Must we take our leave so soon?

Indeed. Make ready.

The watchers simultaneously disappeared.

Deep night engulfed the meadow and forest.

I

Ecce homo Triumphalis!

First inscribed upon the Medallion
of Imperium Terrestriana, 3794 CE

Shortly after sunup, a neohuman male wearing a matte black pressure-suit that bore the imperial crest warily emerged from the grounded pinnacle's hatch; it closed behind him. Toting a megajoule laser rifle at high port, Holt Morrow paused at the foot of the extended access ramp and scanned the meadow for movement, any type of movement. Birdsong impinged upon the external transducers of his cumbersome vacuum gear and amplified to ring faintly within his bubble headpiece. On the fringe of forest, wisps of downy, fern-like growth stirred here and there under a vagrant breath of morning breeze. He discerned no other movement.

A veteran explorer, Morrow's wealth of experience coupled with a deeply ingrained survival instinct, made him ultra-suspicious of the verdant stretch of grassland bordered by what to outward appearances was pastoral forestland. If anything, the meadow and forest looked *too* promising — a pastoral scene hinting that it contained nothing the least bit inimical. Having set foot on a radically differing spectrum of raw worlds during his century-long career, Morrow was preternaturally aware that the unknown was indeed suspect, and what might or might not lurk beneath the recently discovered planet's inviting veneer would remain suspect for some time. First and foremost was Morrow's certainty that the knowledge that concealed within the peaceful paradigm in which he had been awarded the privilege of being first to set foot, anything at all might lie in wait unseen, yet suspected.

Morrow stepped off the ramp, walked forward a few paces turning round and round, and paused again. His leathery cheeks patinaed with a traceries of broken venules, deep crow's-feet gathered at the corners of his narrowed eyes as he squinted into the bright sparkle of morning. After a second intense inspection of the immediate surroundings, he began to distance himself from the starcruiser's landing craft, moving forward cautiously, bearing himself erectly, athletically despite the encumbering pressure-suit. Vigilant, his reflexes at hair-trigger, he again turned round and round as he walked, churning metaled boots through the dewy meadowgrass of early morning.

Temporarily satisfied, pending further examination of the evidence, Morrow leaned the laser weapon butt-downward against his suit's bulbous, articulated knee and, rough-chiseled features split in a homely grin, waved a benediction to the alien surroundings. "Out, come out wherever you are!" he sang into the suit's throat microphone. "At first glance, this pretty lump of mud looks to be a patch of prime, A-number-one-real estate."

The pinnacle's main hatch rumbled open. A dozen armored shock troops spilled down the ramp and double-timed into the meadow, forming a loose, outward-facing arc to interdict the landing craft. Watching the deployment with a vaguely cynical expression, Morrow succumbed to a spur-of-the-moment impulse, unclipped the dogs of his pressure-suit's globular headpiece, and cracked the seal with apparent unconcern. Drawing a shallow, tentative breath, he savored the fresh tang of unregenerated air. He lifted off the fishbowl, set it on the turf and began shucking off the vacuum gear with wriggling ease that suggested much practice. Disregarding the trio of gesticulating explorers who approached, he sat down on the turf, stripped off heavy sweat socks and slid his bare feet through the dewy grass, with an expression of sybaritic pleasure.

Maran Roberts, the exploratory mission's nominal commander led the way clad in matte black vacuum gear identical to that Morrow had put aside — an unspoken declaration of verifiable aristocracy through six or seven generations of unmutated or lightly mutated neohuman

stock. The orbiting starcruiser's first officer, Ennis Ladeen, trailed Roberts towing via remote control a pair of null-grav aerial search drones. A jittery flight surgeon clad in gray-green vacuum gear brought up the rear.

The medic gesticulated and said something to Morrow lolling unprotected on the turf. When no response was forthcoming, the physician tried again, his mouth working indignantly. Holt could hear only the indistinct voice-buzz emanating from the fishbowl headpiece resting beside him on the grass.

Commander Roberts dropped a gauntlet to his utility belt and energized his suit's external speaker. "A touch hasty, weren't you, Holt?"

"Nothing too scary in this pretty lump of mud," assured Morrow.

"Hereafter," suggested Roberts with no hint of levity, "you will either do as the surgeon suggests, or chance a personal encounter with . . . the 'hereafter.' You claimed seniority, badgered me into foolishly awarding you the signal honor of being first off, and now act irresponsibly. Despite posing as a modern Methuselah with practically limitless experience, why so eager to forfeit the honor next time? Old hands do not behave like green youngsters; it sets an extremely dangerous example."

The accused grumbled about having been resurrected so many times that one more session could do no harm. A sharp look from Roberts silenced him.

His frown visible despite the reflective fishbowl partially obscuring his features, the flight surgeon's head wagged knowingly. He turned away in disgust, retreated toward the relative safety of the pinnace.

"This one certainly looks promising," endorsed Ennis Ladeen. Gazing across the expansive meadowland, he added, "Except for lacking a natural satellite, it could be a clone of Old Terra."

"Exemplary," declared Roberts. "One might even say idyllic, but perhaps only after a quick first glance. The orbital survey report raved about it, and recorded a most favorable summarization of the entire stellar system. Five also looks promising, though extensive atmosphere and ecosystems enhancement will be mandatory before reaching first stage viability. The other relatively close-in pair may require six or seven cycles of intensive terraforming, plus ancillary improvements. But there can be no doubt that Three, here, is the authentic gem. How shall we begin, Ennis?"

"Best, I think," replied Ladeen, "will be to send POLLY up for a quick look-see to log the landing site perimeter. Once the meadow and surrounding forested area prove secure, we might send GEG on an expanding search spiral out to, say, a hundred-klick radius."

"So ordered," approved Roberts. "Perhaps we'll also move the picket ring out another fifty meters or so, give ourselves a bit more elbow room."

"Aye, ser Roberts," said Ladeen, The second in command began issuing orders as he walked away.

Outwardly at peace with himself and the universe, Morrow lolled on the turf, chewing on a grassblade.

“What caused this wild urge to desuit?” Roberts casually inquired. “I’d hate to lose you over a senseless misstep like this, Holt; we’ve voyaged together too long. Why choose to suddenly exhibit such adolescent behavior?”

Morrow spat out the grassblade. Clambering to his feet, he scuffed a big toe through the meadow grass — a show of penitence that fell light-years short of deceiving Commander Roberts. “Nothing very hairy to fret about in this grassy green garden.”

“You chose a curious method to prove that thesis.”

“Aw, don’t be crotchety, Maran. S’pose I felt a sudden urge to, uh . . . Being cooped up aboard ship made me —”

“Holt,” declared the commander, cutting the other short, “we’ve seen a portion of the visited galaxy together. More than once we’ve stumbled across a ‘pretty lump’ like this, albeit none anywhere near as inviting. You more than anyone, should know that no two raw worlds are ever alike. In their pristine state, all share a universal presumption of danger in equal measure.”

“Guess I needed a breath of fresh air after being penned up for —”

“Most virgin planetary matrices,” pursued Roberts, not allowing Morrow restate his point, “turn out to be innocuous, and want no more than the touch of a friendly hand to achieve stage one viability. Then, if you will recall, after all our hard work we explorers receive a polite request to step aside so that the newfound global matrix can be scraped, weaned, watered and made fruitful by legions of ‘experts’ and political wonks in a rush to prepare for the multitudes soon to swarm in, breeding and fighting. Then shortly — far too shortly — the Planners insist that we industriously dig deeper into the galaxy and turn up yet more viable planetary matrices.”

Holt shrugged. Looking pensive, he said, “If a century-and-more of strife and struggle hasn’t bilged what few memory links’re left in my head, “the computer tabbed Arcania as the first major real estate deal our team sighed off on.”

“Your memory remains sound,” said Roberts, “even if your survival instinct does not. But how many, many ‘real-estate deals have we turned since Arcania.” Roberts reflected wistfully on the wildernesses and dreary vacuum where much of his long life had been spent. Then his chin lifted sharply inside the fishbowl. “No, you impulsive old pelican,” he accused, “you are not *not* going to change the subject.”

Holt refused to wilt under the other’s penetrating gaze. “This lump’s special, Maran.”

“Um, yes. Perhaps especially dangerous.”

“Uh-uh,” denied Holt. “This grassy green and golden garden’s floating way to hell and gone out here, a goodly number of parsecs from the noise and the crush. Hadn’t intended to mention it until you started riding me about dumping the p-suit. For some reason a spooky feeling came over me . . . What I mean is, when the pinnacle’s hatch slid open and I planted my boots outside on the ramp it was like I’d been here before, and just now come back again. In a way, I’m almost sorry the survey team found this lump.”

“Déjà vu.”

“Say again?”

“I also felt it — still feel it,” Roberts told him. “Chalk it up to a psychological mind game the subconscious never seems to tire of playing. An exotic ambience of some kind seems to per-

meate what little we've seen of your 'pretty lump.' For me, it was like stepping into an imaginary dreamworld, not just another altogether real raw planet overly ripe for settlement. It made me feel right at home, as if a matrix this ideal comes along only once in several lifetimes."

"Uh-huh. Good, bad or indifferent, a dose of deja-whatever-you-called-it socked me right in the gut."

Appraising the stir of activity commencing around them, the commander gently clapped Morrow's shoulder. "Come, time to do penance."

A chuckle. "For instance?" Holt bent and retrieved his fishbowl. Lugging the clumsy pressure-suit and laser rifle, he trailed Roberts to a slim gray console hovering millimeters above the turf, its null-grav field flattening the meadow grass in a neat rectangle.

"Exposing yourself to an alien environment automatically bars you from the pinnacle for whatever quarantine period the medics prescribe," said Roberts, "so you might as well make yourself useful." He touched an amber switch-plaque marked LOG, causing it to glow green and illuminate the word EXPEDLOG. "Ser Morrow," declared Roberts formally, "you are ordered to supervise the preliminary survey. All natural phenomena within a one-hundred-kilometer radius are to be observed and recorded, analysis to immediately follow. Constant audiovisual contact with the pinnacle is to be maintained at all times. . ."

The commander's orders continued as the anonymous system's primary climbed higher above the trees and the turf began to dry, assisted by the gentle morning breeze rustling unfamiliar leaves in the nearby copse of soaring trees.

* * *

Ten revolutions of the as yet unnamed raw planetary matrix — ten "periods" in imperial parlance — effected a slight yet significant change in the expansive meadow. Gleaming like anodized mushrooms against the darker backdrop of forest, a quadrate of prefabricated, interconnected metal domes now housed the interim command center. Kilometers distant, all three of the starcruiser's ground-to-orbit shuttles were grounded in the burnt area where the original landing had taken place, their ogive prows pointing accusatively at the lone patrol verticraft orbiting monotonously a thousand meters overhead.

Reveling in the opportunity to work in a beautiful, pristine new world, all overt activity took place elsewhere. Roving specialty teams systematically took the planet's pulse. Telerobotic airborne cartographic survey drones mapped the five major land masses and numerous islands. The interstellar cruiser shifted to a polar orbit and began cutting one orange slice of terrain after another as the planet rotated beneath it, while ultra-sophisticated remote sensing equipment recording photographic, infrared and electromagnetic surface detail, and scanned shallow by recording subsurface features via ground-penetrating radar backscatter. Botanists and biologists invaded the forests, the deserts, the high plains and the low plains. A plateau not far west of the landing site immediately attracted the interest of planetography specialists when radar surveillance detected unnaturally regular geometries on as well as beneath the surface. All of the varied data, once edited and compiled in the command center, was uploaded to the starship's master computer for eventual incorporation in the expedition's formal Stage One Report.

The explorers took full advantage of their leisure hours. They played as hard as they worked, rock-climbing in the high country, shooting rapids in the white water of a thundering

river. Others captured the planet's shimmering landscapes on holovision disc, much to the disgust of several amateur artists among them. Bouts of swordplay drew spectators to a natural grassy amphitheater within walking distance of the command center, where the expedition's untied, free-spirited women offering their favors as prizes. However, swordplay out on far perimeter of the imperium's periphery was fencing, not dueling per se. Conducted in the spirit of friendly competition, it lacked the rigid commandments incorporated within Code Duello, the Convention-set method of settling grievances so mandatory for so long within the ever-expanding sphere of neohuman civilization.

Most explorers felt themselves beyond the jurisdiction or influence of the untold trillions in whose name they combed the Gould Belt's nearer reaches. Explorers rarely if ever gave thought to the prevalent, exacting, inescapable tenets of Convention, although not because they believed there was anything wrong with upholding one's honor and dignity in that manner. Even so, formal duels were practically unknown within the close-knit brotherhood of men and women who willingly spend their lives dedicated to searching for viable worlds hundreds of parsecs from Old Terra. Accustomed to living and working in the presence of elemental outworld dangers, explorers felt absolutely need for artificial stimulation, an attitude largely unspoken due to the semi-religious nature of Convention. Most professional explorers ignored the synthetic intrigues and posturings Code Duello imposed, yet but refrained from mentioning the controversial subject Convention because privately many believed it smacked of sham, a reflexive deceit conveniently palmed off on the masses as their own idea, and continuously encouraged by the Planners as a method of instilling a sense of honor, and perhaps a will-o-the-wisp once known as chivalry, in the vast cross-section of neohuman society. Figurative as well as literally outsiders in that sense, many explorers believed the Planners, forever proactively fostering Convention in its most sanguine guise, Code Duello, considered the unwritten code a minor aid in controlling runaway overpopulation, a foundation established to the concept of "honor" that might, just might instill a semblance of aristocratic noblesse into trillions of otherwise drab pedestrian lives.

* * *

At hour fifteen, Commander Roberts sat back and massaged his neck muscles. After hours spent before the communications tanks, he was preparing to turn things over to his second in command, Ennis Ladeen, in favor of a shower, and perhaps a stroll in the forest to unwind.

Holt Morrow hailed him before he could get away. "Got a minute, Maran? Fella here says it's urgent."

Roberts craned to look over Morrow's shoulder. The image of a stocky, broad-shouldered explorer filled the holovision tank. He nodded to Holt, tiredly stepped across the aisle. "Commander Roberts. What can we do for you?"

The caller drew himself to attention. "Gailen van Maar, ser Roberts, Xeno Team Four."

"Proceed, van Maar. We are recording."

"Ser Roberts, not long after the landing our team analyzed the area bounded by . . ." Van Maar paused to read coordinates from his notes. "Ground-penetrating radar data obtained in the region indicated unusually regular subsurface features in a low, flat-topped tell semi-isolated among distinctively rolling hills. The master computer analyzed the mesa and evaluated it as more than simple anticline, but here on the ground it looked like . . . Well, our team decided it

did not seem to be an entirely natural phenomenon compatible with the surrounding terrain. I requested more data during an orbital passe — specifically hi-res images and radar data on the area in question. After viewing the magnified data, I decided the mesa was definitely incompatible with local topography, and —”

“Enough,” said Roberts, killing the recorder.

“When,” groused Morrow, who had watched, listened, “did they stop teaching kids two-syllable words?”

“Dictate your report later, ser van Maar,” suggested Roberts. “Exactly what have you determined?”

“It *has* to be what little evidence remains that a *city* once stood here, ser Roberts. Extremely ancient, and only marginally recognizable as such, but a city.” The xenologist’s enthusiasm caused muttered comments to travel about the command center among explorers who had gathered to listen in.

“Evidence of prior habitation,” said Roberts, “cannot help but excite the imagination. You and your team are to be complimented. Anything definitive to report thus far?”

“As yet, not much has been established,” declared van Maar. “Preliminary radiographic surveys indicate what may have once been walls, foundations, the shells of large buildings, et cetera, are there. Implements too, or what might once have been implements. Everything discovered found to date is on holodisc, of course. Now our primary tasks will involve segregating and classifying site identities and locations before commencing a dig that —”

“Excellent!” interrupted Roberts a second time. While van Maar had been speaking, he had ordered Morrow to look up the caller’s background. Hurriedly reading the data, he became aware that Planet Dan, the new world’s just designated as such by random computer selection, was part of only the second entry in the xenologist’s Expeditions Register, a fact that partially accounted for young ser Maar’s excitement. He asked with dry inflection if they too might have a look at the site.

In the holographic tank, the xenoarchaeology specialist’s image looked startled. “Forgive me. Of course, ser Roberts. One second, please.” His image snuffed out, to be replaced by a panorama of low hills covered with what looked like scrub brush. A broad, semi-flat tableland humped above the surrounding hill crests. At first Roberts found it difficult to share the other’s excitement. Then he blinked, enhancing the image’s stereoperspective quality. What at first had seemed low scrub brush was actually a grove of medium-sized trees. He scaled the find by comparing it to a pair of grounded verticraft parked atop the huge mesa.

“Interesting,” he said. “Call down from the cruiser any additional equipment or services you may need, ser van Maar. If the preliminary data can be factored into the report within the next five or six periods, fine. If not, your discovery will have to become a Stage Two find.”

“Just before calling in,” said van Maar hurriedly, “I sent a shopping list up to the cruiser, ser Roberts. This is, uh . . . What I mean to say is . . .” The scientist hesitated. “I confess to still being something of a neophyte, ser Roberts. This is only my second voyage, and I wondered if I would, er . . .”

“And you wondering if you would be credited with the discovery,” said the commander. “Of course you will,” he assured the other. “Congratulations are in order, ser van Maar. I will leave this channel open for your formal preliminary report.”

“Thank you, ser Roberts.” Van Maar’s holovision image dissolved, and was again replaced by a view of the plateau.

“So we’ve got company?” observed Holt Morrow.

“Or did sometime in the distant past. No point raising a false hope.”

“My only hope,” said Holt, “is that the natives are friendly.”

* * *

Tanis the elder came back into rapport with his youthful apprentice. *One senses a growing suspicion of an intelligent presence. A nexus is at hand, O Polct. Are you prepared?*

Well prepared, yet apprehensive.

At this early juncture, no reason for apprehension exists. The pristine encounter will be simple and uncomplicated. One of the newcomers comes this way, possibly a being who deals with varieties of fauna. Make your presence known to it, but nothing more. Understood?

Verily, O Tanis.

Make no attempt to communicate with the newcomer.

Not even a tentative attempt to align myself with the seat of its being?

By all means attune with its psyche if it proves a simple procedure. Should the task prove easy of accomplishment, by all means learn its frequency and range. Should it attempt to communicate directly, however, only audibles are to be employed. Is that clear?

Comprehension sits with me, O Tanis.

Very well. Position yourself here . . . Within Polct’s mind spread a crystalline image—a forest glade bounded by lofty trees trailing moss in sunlight filtering through the forest canopy. *The creature in question approaches from the direction of the watercourse.*

Would it not be wise for me to transit now, O Tanis?

Go, was the elder’s wry command.

Polct vanished.

* * *

A member of the bioxenology team, the explorer liked to work alone in violation of a long-standing rule expressly forbade investigation in other than pairs during the preliminary research phase of a new global matrix. The seasoned xenologist spotted the mothlike flitter again where he least expected it to be, behind him.

Back where he had grounded his verticraft on the bank of a clear-running stream, he had been able to approach within mere meters of the pastel creature, almost near enough to net it. But what appeared to be a large, pastel-winged insect flew like a ray of light, flicking and fluttering in erratic jogs against a background of shrubs so riotously overgrown with vivid crimson and pale lemon-colored flowers that it seemed to jerk whenever he shifted his gaze.

Spotting his quarry as it alighted in a clump of ferns, moved forward, making haste slowly, moving cautiously one slow step at a time. The forest canopy closed in overhead and he entered a darkling tunnel of greenery. Fearful of startling the creature into flight, he slowly unfurled

the net and stalked the moth. Lips pursed, head bent in concentration, he rounded a bank of ferns . . .

And froze.

Something entirely alien was studying him from a spot no more than ten paces away.

With a stifled gasp, he almost dropped the long-handled net, trying in that first, petrified instant to lend neohuman form to the thing. He groped for his sidearm, and then hesitated when the alien figure remained motionless. Training and experience were manifested in the manner in which he shifted mental gears and grasped physical details.

It was *something* vaguely anthropomorphic, a full half-meter taller than he himself in stature, with ebon, reed-slender limbs that looked boneless, rubbery in texture. A chitinous “shield” covered what he automatically thought of as the thorax. Curling upper appendages also gave an impression of bonelessness, hanging limply as they did from either slender, odd-looking shoulder. The size and shape of the ovoid head suggested a brain case larger than neohuman. Its dark, elliptical eyes glistened with intrinsic intelligence in the shadowy dell.

Impulsively raising a hand in greeting, the echo of the scientist’s inane “Hello” mocked him whispering back through the green corridor.

Neohuman and alien faced one another for a seconds-long eternity that must have lasted all of another five seconds, each weighing the other’s possibilities and limitations. Then with ponderous dignity an alien appendage lifted in macabre imitation of the man’s salute. A pleasant, sonorous sequence of hummed musical notes emanated from beneath the bulging, alien eyes.

The scientist gasped and whirled, sprinting toward the communicator should have had with him, but had thoughtlessly abandoned in the verticraft.

Supremely dejected, Polct the younger observed the hasty departure and wondered in what manner it had given offense.

* * *

Eight subjective periods later, as reckoned by the starcruiser’s atomic chronometer, Commander Roberts was seated before a console in the communications compartment abaft the gigantic vessel’s bridge. “No, Holt,” he said, continuing their ongoing discussion, “it didn’t strike me in any way as antagonism, merely a matter of celestial disinterest.”

Morrow frowned. “You telling me the locals don’t give a damn what we do with their world?”

“That was the inference. Aram Singh believes the Danii belong to an ethnic strain much older than the originally estimation, perhaps a culture even more mature than any other intelligences thus far encountered. The negative factor is that they appear to appear be few in number. The Danus I last attempted to converse with impressed me greatly. An air of age-old patience and tolerance was reflected in every semi-decipherable hummed phrase it uttered. Norman and I made several iterations in order to pose our questions succinctly. We asked if it would be acceptable for us to re-engineer the arid regions and reconcile certain other regions for future neohuman settlement. Near as Norman’s transliteration software was able to accurately judge, the elder simply announced its kind too few to have any interest in ‘remaking’ the wastelands.”

“Remaking? You mean the skinny hummers could once change their *environment*?”

Roberts lifted both hands, palms upward. “Who can say? When you have a moment, read van Maar’s updated report of the excavation. What may once have been a fission reactor, or something very much like one, was unearthed period before last. The Danii apparently had nuclear energy, conceivably even fusion technology.” A thoughtful pause. “Another reference puzzles me no end. It was as if the Danus styling itself an elder had avoided a particular subject during the interview, and then just before it disappeared before our eyes gave the recorder a speech that transliterated something, uh, ‘You seem a superior species. Higher Ones should not object to your contemplated actions.’ Norman and his team are reviewing the semantics of our conversation, emphasis on that choice concluding tidbit.”

Holt chewed over the commander’s words of wisdom. “Spooks who come and go like a mirage,” he said slowly. “That I do not like even a little bit, Maran. Any notion who the hell are these ‘Higher Ones’ they keep prattling about?”

A cryptic half-smile. “Neither who, what, where nor why they are. Our evaluation of the Danii has been modified a half-dozen times in as many periods, always upward of course, and always in fairly large increments. Their collective intellect has to be of an extremely high order, although in typically alien fashion their thought processes seem to be out of phase with our own. The planet is also extremely ancient. Epeirogeny estimates its formation took place many gigacycles before Old Terra.”

“Really? I’ll be flayed! Sounds like we’d best tread lightly around the skinny hummers, else find out what they’re all about too late in the game.”

“That does seem wise. Any number of other puzzling discontinuities have also come to light. Hydrology reports the streams and rivers running overly full in ratio to the measured snowpacks in certain higher elevations, while seawater is oddly deficient in salinity when planetwide minerology-erosion patterns are taken into account, and so forth, and so on. Not to mention the prize puzzle of all currently bothering demography experts plenty, and giving our plane-tography people fits.”

“Their hideouts?” guessed Morrow.

A brusque agreeing nod. “Where are the Danite habitations? After comprehensively scouring every square kilometer of either hemisphere, specialists have pored over the data time after time and ended up not only running on empty, but doubting the accuracy of the recorded data. They’ve gone back over every iota of observables a second, third, fourth time. Not one dam, roadway, bridge or building — not so much as a *hut* — is in evidence. Nor according to ground-penetrating radar or radiographic survey data, do any caves or other than normal underground cavities exist.”

Looking askance at his colleague, Holt muttered, “Y’don’t say.”

“To all outward appearance,” added Roberts, “with a single exception — the ancient city’s ruins unearthed by van Maar’s team — Planet Dan is a lovely, primeval wilderness. Yet beings with at absolute minimum neohuman intelligence come before us in their own mysterious fashion, converse in what can only be construed as friendly fashion, and then vanish like shadows.”

“So let a few of our laddies follow one of the hummers,” suggested Holt. “See what he, she or it does, where he, she or it goes.”

“It’s been tried several times,” explained Roberts. “The pair Norman and I interviewed period before last walked behind the bole of a huge tree and failed to reappear on the other side. Nine witnesses, including myself included, saw the event, or rather the lack of an event. Then yestermorn Carstairs and one of his aides tried from the air, and lost the targets when a pair of Danii became obscured by foliage. Carstairs cast the verticraft bout for minutes, failed relocate the Danii and landed in frustration. The line of four-toed footprints in the soft ground stopped abruptly there behind the tree.”

Holt uttered an appreciative whistle. “Got to say it’s a brand new wrinkle in transportation. Any ideas?”

“One, yes. But it hardly seems worth mentioning,” admitted Roberts. “After we came back aboard the cruiser I spoke to a knowledgable staff scientist. Teleportation has been discussed for centuries, and yet . . . It would be simplistice to say I didn’t get a sympathetic hearing when I broached the subject, but . . .” A laconic shrug from Roberts. “I’ve attached the paranormal inference as an appendix. The Planners will incorporate it in the whole, should they stoop to believe a word of it.”

“Fat chance! That collection of creaky fossils might have trouble swallowing a far-out notion like teleportation. It’s a sour system, Maran, when we’re forced to depend on the think-power of that overripe collection of windbags. Planners, my derriere! Why, my Aunt Nell could do a better job of —”

“It’s almost time,” reminded Roberts, interrupting what he knew could easily turn into a lengthy tirade.

Holt consulted the digital chronometer, a readout of the starcruiser’s subjective timing system. “Less ‘n two minutes to h-hour, d-day,” he said.

“I almost forgot to ask,” said Roberts, “who won the election.”

Morrow grinned. “Your very own Number Two, good old up-‘n-at-‘em Ennis Ladeen. It wasn’t even close.”

“I’m gratified. It always makes me uneasy to turn things over to an interim director. In this case, it pleases me to leave Ennis in charge even if leaving Dan will be painfully difficult.”

Morrow was noncommittal.

“Did I mention,” asked Roberts, “that nine senior staffers have exercised aristocratic prerogative and opted for permanent reassignment?”

“That so?”

“Aren’t you surprised, Holt? You know as well as me how explorers detest raw colonials. Don’t you find that many requests more than a tad unusual?”

“Uh-huh, I suppose so. But this’s an unusual matrix . . . Sorry, Dan is an unusual worle.”

“A true statement,” said Maran. “What is even more surprising to me in another way, is that on my desk are over one hundred petitions from among the junior explorers, plebes and crewmen.”

“Kind of . . . unexpected.”

Roberts chuckled. “Stop waffling, you sly, devious relic! I too mean to stay on here.”

Morrow's sheepish expression spoke volumes. "Mind you, I'll be hanging around only long enough to see what brand of jackass the Planners appoint director of this pretty lump. Then I'll be moving on."

"You may rest your mind on that score, Hole."

"How can you say that?"

"I almost never ask favors of the Star Council," Roberts told him, "and when I do my request is often granted rather than denied. Despite what you may personally think of The Planners, they delegate unlimited authority to whomsoever they appointed as their surrogate — can they do otherwise across parsecs of deep space? Directing an unintegrated frontier planet demands a subtle brand of delicate firmness, a characteristic far from common."

"For any number of cycles I have firmly believed," continued the commander, more or less thinking aloud, "that our swollen, far-flung interstellar society demands too much of such an appointee. At first he or she accepts the assignment feeling duty-bound to walk with purpose and agility a tightrope the Planners stretch between the pillars of authority and responsibility. But sooner or later, that selfsame tightrope invariably develops the discomfiting habit of going slack when least expected. After he or she has performed herculean labors to create a stable, viable social matrix out of raw chaos, the shackles of responsibility begin to tighten inexorably, gradually diminishing the journeyman director's authority. Performing the direction office of an early stage social matrix is a thankless duty. Given a free choice, Holt, whom would you select to govern Dan?"

A laconic shrug. "Ask me not. I haven't been anywhere near Sol for sixty, seventy standard cycles. Can't think of anyone offhand, except maybe . . ."

"Yes, except . . .?"

"Well, there's a long-time acquaintance who, last I heard, was co-Director of Luna. Maran, you yourself once had dealings with Pierce Grey. Altogether a sterling gente in my humble opinion, he whelped a spoiled brat who believed himself handy with a sword and turned gladiator . . ." Morrow broke off staring fixedly at his old friend. "Roberts, you scheming, conniving nabob!"

Silent amusement bubbled from depths of the commander's personality. "I definitely did know Pierce Grey well. I've kept his name lodged in the back of my mind for half a century on a presumption that sooner or later we would turn up a wonderland planet like Dan. Pierce was my first and immediate choice." About to continue, the commander glanced at the chronometer's digital readout and turned to the console. "Control," he requested.

The starcruiser's master computer made no verbal response, but a sequence of indicators glowed green as circuits closed and small fraction output of titanic nuclear fusion terawattage made available to the hyperspace transmitter. Glow panels illuminating the ship's communications compartment brightened, faded slightly in intensity at a brief power surge, and then brightened again.

"Control local," advised the computer audio woodenly.

Roberts acknowledged by covering an amber switch plaque that promptly cycled to green and the words INPUT ACCEPT appeared. Keying the report's alphanumeric file identity, he

studied the chronometer's blinking digital readout. When the numerals winked to indicate the even hour, he pulled down and locked in place a luminescent red lever.

To the accompaniment of a subdued, barely audible organpoint of sound, the exploratory mission's digitized Stage One Report was rammed page by page through the measureless, multi-dimensional gulf separating Old Terra from the quietly floating mote now designated Dan.

II

*The young are prodigal of life
from a super-abundance of it;
the old are tenacious on the same
score, because they have little left,
and cannot enjoy what remains of it.*

William Hazlitt, antebellum

British essayist, circa 1800 CE

One subjective week later, and more than two hundred parsecs from the recently discovered outworld about which he had no knowledge whatsoever, ser Elan Grey stepped from the showermassage. Bouyant in spirit after having out-pointed ser Claude Graham in a lively bout at the Palace of Swords, he turned round and round before an exhilarating blast of warm, drying air. Graham, he realized only too well, was definitely not the most accomplished smallswordsman he had ever faced, a fact that, added to the resentment he felt at being forced to pull from his scabbard the insipid, guarded épée foisted on him by Convention, had dulled his reverie during the showermassage of reliving the bout. The miserable épée had handled like a willow wand compared to his beloved Solingen rapier. Yet all things considered, it had been a creditable performance. After dressing, he meant to return to the arena and reap kudos.

Offered soft linen by the autovalet, he made his toilet with liesurely grace, selected a fresh set of aristocratic Blacks from the wardrobe and carried the garments into the suite's riparian chamber. After dialing a rum concoction, he verbally commanded the holovision tank to energize. Tambour doors hand-crafted of rare, lustrous cherrywood from Terra's extinct forest opened; the integral wall unit came to life and illuminated.

Elan scarcely a minimum of attention to the blathering commentator while pulling on the matte black tights, shrugging into the chest-tight doublet and carefully winding a scarlet cummerbund around his waist, which he deftly tied so that the ends draped with uneven precision about his left thigh.

Outdoors, the afternoon smog seemed lighter than usual for some reason. Beyond the floor-to-ceiling glasswall, a breeze ruffled ficus leaves in the terrace garden's hazy sunlight. From his two-hundredth floor vantage, he could barely make out the glossy sheen of the distant Pacific.

He adjusted the cummerbund, then set the scabbard just off his left hip and popped on power, giving the slim scabbard an experimental flip with his forefinger. He watched it bob to

rest, stepped to the arms case in an alcove near the loggia and took down the beautifully wrought Solingen rapier that was his pride and joy. Hefting the weapon fondly, he resheathed it with a flourish, finished the drink and checked his appearance in the full-length mirror. His lean features, mildly flushed from exercise and the showermassage, perfectly complemented the funereal, impeccably tailored Blacks form-fitted to him as if the mannequin had been his body itself, which in a sense was true. Centimeters from his hip, the scabbarded rapier bobbed at the just the proper jaunty angle.

Entirely satisfied with his self-image, he threw an ebon, crimson-lined cape over his shoulders, secured it to the shoulder catches, and made his way into the loggia. Exiting the suite's riparian chamber caused the holovision tank, the waterfall flowing down an entire inner wall, and the light sensors to sense the sudden absence of a warm body and switch off. Just before it fell silent, however, he thought he heard his name spoken.

Elan hesitated at the portal. Had it been his name? He strode back briskly, verbally ordering the holotank to re-energize.

"—appointment came as a surprise in both Luna and the homeworld." The speaker, an attractive young woman whose features were an exotic meld of Sinitic and Caucasian ancestry, went on to say, "The newly appointed planetary director was unavailable for comment, but a Star Council spokesperson described ser Grey's ascension attributable in part to the personal sponsorship of none other than ser Weldon Lovelock himself . . ."

Ah, so that was it! The announcement concerned his pater, Pierce Grey, who had apparently achieved a high niche for himself. As a surrogate Planner of the Star Council, Pierce had been appointed the director of what had to be some dreary outworld. He evaluated the development with decidedly mixed feelings. His biological pater had always treated him decently, and in fact with an excess of decency, should such an indictment be credible. As his legal pater familias, Pierce in his stodgy, old-fashioned way had convinced himself that one's responsibility toward one's offspring extended far beyond what most sophisticates considered natural or normal. Yet learning of his ascension to directorship had somehow managed to generate a twinge of envy. Sinking into a lounge, Elan listened with less than half an ear to the subsequent news item.

In truth, he had considered Pierce a major bother and nuisance during his own formative cycles. Oversolicitous, forever ready to pry into his son's private affairs, his pater had been quick to offer counsel, requested or not. Yet on the other hand he had never shirked when it came to help his admittedly errant offspring dodge on adolescent scrape or another, nor could he himself successfully avoid his appreciation during such instances. Yet all things considered, the infrequent embarrassment brought on by Pierce's insistence upon playing "father" made him rather glad Pierce would be leaving the Earth-Moon System quite probably forever.

He tried with little success to imagine what going out into the galaxy would be like for Leighton, his younger sibling. He had never really taken the time to get to know the boy well, and now it would be too late. *Oh, well; a shame*, he thought. Perhaps a farewell call to the Directorial Seat in Luna would be order, and then again . . .

The vidicom's soft chime interrupted his thoughts. At a pair of voice commands, the holotank de-energized and the vidicom terminal illuminated. The image of a swarthy young man with bright blue eyes condensed in the smaller tank.

“There you are, Elan. We’ve been wondering what became of you.”

“I was halfway out the door when you rang, Camon.”

“Hurry on over. Elyse is here, and a ravishing golden goddess happens to be visiting the arena. Miss seeing her, and you’ll sulk for ages.”

“I’ll start sulking now.”

A chuckle. “Sulk hard! Your bout was splendid by the way. And, oh yes; we were delighted to learn of your pater’s good fortune.”

“I suppose by now it’s common knowledge.”

“Oh, quite. Everyone’s talking about his appointment. We’ll toast him and his important new posting if you promise to hustle on over. But you weren’t thinking of running off to Luna, were you? Elyse’s party is next week, remember?”

“Don’t be obtuse, Camon. Tell Elyse I wouldn’t dream of missing her soirée.”

“Come tell her yourself. The wine is chilled, the evening’s young.”

“Ten minutes,” said Elan, and switched off. Seizing his cape, he made ready to leave the suite.

* * *

He didn’t get far. Once again hesitating in the loggia, he was taken by a fit of indecision, and glanced back at the silent vidicom tank, now concealed by a sliding tambour panel. How tiresome it would be not to see Pierce and young Leighton off to the outworlds without at least saying farewell. A dereliction of that broad stripe would be gauche and unseemly, a breach of etiquette he knew would come back to haunt him. Stepping back into the riparian chamber, he whipped the cape from his lean but respectable breadth of shoulder, draped it over a lounge and seated himself before the vidicom tank. Punching the code of the director’s habitat in sublunar Sinus Iridum, he surprised himself by remembering the private code cycles after his last call.

The tank brightened to a pearly, even texture and usual seconds-long lunar transmission lag ensued, but no image condensed — modern high-technology would never be able to reduce the amount of time required for a lasercomm signal to contact Luna. A mellifluous, uninflected computer voice invited him to have a pleasant evening. “Sincere apologies, gentle ser. Director Grey is not available to take your call at the moment. You may record a message if you wish, or request Lunar Vidicenter if your call is important, or an emergency is involved.”

“Vidicenter,” Elan said curtly, irked at being forced to deal with an electronic buffer.

The ensuing lag further annoyed him. The holotank’s featureless melange suddenly gave way to the image of a brownette woman who was no longer young, but comely in a matronly sort of way. “May I ask the nature of the emergency, ser?”

“There is no emergency, sera. I would appreciate an open channel to Director Grey’s private chambers in the Bay of Rainbows. Some sort of bothersome guard circuit seems to be invoked.”

“Gentle ser, the director has left instructions that he is not to be disturbed.”

Elan pondered his response. The banal notion of announcing his relationship to Pierce offended his sensibilities, yet if it was the only way . . . “Sera, I have the honor of being a family

member. I must speak with Director Grey on a matter of some urgency before he leaves for the outworlds.”

“I . . . see.” The woman looked troubled. “His recorded instruction was specific. Can you positively identify yourself, gentle ser?”

Elan dug in the pouch concealed by his cummerbund and withdrew his Congressional Medallion — a palmable platinum disc inscribed with his full name, the ubiquitous maxim of Imperium Terrestriana, and the name of the Star Council Planner or other high official who sponsored the bearer. One of Elan’s principal conceits was the fact that he had been sponsored by none other than the Director of Terra himself, ser Weldon Lovelock.

He saw the woman’s image flinch slightly upon learning ser Weldon’s identity. Dipping her head in subconscious deference, she said, “Please forgive the delay, ser Grey. I’ll put you through at once.”

“Many thanks, sera.” After another interval pattered with wavering splotches of color, the image of young Leighton Grey jelled in the tank. The boy’s eyes lit with surprise. “Elan!” he exclaimed, then turned away and called, “Pierce, it’s *Elan*.”

“How are you been getting along, young pup?” Elan grinned. “By the sacred precepts of Convention! You’ve grown like a weed. Nearly time to fit you out with a sword and scabbard, eh?”

After the lag, Leighton’s image returned the grin with compound interest. “Great to see, uh . . . I mean to hear from you,” he faltered. “How about you, Elan? Had any tough bouts lately? How many kills are registered to you now?”

The transmission lag gave Elan time to concoct a response. “Whoa, Leighton,” he said. “Slow down. You’re the one who should be telling tales, not me. I hear you’ll soon be going for a very long long ride.”

“To Dan,” said the boy with a touch of smugness. “Very glad you called, Elan. We’re leaving in only a few hours. Dan is over two hundred and forty parsecs from Terra.”

Elan reacted to the pronouncement with a bemused nod. “So that’s what your new home is called, Dan. Let me tender a kernal of advice, Leighton. You mustn’t think of the transit in terms of parsecs; it makes deep space distances sound grossly exaggerated. Think of the cruise in terms of time. A few months aboard ship will whistle by faster than you can say Dan. Not many centuries ago, it took longer just to reach Mars.”

“But out of sight,” intoned newly appointed Director Grey, “out of mind.” Entering the vidicom scanner’s field of view, he chose a seat beside his younger son. Although his patrician features were placid, outwardly self-controlled, his dark hair was more brushed with silver than Elan remembered. “And being farther out of sight,” added Pierce, “we shall no doubt slip even further from your thoughts. How have you been?”

“Quite well, thank you.” Sensing the inevitable note of mild reproach in the way his pater had asked after his wellbeing, Elan wondered why it had been, and forever would be, so difficult for them to hold a simple conversation. “I called to congratulate you on your appointment, Pierce. I realize . . . That is, I know how much it must mean to you.”

“A major upward step,” admitted the elder Grey after the lag. “When you have a moment to spare, look up the data on this newly established matrix on you own. You will soon begin to

appreciate my good fortune. Judging from the transmitted graphics and corollary data Maran Roberts sent along, the planet is not only earthlike and lovely, but totally promising. I'm anxious to get out there and come to grips with my new responsibilities."

"Why don't you come along with us, Elan?" asked young Leighton eagerly.

A nervous smile. "I'm sure that would be enjoyable, Leighton. But getting away just now would be, well, rather . . . awkward."

"It's only a few months aboard ship," declared the boy, throwing Elan's words back in his face. "You told me that yourself a minute ago."

The transmission lag stretched emptily, an embarrassing hiatus making matters complicated. *How silly!* thought Elan, and wished he hadn't bothered to make the call. Why could he never, ever seem to find an easy topic of conversation with his pater *or* sibling.

"I assume," said Pierce at length, "you're still acting as ser Weldon's attaché at large."

For some reason the reference to Director Lovelock put Elan off balance. "Er, yes. Er, more or less. Ser Weldon requires practically nothing of me — meaningless errand boy tasks, mostly, make-work nonessentials, busy-work of that sort."

Pierce's negative headshake was adamant. "It may seem like trifling work, but you must surely realize that how you accomplish such 'meaningless errands' could form a critical doorway to your future. You're gaining a form of exposure to the inner workings of government, and that is something of which only a dullard would fail to take advantage. What I mean is . . ." Pierce broke off, looking as if he wanted to bite his tongue.

"What is it? What's wrong?" asked Leighton after the maddening transmission lag.

"Nothing," said Elan, resentment over the implication of being a dullard making him thick-tongued. "I really should ring off now, Pierce. You two are probably very busy, getting ready to depart."

"Indulge me a bit longer if you will," insisted Pierce in a monotone. "This will have to be our last chat for quite some time, perhaps forever. I realize how distasteful it is for you to discuss personal matters, but this one last time allow me to speak my mind and not mince words. I make no pretense of being happy with the lifestyle you have chosen for yourself, Elan. More, it saddens me deeply to learn you are still bent upon wasting your essence in the arena. You're far too intelligent and too well-bred, to dissipate your talents dueling and carousing."

"Pierce," responded Elan grimly, "I didn't call to start another argument. How many times have we had exactly this same conversation? My life is my own. I thought by now you might begin to understand how I feel about that."

"Oh," assured his pater, "it could well be largely my fault, so I fully understand. Centuries ago, The Planners fostered the image of casual independence and armed dignity, and in so doing gave life to a popular everyman culture hero, the duelist. I was remiss in allowing you to become intoxicated at an early age with the glamour and excitement found in all arenas, wherever they might be, and especially guilty in letting you become infected with the challenge of besting the best. In retrospect, I'm certain you fell victim to the enchantment of Code Duello, actually a more or less natural consequence for any well-bred, superbly conditioned young athlete, be he aristocrat or plebe.

"But deep within you," continued Pierce, "must reside the knowledge that it is the height of unwisdom to carry that virulent infection into maturity and forever pay service to it instead of allowing the native intelligence with which you are so richly endowed to remind you that there can only be an empty end to the lifestyle you are perpetuating. I urge you to keep one simple, straightforward item of your present existence firmly in mind: each time you accept provocation, or offer challenge, you literally place two lives in the scales. You will eventually meet your equal, or potentially your superior. When you do, resurrection will be entirely up to the whim of contest's victor. Why do you refuse to admit that to be an obvious truism? It would cause me unbelievable pain if all you promise were to be squandered on the arena's bloody cork."

"I really must ring off now, Pierce." In the act of saying goodbye, Elan hesitated when Pierce began speaking more rapidly.

"Listen to me," pleaded the director. "You, my eldest my son, stand at the apex of a bloodline second to none in the entire imperium. Congressional immunity endowed by Convention was your birthright; it frees you from any and all need to further prove yourself, for you can no longer be considered an impressionable youngster. Yet you revel in Code Duello, persist in seeking combat strife and struggle like some professional gladiator."

Elan suppressed a groan. "Pierce, can we say our farewells and go our separate ways in peace?"

"But, it's so . . . so frustrating," declared his pater. "You've proven yourself, your virile manhood, hundreds of times over. What's to be gained by pressing your luck beyond a reasonable limit?"

"I really must go now," declared Elan. "I wish you the absolute best in your new venture, Pierce."

"Wait, wait," cried the elder Grey. "Do yourself one last favor. Do it for me, Elan, and for Leighton. Spend more time and effort on the execution of your official duties. Serving as one of ser Weldon's attachés may seem a meaningless honorary post, but if you were to exhibit a smatch of diligence, were to demonstrate at least a vestige of genuine interest in the 'meaningless' duties assigned by the director's office, there is no telling how far, or in what direction, such diligence might eventually take you. You could become a Congressman, a Star Council Planner, a planetary director. You could become one of the ten thousand most important individuals in the imperial government."

"I wish you a pleasant journey, Pierce, "and nothing less than great success in your new role as planetary director."

A weary shrug. "Our best wishes will be with you always, Elan. Try and find time to think of us now and again. Goodbye."

Elan spent a minute saying farewell to his young sibling before despondently breaking the connection. He sat before the vidicom tank for a time staring dumbly into the blank holotank, and then rose slowly, collected the somber cape and swept it around his shoulders in a swirl of crimson lining. His friends would be waiting for him in the Palace of Swords.

Dawdling through the loggia, he halted again at the portal. His mood had changed. No longer ebullient, he somehow doubted whether he could bring himself to enjoy the evening ahead.

* * *

“Dan . . .” Ser Weldon Lovelock uttered the name with weary intonation. “What have we here?” The director’s “waste not, want not” attitude drove him to utilize odd moments in a crowded schedule to peruse the most important communiqués among thousands screened each period by his executive assistant.

“A newly established planetary matrix, ser Weldon.” The cyborg, once an illegally born neohuman infant whose living brain had been mated with a half-kilogram of microelectronic circuitry, performed as the director’s purported secretary and factotum. In reality, the man-machine, stripped of any ego or personality it might have one had, performed a faultless role asinet minister without portfolio. “You will recall sponsoring the appointment of surrogate co-Director of Luna Pierce Grey to directorship of the new deep space matrix.”

“Ah, ser Grey. Yes, of course; the planet’s assigned nomenclature had slipped our mind. Now memory serves us well: we acceded to a request forwarded by a premiere explorer from the imperial stable. Maran Roberts advocated ser Grey’s appointment in the strongest terms possible. I take it the Star Council has ratified the appointment.”

“Indeed, ser Weldon. The Planners voted period before last, a unanimous tally.”

“And the Congressional vote?”

“The Congress of Man approved ser Grey’s appointment, two thousand, six hundred and twenty-four assenting, fifty-seven dissenting. Director Grey and one family member are in trajectory as we speak.”

The Old One nodded. Then, as if searching for something hidden in the peaceful holographic illusion all around him, he cupped his chin in the palm of one skeletal hand and let his speculative gaze drift down the precipitous sweep of Capri’s leeward cliffs and across the Bay of Naples to the wispy plume venting from the cone of Vesuvius. The scene, a favorite backdrop regularly used in his sanctum, numbered among ser Weldon’s few remaining indulgences. Although able to order a variety of startling, often bizarre panoramas derived from more than a thousand worlds, he found himself ever drawn to the classic grandeur of Naples’ bay, smitten in the manner of every visitor from Roman Emperor Tiberius to countless millions of tourists.

“Fifty-seven dissenting votes,” he mused, and mulled the count. “Storage of the dissenters’ names is required. Place the information under our personal seal, codeword ‘salamander’.”

“It is done, ser Weldon,” confirmed the cyborg two milliseconds later.

Lovelock spent a moment reflecting on the advent of the now Stage-Two social matrix labeled Planet Dan. “How many viable global matrices have been established during the past sixty subjective periods?”

There was only a brief wait while the cyborg pulsed the archival database deep beneath the Palace. “Six, ser Weldon.”

“Six!” The word erupted as a snort of exasperating. “More than thirty exploratory teams roaming the circumambient periphery, and they are able to turn up only a half-dozen semi-habitable matrices.” Squinting into the sunwashed distance, his gaze swept along on the seagirt horizon beyond the Bay of Naples. “And the quantity of transportees currently awaiting shipment . . . ?”

“Awaiting transport within what spherical radius, ser Weldon?”

“Um, let us say arbitrarily, oh, one hundred parsecs.”

The cyborg researched the answer electronically. “Fourteen-point-three million transportees currently await shipment, ser Weldon, all from established societies within a solcentric hundred-parsec radius.”

“Umm-m-m, and the ratio of convicted sequestrees to voluntary colonists is . . . ?”

This time the wait was slightly longer. “Close to twenty-nine percent, ser Weldon, approximately Four-point-one-five million prospective transportees currently awaiting shipment are convicted miscreants.”

“Preposterous!” Lovelock fumed for seconds, making up his mind. “Memo to Star Council,” he said harshly. “Attention Outworld Ministry. Gentle Planners, et cetera, re: gross volume convicted sequestrees presently awaiting transport. Strongly advise retaining all voluntaries in situ until the current log jam of miscreants is alleviated. Urge added haste in locating viable planetary matrices, and even greater haste adapting and rationalizing those matrices thus far proving themselves marginal for neohuman tenancy. Also strongly urge the dispatch of military units to control those Stage Two and above matrices slated to receive extensive convict populations. End.”

“It is done, ser Weldon,” announced the cyborg.

Irritated for no particular reason by the man-machine’s efficiency, Lovelock silenced the man-machine by covering a switch on the armrest of his gleaming geriatric chair. Closing his eyes tightly, as was his habit he subjected the problem to cold, logical analysis. The subject became maddening; at times. At times one could almost feel the pressure of neohumanity swelling to fill the volume of relatively proximate deep space like some malignant yeast.

He thoroughly detested the apparent necessity of dumping unrepentant criminals on uninhabited frontier planets. Conceivably a precedent fraught with peril, it caused warning bells to toll deep within his pragmatic, highly perceptive mind. On the other hand, was there any choice in the matter? Often of late had found himself yearning for access to an utterly detached objective viewpoint — an intelligent being, say, from some distant galaxy. How would such a totally uninvolved entity evaluate Imperium Terrestriana per se? More to the point, what would be the hypothetical outsider’s logical solution to the ever-pressing population quandary? Would such an intelligent being actually discover the imperium to be an “empire?” Not really, no. Not in the strictest sense of the term. Imperium Terrestriana bore no resemblance whatever to the enforced acquisition of socio-economic commonwealths flourishing centuries ago and in remote antiquity.

Goaded by the inexhaustible neohuman urge to discover what lay beyond the next hill, the next ocean, the next star, the children of Terra had taken wing and disseminated their unique brand of culture and civilization throughout roughly four hundred globular parsecs of deep space. The so-called empire thus formed was loosely bonded, and even more loosely governed, by a commonality of species, not commerce. The energy expenditure required to drive ultra-expensive starships over true astronomical distances precluded anything in the way of profitable trade by the most canny of entrepreneurs.

Modern interstellar “commerce” simply was not practical. Interstellar contacts between neohuman societies principally involved scientific and technological exchange, an occasional

rare military operation somewhere, and a trickle of taxation from thousands of worlds, a collateral benefit that ensured the homeworld a continual enjoyment of wealth beyond measure. Yet the bottom line was the ever increasing, undeniable necessity to relocate swarms of neohumans in what continually proved to be a feeble effort to control and alleviate runaway overpopulation.

Ser Weldon built a pyramid with knobby fingers and tapped the tips together in an erratic rhythm. Reaching inward, he searched for the full, rational implication of where his train of thought was taking him. People, people, people! His hypothetical visitor would immediately recognize what a truly superfluous quantity of neohumans dwelt in widely scattered colonial societies — patricians and plebeians alike, the old and the young, the mutated and purer strains, although universal genetic engineering practices guaranteed that very few of the unfortunates numbered among the sick, lame, halt or blind.

Yet medical science, despite incredible advances, had also been one of the villains. Fecundity plus a hyperextended lifespan had all but guaranteed the present imperial quandary he and the other Planners had to face daily during those hyperextended lifespans. Allowing one's imagination free rein made it impossible to comprehend the pluperfectly enormous swarms, the trillions upon trillions of neohumans currently inhabiting thousands of social matrices which in essence were not exactly "colonies," with each neohuman subjected to uniquely individual drives, ambitions, philosophies, virtues and vices. An identical conundrum cropping up without surcease during his century-plus in office had been the question of questions that now and forevermore required some sort of answer: Where was it all taking them? Whither was neohumanity bound? Growth for growth's sake had sufficed for millennia in the long gone pre-Holocaust era, but ever since the extensive interregnum following hard on the heels of the Thermonuclear Horror that had once decimated Terra, and throughout the interminable cycles of reconstruction, the numbers multiplied and grown to measurable proportions that made interstellar relocation not just desirable, but mandatory.

And, now . . . ?

Yes, definitely the time had come to return to fundamental beginnings and walk forward slowly, analyzing, interpreting, questioning even the most fundamental of fundamentals.

Given: the tripodal check-and-balance imperial governmental system comprised of the Star Council, the Congress of Man, and his own empyrean post was adequate to administer the interstellar imperium.

He was not at sure this could longer be considered an accurate statement. Thermonuclear devastation had all but erased Terra's ancient civilization in three brief, catastrophic periods. The strongest of the strong who emerged after a second long, dreary night of barbarism, provincialism and social repression had seen no way clear but to pursue the groping, trial and error ways of their forefathers, and the national governments they established had inevitably undergone the classic upheavals and struggles of insurgency, revolution, counter-revolution and warfare. Later, acting individually and collectively, a few wiser heads had prevailed, and the first planetary government had been born, although its birth pangs had been bloody indeed. The farsighted founding fathers of the new age had been shrewd enough to learn at least *some* of history's lessons, and the global government they inspired had gradually devolved into a functional form of non-government. Hands off! had been their credo in so far as that was practicable. Hands off had be-

come the watchword of the new era, a watchword that had been sustained, again to the extent it proved feasible. The great cross-section of neohumanity had been encouraged to adopt its own means and methods of regulating personal affairs, and rectifying personal grievances on its own, a practice labeled “anarchy” by some, of course, although many more believed that term misapplied. Was there no distinct if subtle difference between anarchy and allowing the masses to govern their own personal conduct as best they could.

During subsequent centuries neohuman society had evolved into a solar and eventually interstellar community of common interest, with the basic self-governing philosophy maintained, augmented and strengthened in various and sundry ways. Hands off! Allow social pressures find their own points of natural equilibrium. The best government was rediscovered to be little or *no* government.

As it presently existed, at least in his his personal view, the Congress of Man had degenerated into little more than a social club, a “sewing circle” of debate and argument staffed by hereditary, unmutated or lightly mutated solar aristocrats. The Star Council, on the other hand, accomplished the higher level function of administering and directing the activities of so-called Imperium Terrestriana, in the extrasolar sphere, via the concerted efforts of its far-flung surrogates, a legion of planetary directors appointed to perform the surrogate functions of the Star Council Planners themselves.

His own role, ser Weldon decided, was much more difficult to define. Traditionally hailed as first among the Planners, he acted as chief administrator, go-between and tie-breaker for the manifold interleaving and intertwining functions of Congress and Council. *But only in theory*, he thought wryly. For century and more he had exercised iron-fist-in-velvet-glove diplomacy, immersed in an atmosphere thick with intrigue coupled with subtle, but often less-than-subtle pressure. He thought of himself as an official mired in a rich stew of strong-willed men and women who constantly jockeyed for leadership, and more often than not won it. Often had he admitted to himself that he thoroughly enjoyed every aspect of political life, especially the political maneuvering infighting constituting the supreme rationale of his hyperextended existence. His was a masterful talent, a talent of which he was all too aware, a talent nurtured, refined and redefined during his many, many decades in office.

But was the present government adequate to sustain an interstellar empire? He supposed so, since somehow or other, clumsily and inefficiently, it worked. Eventually a less cumbersome means and methods of governance would have to be devised.

Very well then. Given: fostering the universal adoption of Convention promulgated by the patrician nobility during the drawn out, semi-barbaric cycles of postbellum reconstruction and the more enlightened interregnum among the hybrid, mutant and plebian classes had been wisely motivated. It was a favorite topic, and one he had been known to lecture about at the drop of an opportunity. He never failed to pay homage to the remote, illustrious predecessor who, deeply inspired by the notion, had urged the lowly born to adopt aristocratic lifestyles. That visionary concept was in his opinion a masterstroke second to none, and more to the point an act of clear-quill genius, accomplishing as it did so many varied and diverse things of high value.

The pristine, exclusively aristocratic form of Convention, basically a renaissance of the very ancient, antebellum method of resolving personal differences through armed combat, pro-

vided a ready outlet for the primal aggressive urge anthropologists suggested might have stemmed from neohumanity's remote, collateral "killer ape" ancestors. Broadened and deepened through modern usage, Code Duello, although the prima facie basis of Convention, was not actually its *raison d'être*. Not in his eyes, at any rate, or in those of the majority of his fellow Planners.

Dueling actually made not the tiniest conceivable dent when it came to diminishing the imperial overpopulation problem, but did offer any number of attractive collateral benefits. Code Duello and its attendant posturings and posings helped build an extremely polite social body, and simultaneously confirmed a classic Darwinian virtue: the swift elimination of those less well endowed physically and emotionally — or in short, genetically.

Here was true value, thought ser Weldon. Convention in general, and Code Duello in particular, aided in a miniscule, all but insignificant manner to keep the birth rate low, the death rate high. The Convention-set dueling rapier had long since proven itself a magnificent equalizer, demonstrating conclusively, time after time after time, here there and everywhere, that an accomplished smallswordsmen of moderate stature could best a larger, equally proficient, smallswordsmen in roughly one-half the engagements on record. Moreover, Code Duello had effectively replaced ninety-nine percent of the burdensome, costly structure of civil law. Were one's property, person or family to be injured by one's neighbor, redress was instantly obtainable.

Convention also offered other important bonuses. The adoption of rigid birth-control manners and mores in the wake of endless, futile attempts to legislate and control the basic human drive to reproduce, had been a stroke of secondary genius. Drummed into the populace via intense propaganda campaigns had been the stark truism that bringing an illegal child into society not only deprived other citizens of their birthright, but denigrated to some degree the entire social body within some stable, mature segment of the population. In essence Convention had engendered the simplest form of population control, especially here in the perpetually overcrowded homeworld.

As had forever been his style, ser Weldon then proceeded to the crux of the problem. Given: sequestration along the outworld frontier periphery — the involuntary detention and deportation of plebian and patrician offenders alike — was an effective method of handling transgressors who defied the sacred precepts of Convention. He was not at all sure this conclusion was any longer semi-valid. After all, what principal rationale lay behind mass sequestration? Why rip miscreant citizens from their indigenous societies and dispatch them on one-way trips to the outworlds? Illegal parentage was the foremost reason, of course, followed closely by the crime of illegal killing — the murder of a Congressionally immune official, for example, or a public assassin, or by the use of some non-Conventional weapon, or in isolated, especially notorious cases by using one's own two hands. Crimes of passion which, for one reason or another went unavenged — a rarity — or crimes of avarice, desecration of the environment, wasteful consumption of nonrenewable resources, errant cowardice, or the severest forms of moral turpitude, completed the docket of sequestrable offenses. Lesser infractions were punishable by public flogging, branding, and sometimes social ostracism.

And the homeworld had itself developed a new fillip — the custom of having flagrant offenders impaled on cruel stakes in each particular locale where the offense had been commit-

ted. Although he considered this last a barbarous if currently fashionable ritual, impalement did offer the singular virtue of instantly eliminating offenders who would otherwise pose a logistics problem while awaiting sequestration. It pained and angered him to contemplate the gross quantities of aristocrats mixed in with almost thirty million unfortunates currently awaiting sequestration. Some were no doubt the patrician victims of unjust accusations, faulty counsel, erratic trials and unjust convictions, but the others . . .

No, there simply *had* be a more sapient solution to the population quandary than voluntary colonization complemented by criminal sequestration. It was inarguable that both forms of relocating citizens did aid population control in a minute, inconsequential way, but it also meant postponing the basic problem by making it necessary to perpetually stretch the boundaries of the empire. All things considered, sequestration, voluntary or otherwise, amounted to an obtuse process akin to sweeping convicted miscreants plus voluntary colonial and their associated problems under the interstellar carpet. Capital crimes demanded capital punishment, not sequestration. It was not a pristine notion; he had grown more concerned of late over the swelling quantity of convicts awaiting sequestration, a concern brought into sharper focus by the recent appointment of an honored acquaintance, ser Pierce Grey, to the directorship of a raw, newly established Stage Two matrix.

At the first opportunity he made a mental note to feel out certain intimates among the cadre of fellow Planners he considered relatively trustworthy confidants. Perhaps he could gather several together in private, where they could put their heads together and effect some form of agreed-upon compromise, and propose to the entire Star Council that at minimum criminal sequestration be denied for lesser offenses.

But the penalty for a truly heinous crime such as having the impudent gall to bear illegal offspring, would have to be . . .

Death!

Ser Weldon cringed inwardly at the unspoken word. Even as a voiceless thought it was laden with typhoon force winds. He had lived far too long, and too well, not to be terrified by the eventual certainty of leaving his cherished life behind.

Had his memo to the Outworld Ministry been wise? He supposed so, although it occurred to him in passing that Director Pierce Grey would soon find himself exposed to a severely disruptive element if thousands of convicts were suddenly thrust into a raw social matrix undergoing only the second stage of integration, development and colonization. The fact that ser Grey, who for most of a century had occupied the chair of Luna's co-directoracy, was personally known to him was not a factor when groping for an option that might help balance the neohuman equation. No favoritism would be shown, and that was yet another "given." Pierce Grey would have to make the best of the situation. Pierce would be forced to cope with the situation in precisely the same way as all other frontier directors.

He stifled a yawn. The sequestration quandary continued giving off the rancid odor of a Pandora's box much, much easier to open than close. He dismissed the issue, covered a switch plaque activating the cyborg, and asked, "What is next on our plate?"

"The Plenipotentiary from Endorus awaits your pleasure in the reception chamber, ser Weldon."

“Again? What might the smelly creature want of us this time?”

“The plenipotentiary wishes to discuss autonomy for Endorus within its own sphere of influence, ser Weldon.”

His expression one of subliminal distaste, Lovelock envisioned the visitor he was about to receive, and hopefully pacify — an argumentative, snail-like creature ensconced in a coffin-like bioregenerative tank that never failed to reek faintly of ammonia or some noxious compound.

“The Endorian,” he muttered, “is persistent. Bid it to enter.”

“At once, ser Director.”

III

Leaving the old, both worlds at once they

View that stand upon the threshold of the new.

Edmund Waller, antebellum, pre-

Industrial Briton, ca 1600 CE

Director-elect Pierce Grey picked at his meal. Tedium enhanced by the prolonged shipboard routine had proved every bit as unappetizing as the dull, pedestrian fare served aboard the starship. Ennui had undermined his usual sharp appetite.

He reminded himself for the umpteenth time what a mistake it had been to endure the months-long transit in a conscious, waking state. At home in the familiar surroundings of Luna’s Bay of Rainbows after the excitement over his appointment waned, he had looked forward to solid weeks of rest and contemplation before taking up the reins of government. Thus far the changeless monotony of hyperspace trajectory had also proved to be a major disappointment. He envied the ninety thousand voluntary colonials, dormant at sub-temperature in the ship’s labyrinthine cryogenic hold, to whom the endless weeks would seem like only a night’s rest.

He and his younger son, the sole aristocrats aboard who had not availed themselves of cold sleep, were the victims of social consciousness, a fact making it no easier to endure the interminable transit. The starship’s master, a crotchety semi-hermit bound up in obscure uses acquired during a lifetime spent between ports of call, had at every opportunity pointedly ignored his distinguished passengers, while the crewmen and women, thought of them as a black-clad patrician ogre and his scion with whom they would willingly have little or nothing to do.

Hyperspace correspondence with Maran Roberts had helped pass the endless hours. An old and cherished friend, the chief explorer spoke glowingly of Dan, and the holographic images he had transmitted via n-space were filled with unprecedented pastoral charm. If holograms could capture the planet’s mystique in such enticing fashion, he found it difficult to imagine what it would be like to stand for oneself beneath those magnificent, lofting trees, and eagerly looked forward to discovering Dan for himself.

Pierce stirred, taken by an urge to have done with the sterile, static environment of the ship and its half-alive crew. Across the dining saloon, an aloof knot of ship’s officers taking their mid-watch meal purposely kept their distance. Frozen behind them in a bulkhead-spanning flat

screen, the unrelieved grandeur of galactic night had begun displaying a subtle change. Several watches ago the starship had re-transitioned from multidimensional n-space and flickered back into the Einsteinian continuum. A reddish-yellow star, the Danite System's primary, was gradually detaching itself from the anonymity of numberless flinty companions to blossom brightly against the hazy clot of the thirty-odd-thousand-light-year-distant galactic center. Hours ago, its luminosity augmented by relative proximity, it had exceeded the capacity of the ship's external sensors, and the waxing, magnified disc had been occluded by an artificial blank that made it look hollow, with only the coronal blaze standing stiffly outward on the limb.

Magnification also made their destination appear much closer than it actually was. At n-space cruising velocity — some unimaginable multiple of lightspeed — the Danite System would now be far behind the ship. But re-transitioning into the normal spacetime continuum meant the angstrom wavelengths formerly distorted into relative invisibility once again impinging upon the ship's external sensors. It struck Pierce as odd that the final stages of deceleration required to bleed off the starship's intrinsic velocity when departing the solar system would take longer than parsecs of n-space cruising. Soon now, he had been told, the visual spectrum sensors would be able to define planets.

"Pierce."

Having all but forgotten his younger son's presence, Grey looked away from the starry spectacle. "Yes, Leighton?"

"If you don't want your dessert, I . . . uh, just wondered . . ."

Pierce lifted the crystal bell, handed it over with a smile. Between mouthfuls, Leighton mumbled a polite, "Thank you."

In an introspective mood, Grey watched his son devour the fire-and-ice concoction. Unlike he himself, Leighton was apparently enjoying the protracted transit. Avidly interested in anything and everything from astrogation technique on the bridge to nuclear fusion engineering in the enormous vessel's bowels, the boy had persistently gotten in the crew's hair, prying into all unlocked compartments, pestering everyone with endless questions.

Pierce had wanted him to undergo cryothermic hibernation, but he had been counseled out of it. At nine cycles, the educators had insisted, Leighton was on the verge of appreciating the third level of abstraction, a poor time for consciousness to be interrupted. A strong dissenting vote had also been cast; though far from a mature one, Leighton Grey definitely had a mind of his own.

On the other hand, thought Pierce, *his elder son had been far more headstrong*. How two offspring endowed with identical genome characteristics could be so different perplexed him in the same way it had perplexed every set of parents since mythical Adam and Eve. He caught himself wishing Elan had been more like Leighton, and as he knew it would be a hard, nostalgic throb commenced within him, a longing to have Alexa beside him watching the boy's tousled head bend forward over his dessert like some gawky, feeding bird. He closed his eyes against the twinge and let it fade — a trick learned well during the seven cycles since Alexa had been taken from him.

No, he decided; his assessment of Elan had been far too simplistic. Even at Leighton's tender age, Elan had shown signs of beginning to stray. Not that his eldest was entirely to blame,

he admitted. It was incredibly difficult to *have* a child in the homeworld, let alone hope to properly rear him or her. But Alexa had totally agreed that it would be better to run the gamut of social censure than to enroll Elan in some coldly efficient development crèche. In his official capacity as Luna's co-director, he and his consort had resisted tradition so stubbornly and perhaps naively that colleagues had taken to calling him "Father Grey" — one of those casual gibes, he supposed, behind which lurked the distrust patricians invariably bore toward nonconformists.

Aristocrats did not raise their own offspring. Oh, he and Alexa had known what it would mean for them to do so. Not precisely ostracism, but more an ever so faint shying away on the part of familiar friends and acquaintances, smiles where once there had been laughter, tepidity instead of warmth. They had eventually given in, of course. Elan had gone through secondary development as an anonymous pedestrian, except by then the clay had been partially spoiled; he had no longer been anonymous to himself.

Pierce recalled the shared delight and wild enthusiasm attendant upon Alexa's first pregnancy. He also remembered how swiftly their joy had curdled when final Genetics Board approval was held pending over some trifling clerical error involving supposed recessive traits in the DNA of her family several generations removed. In Luna, upon learning that approval to be was an eventual certainty, they had thumbed their noses at the universe and made a terribly funny joke of her physician's anxiety, for by then the clueless Giver of Life was having sleepless nights, terrified by the thought of spending the rest of his life as the sequestered guest of some nameless planet circling a distant star.

The dither following Elan's birth had been monumental; Pierce had greeted visitors daily at the exodorium, for Alexa had pooh-poohed the advice of her women friends, most of whom had urged ectogenesis, a procedure he himself had also considered prudent, and turned matters over a team of OB-Gyn specialists, and vetoed the notion. Born in normal fashion, Elan had been named for the gusto he had exhibited flailing and crying at birth.

And the celebration! Convivial gatherings ongoing get-togethers with relatives and close friends had gone on for the better part of a standard week, costing he and Alexa loss of sleep as well as a smidgen of their remaining sanity. It was then that ser Weldon Lovelock had first hinted at a co-directoracy, an elevation to which Pierce had long aspired, but of which he had only dared dream. At the time he had been less than one hundred and thirty, emphatically juvenile as planetary directors went. He had nevertheless run to Alexa with the tidings, and the future had stretched before them, limitless, fresh and exciting.

Seventy cycles ago! How incredible it seemed now. He and Alexa had been together less than ninety cycles all told. Why in antiquity sixty or seventy cycles had comprised an entire lifetime; now it was little more than post-adolescence.

Melancholia flooded through Pierce. Helpless against it, he fought by giving in to it.

* * *

Having finished his dessert, Leighton was playing idly with his utensils, preoccupied by studying the starry vista on display across the dining saloon, he. "We'll land soon," he said in an offhand manner.

"In a few more periods. Not homesick, are you? Or lonesome?"

The boy's nose wrinkled. "It isn't the fellows I'll miss so much . . ." A searching look. "Do you think Elan will come visit us in Dan?"

"Doubtful," replied Pierce drily. "Your big brother rarely stopped by in Luna. He was much too busy to even see us off."

The boy sat back, refusing to meet his pater's steady gaze. "Why don't you like Elan?"

"A searching question, but one deserving an answer. No, I suppose I don't like Elan very much, although I love him dearly." Putting it bluntly made Grey's throat tighten.

"Why not, Pierce?"

The director gave careful thought to his son's question. How, he asked himself, does one explain to a boy the disappointment and disillusionment that come after cycles of planning and hope? How could he tell Leighton that his god, Elan, was arrogant and selfish, wasteful of talents not even won, but simply endowed? Would it be proper to explain to him that his idol was a perfect example of the spoiled aristocrat, bent upon earnestly and devoutly manufacturing a wastrel's life for himself?

Feeling his blood heat in the way it did whenever he thought of his elder son, Pierce finally said, "It isn't that I personally dislike Elan," he said, wondering if it were true. "When you're more mature, you will begin to realize your brother is not altogether the dashing smallswordsmen you've placed on a pedestal and worshipped. He's a man, and men fight because in our society it is expected of them, or rather demanded of them. We've spoken of this before."

"Convention," said Leighton, his inflection implying that he considered it an entirely wonderful institution.

"Umm-m-m, yes, but unfortunately 'Convention' covers a multitude of . . . In my opinion, Code Duello is the foster child of hard-hearted cynicism, an offshoot of this 'survival of the fittest' doctrine so insanely popular during the past few centuries. Actually the practice has deeper roots.

"Long ago," pursued Grey, "psychologists determined that combativeness, the ever . . . competitive instinct to fight among ourselves, is as much an inherent neohuman trait as input from their five senses. For thousands of cycles wars were waged between tribes, families, nations, and eventually between worlds. History taught us the major reasons for warfare: economic differences, matters of unequal land distribution, colonial empires forming or breaking up. But those are only the obvious reasons. Other, more subtle rationales also exist. Ethnic or superstitious differences and prejudices were once flash points that ignited mass conflicts between ancient societies. Sometimes a simple, wholly unimportant matter of skin pigmentation or some less common variety of 'otherness' such as metaphysical belief, was sufficient. Taken either in its entirety, or individually, these obscure 'reasons' directly contributed to the cyclical shedding of billions of lives. Understand?"

The boy was not sure. "I . . . think so."

"At any rate," added Pierce, "the Planners then in power encouraged dueling in order to eliminate not random bloodshed itself, certainly, but as a means of providing a safety valve, a method of resolving the frustration and often consequent hysteria that build up in one who feels the injured party over *not* fighting when severely provoked."

A grimace of perplexity. "It's . . . funny the way you say it, Pierce. I always thought men fought because they liked to, wanted to."

"That also happens to be true, and yet . . ." Grey drew a deep breath. "The Holocaust came within a thin hair of terminating Terran civilization, Leighton. A near thing, and it taught us a frightful lesson. Men now fight individually over insults or slights real and imaginary, whereas in ancient society wholesale, organized combat destroyed entire cultures, decimated entire nations. Our interstellar empire, if that indeed a proper name for it, may be decadent — that is to say, uh . . . rotten at the core as some suggest — yet its trillions of citizens are also extremely polite to one another, and for an excellent reason. The life of each and every neohuman male is channeled by Convention, a fact of striking importance to what are known as alpha males like your brother Elan. A sure knowledge exists throughout interstellar society, you see, a certainty that should one cross over the line where urbane behavior ceases, someone will quickly step forward and correct his lapse.

"Naturally certain provisions are made," said Pierce, "to protect the physically or morally incompetent. But the fact of such incompetency makes them ineligible for specific boons such as earning the right and subsequent approval to bear offspring. I realize that sounds harsh, but it helps create a strong, vibrant social body. There are also immune officials like myself, though we too must prove ourselves before . . ."

Grey broke off, conscious of the cowed look in his son's eyes. "Sorry, I didn't mean to let the windbag politician in me start a lecture. Don't fret about what I've been telling you, Leighton. I'm sure you'll understand more fully when you reach adolescence."

The boy said timidly, "But if you like the way things are, why don't you like Elan? He's a terrific smallswordsmen."

Pierce sighed. "I'm forced to agree. Sad to say, he's proven his excellence many times over. But do not take it for granted that I wholeheartedly endorse things as they are. Elan has for some time been outstanding blade, and perhaps too much so; there is such a thing as becoming *too* accomplished. Can you appreciate the difference between responding to an ordinary grievance, and seeking to initiate it? I mentioned the word decadence. It means —"

"Rotten at the core." Leighton was tight-lipped. "How can you think way about Elan?"

"I . . . That was not my explicit meaning where Elan is concerned." Grey puffed his cheeks, searching for a way out of the pitfall he had dug for himself. "Listen, a curious action is known to take place when certain cultural 'in' groups have had things their own way for a long, long time. Decadence is the result, as most things are, of numerous and diverse causes, among them the assurance of the elite segment of our populace that change will never overtake them, that they will forever number among the privileged few who are able with impunity to continue doing exactly as they please, anywhere, at any time, to whomsoever they choose. I suspect ser Elan Grey views himself in precisely that light." Grey dismissed his chair, and rose. "Come, time for study."

The boy was obdurate. "You haven't answered what I asked," he said. "Will you ever?"

Pierce searched his son's troubled eyes. "I promise," he said. "Once we're settled and have our feet planted firmly on the ground in this wondrous new world, I faithfully promise to we'll go into the matter as deeply as you wish."

Leighton's demeanor informed his pater that he was to be reminded. Leaving the dining saloon, the boy glanced back over his shoulder and tugged his sire to a halt. "Look, Pierce!"

The blanked-out disc of the system's primary was now accompanied by a pair of bright dots and a tiny, fairy crescent swimming in the display.

"Dan," breathed Director Pierce Grey.

* * *

"There, dead ahead on the left, Pierce." Airborne, Holt Morrow pointed through the verticraft's transpex forward bubble. "See the command center there at the far end of the savanna, just beyond the grounded shuttles."

Still flushed with the excitement of grounding, Grey followed the line of Morrow's hairy forearm. A cluster of domes gleamed on the fringe of the broad meadowland. "Pretty spot," he remarked.

"That it is. The big meadow is where I first set foot in this lump," informed Holt, speaking loudly over the muted thrash of the verticraft's ducted fans. "It's as likely a spot as there is in Dan. I think that's why the witchdoctors insisted on offloading the first gaggle of colonials here."

"Hasn't the importance of receiving a good first impression been overstressed?"

"Yeah, it has since you ask. But the head-thumpers always run the early phases of Stage Two integration. Ever tried arguing with one of them?"

"Er, no . . ." admitted Grey, thinking back over the subjective periods since his formal investiture. "From what I've seen of Dan thus far, it would be difficult to gather anything *but* a good first impression."

"I second that, Pierce. You're lucky to be taking charge of this right fair piece of real estate." Holt straightened in the seat and leaned closer to the verticraft's transpex bubble. "Well, what do you know? Look there, Pierce. Unless I'm hallucinating, an Imperial Space Forces admiral's barge has grounded beyond the other shuttles."

"Why, yes; I believe you're right," said Pierce. "I wonder what brings a military vessel all the way out here."

"Search me. Shakedown cruise, maybe."

Bush maneuvering preparatory to landing, Holt pitched the verticraft downward at a shallow angle, leveled out, rotated it on the vertical axis, and let it settle into a cordoned-off section of greensward. Beyond the collection of upturned faces, the ogive prow of the large, black ground-to-orbit military vehicle reared above the command center domes, creating further speculation on the part of the veteran explorer.

Having forsaken command of the departed exploratory mission, Maran Roberts led a contingent of former explorers forward to meet the grounded verticraft. After a brief exchange of greetings, he and Morrow escorted Director Grey into the central command dome.

"I'm sure you're going to enjoy this," Roberts told the director. "Everything is being done to make the newcomers feel welcome. Audiovisual pickups have been spotted all around the assembly area to document the emergence of newly awakened colonials. Listening to and recording the first reactions of new arrivals is important to the psychologists, and in the past it always proved interesting to our explorers. I thought afterward you might like to say a few words of welcome."

“By all means.” Grey exchanged bows with the former pro tem director, Ennis Ladeen, who had handed over the reins of government during the formal inauguration ceremony, and then nodded cordially to the other explorers who had opted to stay on in Dan. Standing apart from the others, a portly aristocrat clad in the matte black uniform of an Imperial Space Forces officer came forward and bowed low. “All the best wishes of my command, ser Director.”

Pierce smiled and returned the bow. “I believe we have yet to meet, ser, uh . . .”

Instantly apologetic, Roberts said, “Forgive me, Pierce. Commodore Garrigues, please forgive me for failing to introduce the Director of Dan, ser Pierce Grey.”

Using two fingers, Garrigues touched his forehead, the tunic over his heart, and the ornate, filagreed handle of a ceremonial saber in the scabbard bobbing just off his left hip. He bowed again, this time executing a full, sweeping bow of deference. “The honor is entirely mine, ser Director. The mind, heart and sword of my command are at your disposal, ser Grey.”

“Delighted to have you with us, Commodore. But I must confess being surprised to find a first-line military starship orbiting Dan.”

Garrigues smoothed his cape. “Ser Director, the Admiralty directed me to bring *Relentless* to Dan as an expedient venture for our shakedown cruise. Commissioned but a short time ago, she is the last word, ser Director, the finest starcruiser ever to be put in service.”

“I see,” said Pierce, not at all sure that he did.

“The Admiralty,” added Garrigues expansively, “has ordered *Relentless* to provide an interim security force for this newly won domain you govern. In the name of the Planners, with your permission, I intend to assign members of the ship’s Bully Squad to serve as public assassins until such time as suitable colonials can be recruited.”

“How thoughtful of you and the Admiralty.” Grey’s manner was also thoughtful. “But Dan is entering only the earliest phase of Second Stage integration. We can hardly expect significant trouble from one shipload of voluntary colonials, especially when large number of explorers have resigned their former postings and opted to make new lives for themselves here.”

“Oh, I am aware of that, ser Director. On the other hand, competent public assassins do not generate spontaneously. Should the need arise during our stay, the Admiralty considers it vital for you to have access to a cadre of precisely the right sort of experienced, tough-minded individuals.”

An uncertain nod from Pierce, who wondered exactly what it was the commodore was trying to say.

Necks craned. Morrow announced, “First shipload coming down.”

* * *

Concealed in a bower of greenery across the meadow, their perceptive senses fully attuned to the variegated spectra of neohuman thought washing through their minds, Tanis the elder, and companion Polct the younger, observed the shuttles descending and departing one by one. A parti-colored tide of new arrivals shortly began flooding into the meadow.

They are so many, marveled Polct. They are as the leaves of trees, the blades of grass. Do all units of this species come here, O Tanis?

Hardly. Yet they do seem numberless. One cannot help but sense a basic flaw often found common among juvenile species, the inability to restrict reproduction at will. Nor is it a true flaw, although endemic.

Why not a flaw, O Tanis?

Because in their presumed adolescent niche in the evolutionary scale, a broad, varied base for genetic selection is a natural and normal prerequisite.

My understanding is truly tenuous, thought Polct. The sheer volume of their ever-mounting numbers would seem a cause for wonderment. Might it not be wise to mull their every aspect and seek more fulsome comprehension?

The elder entity continued its study of the surging immigrant masses. Have you noted the gross variances in mental frequency, O Polct? Their helter-skelter, unintegrated thought processes are rooted in multiple emotions, inducing a muddiness that brings each into consonant conflict with an ability to think clearly, with core rationality.

One indeed senses precisely that, O Tanis. When one attunes, or believes full rapport has been achieved, the subject's thoughtstream becomes submerged beneath overtones of emotion intermixed with physical sensation. It is most confusing.

Aye, confusion reigns. Especially after becoming accustomed to the more superior mentalities among the first to arrive. Their thinking is more orderly, more straightforward. Here and there among the original arrivals are several minds of moderate strength.

Verily, O Tanis. One wonders if this might not be an opportune moment for sampling to commence in order to begin comprehensively analyzing the rootstock of their collective entities?

Not as yet, no. Tanis was adamant. Patience must and shall be exercised until a nodal point has been reached. Even then sampling will is not a function of our duty, O Polct. Sampling lies forever within the purview of Higher Ones. They will act when such action is deemed provident.

One by one, the shuttles descended in jets of roaring flame, and then rose in roaring flame to take on another load of revived colonials. As the transfer and offloading procedure continued unabated, Polct the younger became further entranced by the throng of newcomers that not only increased but multiplied to monumental proportions.

A wonderment! it thought.

The elder did not bother to contradict the evaluation of an apprentice guardian.

* * *

The immigrant tide flowed across the broad meadow and congregated in groups under the guidance of former explorers, where they waited to board a file of null-grav vans waiting to transport them to temporary quarters. Distant voices complementing the visual displays filtered from speakers in the command center.

"Green!" exclaimed a woman's high-pitched voice. "It's all so green, so pretty . . ."

"Whoosh! Would you look at the size of those trees . . ."

". . . And long after we woke up, the counselor assured us we could have children here."

Naturally there were others, the inevitable few.

“It’s a miserable damn swamp, I tell you! Why’d they have to dump us in this gawdawful place? It looks like the back of beyond.”

“I feel so tired. It’s hard to catch my breath . . .”

Holt Morrow snickered good-naturedly.

The shuttles landed, disgorged their droves, rose again on nullified gravity, lit up and returned to the starship for yet another load of colonists in their thousands and tens of thousands. Here and there in the largest holotank, Holt was able to pick out the figures of barrel-chested men, women barren in prime maturity, dark-skinned people, light-skinned people, and those in between, all voluntary emigres, individuals and families no longer able to endure a cheek-by-jowl existence, or those desperate to escape narrowly channeled lives afforded by the basic citizen’s allowance.

Holt made a game of following the progress of a middle-aged individual with a crooked nose, a woman with a bitter, downturned mouth, an adolescent youth who laughed in delight at the greenery and openness around him, a older woman whose expression evidenced her intense distaste for the new world. Here and there knots of sleek, well-groomed aristocrats gathered apart from the others, segregating themselves from the hoi polloi, their women gowned in fashionable semi-nude attire. But the vast majority of newcomers were obviously from the unloved and unlovely, individuals who had thrown in their chips and given up, individuals who no longer cared. Few children were among these volunteers — *a loose term, voluntary*, thought Holt.

He realized that during a full cycle Dan about the system’s primary, or possibly two, an additional larger tide of volunteers would have to be absorbed. A radically different batch of immigrants would arrive then, among whom numerous illegally born infants and toddlers forced to accompany their errant parents on a one-way trip into the depths of a heedless galaxy. The parental criminals to come would eventually be joined by much seedier companions — sequestered murderers, cowards, psychosexual degenerates and other disreputables doubtless salted with a sprinkling of cool, touchy aristocrats who had made a fatal mistake and learned to their never-ending surprise the lapse was irreversibly damning.

Like all explorers past and present, Holt had seen it all before, not once but a number of times. The sequestered latecomers would consist largely of patrician lice, their entire beings steeped in the insufferable formality of Code Duello. Swashbuckling patricians, they would attempt to revel for a time in newfound freedom, yet however short or long those revels might last, they would not — *could* not — fail to bring their swords and haughty air of challenge to Planet Dan.

Morrow grunted, pointed to one of the smaller holotanks. “Look there, half-hidden among the trees.”

A pair of wraithlike, matchstick figures blended with the foliage in near-perfect natural concealment.

Roberts nodded wordlessly.

“Are those the natives,” asked Pierce Grey, intrigued by his first sight of the Danii.

“Spooky blasted hummers.” Holt fingered his stubbled chin. “I’d give a cycle’s pay to know what they think of all the hooraw going on out here.”

“We may not learn that for some time, if ever,” said Roberts. “Pierce, there’s nothing to be gained by waiting until they’re assembled and readied for transport. Would you like to speak to them now?”

“Certainly.” Grey seated himself in the indicated seat before the communications console. “It may sound foolish to of me to . . . It’s such a lovely world, so peaceful and inviting. It’s humbling to think about shouldering such an awesome responsibility.”

Roberts touched his old friend’s shoulder. “Bid them a simple welcome. They’ve just awakened from cold sleep, and can’t help but feel disorientated, not sure where they are, how they got here, or why. You’ve assumed an opportunity to create something truly worthwhile, Pierce.”

“Hear, hear!” said Holt.

Roberts cued a technician, who open the audio circuit and announced, “Your attention, good gentles. The Director of Dan wishes to welcome you . . .”

* * *

Weeks later, Morrow dropped by the command center one shimmering afternoon. Hoping Pierce would have a moment free to chat, he was stewing about something as he made his presence known to the autoreceptionist. After a short wait, the computer invited him to enter the the director’s temporary office chamber.

Grey’s agitated expression, the angry set of his mouth, brought Holt up short. Maran Roberts blinked a silent greeting and turned his attention back to the holotank, where a vast complex of permanent habitats and high-rise structures was depicted under construction by imported imperial crews.

Intuiting that something had gone wrong, but without a clue what that something might be, Holt said, “Stupidity!” and doffed his kepi, dropping it on the director’s cluttered desk. “One of the johnny-come-latelys buttoned me a while ago and asked where he could buy hydroponic equipment. Can you believe it? Uumpteen million square kilos of the most arable land these old eyes have ever seen, and the peabrain wants to grow crops in a tank.”

When no response was forthcoming, Holt looked inquiringly from Grey to Roberts. “What the hell is biting you two?”

The director plucked a communications printout from his desk and let it settle through the air in front of Holt. Puzzled, the former explorer picked it up. Noting the transcribed seal of Imperium Terrestriana, he scanned the missive half-way through before realizing he had missed something.

He looked back at the first paragraph, gagged and cried, “Stage Three!” His astonished yelp echoed in the dome’s high, downcurving metal ceiling. “Involuntaries, *now*? How in the sacred name of Convention do the Planners expect a partially unintegrated planet to handle third-stage trash?”

His features perfectly composed, eyes alight with pale fires of indignation, Pierce rose and came around the desk. “You know better than anyone what this means,” he declared, giving the statement the inflection of a curse. “We’ll get every circum-solar misfit, every fop and young buck who lives by his sword, every freewheeling work-dodger who’s stepped on the toes of Convention for half a century.”

Holt whistled softly. Most of an entire subjective century had elapsed since he had last set foot on any “civilized” world, but his memory was undimmed. In youth and adolescence, he had enjoyed the brawling, degenerate atmosphere created by the legion of “sophisticates” who enjoyed invoking Code Duello as a source of casual amusement. It had been keen pleasure to wear a sword then, but in the here and now, well . . . Also, long ago and far away, he had witnessed the rather awful results the resulted from unalloyed third-stage vermin being dumped into a raw, partially integrated planetary matrix.

“So now we know why Commodore Garrigues and a shipload of trained apes showed up way out here. Looks like the Planners are cleaning house. You file a protest, Pierce?”

“Minutes after the transmittal you just read was telemetered down from orbit, the receiver aboard *Relentless*, Garrigues’ starcruiser, spat out another bombshell,” asserted Grey. “Sending the protest was a waste of time and energy. I can absolutely guarantee that my protest will be ignored, *totally* ignored.”

“Hmm-m-m . . . “Morrow’s gaze locked with that of Roberts. “Lovelock . . . ?”

“A virtual certainty,” said Maran without hesitation. “No, not really virtual. A definite certainty. With every subjective period, the Star Council finds itself more pressed for viable living space. Lovelock must have convinced his fellow Planners they were justified in rendering the precipitate, potentially destructive directive. The Outworld Ministry’s hand may be scribbled on the unconscionable order, but I have no doubt — none at all — that ser Weldon was the instigator. This idiotic decision reeks of having his fingerprints all over it.”

“Now the reason also becomes clear,” said Pierce, “why ser Weldon chose me for this post. He knew full well that in the wake of a plum appointment like Dan I wouldn’t never dream of issuing more than a token protest.”

“Also a certainty,” admitted the downcast Roberts. “Yet something tells me the Old One’s decision goes originated in much deeper thought than simply appointing a “safe” director. Assuming that ser Weldon browbeat the Outworld Ministry into condoning alleviation of the backlogged convicted sequestrees awaiting shipment in this arbitrary manner, is it surprising to believe the worthy Planners automatically fell into accord with their ‘suggestion.’ They always have, and always will.”

“We’d better start prepping for the king-sized mess that’ll soon be on our hands,” said Holt. “Count on it, in spades. If the first batch of sequestrees comes from anywhere near Sol, a high percentage of sword-happy aristocrats are bound to be in the mix, and bluebloods are ten times tougher to handle than run-of-the mill mamas, papas and weirdos.”

Grey’s pained expression confirmed Morrow’s judgment. “I already called Commodore Garrigues about just that very subject, Holt. In addition to the half-brigade of Imperial Marines he promised to send down along with a hundred members of what he called his shipboard ‘Bully Squad,’ we have to get busy recruiting public assassins from among the immigrants.”

“Good,” approved Holt. “Sure it’ll help, but it won’t be nearly enough. Things will get pretty damned sticky around here pretty damned soon. Maran, now you should be glad some of us explorers decided to hang around. We’ll teach the bad news guys a thing or three, count on it.”

A wan smile. "It will definitely be and aid to —"

"An 'aid' my derriere! We can do one helluva lot more than 'aid' the colonials. Just let some pussyfooting, highborn bucko tangle with Creighton, Albans or me. He'll wish he'd stayed home and kept his nose clean."

Roberts regarded his old comrade soberly. "A touch long in the tooth for that sort of exercise, aren't you, Holt?"

"Long in the . . ." Morrow swelled visibly. "Listen, Maran, I can still hold my own when the going gets bumpy. Don't fret about me. I figure to unlimber my old rapier straightaway, scrape off the rust and strap it on."

"Please, Holt." Deeply worried, Pierce did not want to hear more. "Soon now there will be enough strife in Dan to satisfy everyone. I want opinions from both of you. Do you think we've explored every conceivable avenue to avoid what's coming? Is there some way — any way at all — to avert the disaster, or at least forestall it? No third-stage vermin are yet with us, so please, I want either of you to use your imaginations. Help me think of some way to circumvent the directive. Who knows? Perhaps the Planners can be stalled indefinitely."

Holt said, "Don't bet the farm on that tactic, Pierce. It would take a dyed-in-the-wool, double-dire emergency to dissuade that herd of desk-bound bureaucrats from doing whatever the hell it is they want to do, whenever the hell they want to do it. How about it, Maran? Can you come up with anything along the lines of what Pierce requested?"

A negative headshake. "I wouldn't bother trying. We would have to tell the tallest of tall tales just to obtain a hearing, let alone convince the Planners how terribly wrongheaded the Star Council decision actually is. Under the goading of ser Weldon, they can be more than adamant when they so desire, totally unbending. As I said a moment ago, it's simple to justify dumping trash anywhere out of sight, especially for those with no vestige of conscience or understanding who have already ordered the refuse dumped many parsecs away from the problem. I think we will have no choice but to end up forced to live with the situation to come."

With that, Maran Roberts returned his attention to the on-going construction depicted in the holotank.

Disgusted, Holt fidgeted and scowled. Placed his stubbled chin in the palm of one hairy hand, began whistling tunelessly through his teeth.

It proved to be all that anyone could do.

IV

*Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney sweepers, come to dust.*

From *Cymbeline* by legendary antebellum
dramatist William Shakespeare, ca 1610 CE

At mid-evening, the Palace of Swords teemed with arriving aristocrats. A stream of sleek large and small verticraft orbited the towering structure, then dropped down singly and in pairs to deposit newcomers on the vast roofpark. Haughty, black-clad smallswordsmen and their provocatively gowned ladies strolled the balmy night. The guests passed thorough roofgardens too perfectly groomed to be real and entered a vaulted gallery lined with paintings, tapestries and statuary, each piece set in splendid isolation to remind viewers of a long-departed, less populated epoch. A tiled, mirrored hallway, subtly lit with faux clerestory windows enhanced the glamour of all forms of attire, and led to a vast foyer paneled in rare natural wood.

Singly and in couples, guests descended the grand stairway of low-risered travertine widening at the base, their measured steps enhancing the dramatic quality of each entrance. At the foot of the stair, a maître d' impeccably clad in scarlet livery bowed one welcome after welcome, and between times tyrannized a squad of flamboyantly liveried pageboys.

Irksome because every one of several dozen null-grav dining cupolas floating above the arena had been reserved, Elan Grey had condescended to join a pair of close acquaintances, Camon and his lady, Elyse, at a table decked with snowy linen on the hall's declass   second tier. Boredly twisting the stem of a champagne flute in his fingers, Elan allowed Elyse's recital of the latest tidbit of scandal go in one ear and out the other.

"Nouveau riche," was Elyse's acidic indictment. "Not that she pretends to be a social climber like that dreadful Derrenfurth creature, or certainly nothing like that holovision actress person who made such a bisexual fool of herself at Eunice's party, but . . . Camon, you are not listening."

"Oh, I most certainly am, Dear One."

"Well, bi or not, at least she had the decency to —"

"I say, Elan," interrupted Camon, look there." In a lapse of social etiquette abhorrent to Convention, he was staring unabashedly in the direction of the grand stairway. "She's here again, the golden goddess."

Elan said, "Who?"

"*Merveilleux!* I'm not at all certain she's real."

Grey set down the champagne flute. Following Camon's gaze, it was his turn to flaunt Convention by staring in a direct unmannerly manner.

In solitary splendor, an unescorted vision descended the sweeping expanse of stair as indeed a goddess might. Her gown a topless fountain of poured gold, her upswept coiffure a golden bronze hue, she seemed to flow down with sensuous grace from riser to broad riser like a ballerina, her body language making it abundantly clear that she had chosen to demean herself in no small way by venturing into the mundane tinkle of cutlery, the murmur of subdued conversation.

"Who *is* she?" breathed Elan.

"I made inquiries when she visited the arena last," said Camon. "No one had the foggiest. You might remember me mentioning her on vidicom that evening when you didn't bother to join us."

"Everything about her," remarked Elyse with feline intonation, "says 'Look at me! I simply *demand* attention'."

“And get it,” enthused Camon.

Mesmerized, Elan continued to blatantly defy Convention by staring transfixed at the grand stairway, reminding himself that it was needful to exercise careful judgment. Transvestitism was common; the Planners proactively encouraged homosexuality and bisexuality as valuable if totally insignificant factors of the unbalanced population control equation. The longer Grey studied the golden goddess, the more certain he became that no berdache had ever moved with such natural grace, or exuded quite the same aura of pulse-speeding femininity. “A golden goddess,” he murmured, “all alone by some freak of circumstance. Will you excuse me?”

“Elan, if might not be wise to, er . . .”

Rising before cold reason could overwhelm the sudden impulse that overcame him, Elan wended his way between tables head high, his breathing quickened, the crimson-lined cape swirling behind him, the funereal tunic clutching him tightly across the chest.

Stepping down to the hall’s floor, he strode past the maître d’ and his entourage, paused at the foot of the grand staircase and bowed lithely, but not too low. “Good evening, milady. How delightful to learn you illuminate this poor place us with your gracious presence. Would you care to honor my friends and me by joining us?”

Caught up the level, relaxed gaze of the vision’s striking eyes, he stood poised, waiting, not knowing what to expect. *Even the irises of her gold-lashed eyes, he thought, are tinted a delicate golden shade.* Nevertheless, he found the indifferent light in those wonderful eyes somehow disconcerting.

“Why not?” said the golden goddess, and casually took his arm.

Conscious of the picture they must make as a twosome, he in his impeccable Blacks, with the dazzling woman on his arm, Elan felt the covert attention of many eyes as he conducted the golden goddess past tables occupied by suave diners who had trouble pretending not to notice their passage. Arriving at the second tier table he shared with his friends, he was distantly amused by watching Camon fall all over himself by leaping to his feet and performing a sweeping, exaggerated bow of deference.

Elan presented his impromptu guest. “Sera, it’s my distinct pleasure to introduce my dearest of dear friends, Elyse and Camon.”

Camon gushed a delighted welcome, but Elyse’s savoir-faire had deserted her entirely.

The golden goddess’ nod of acknowledgment, while polite, was entirely noncommittal. She permitted Elan to hold a chair for her and seated herself gracefully. “Good gentles, might I impose upon you for a glass of bubbly?”

Camon outdid himself fumbling a towel-wrapped bottle from the ice bucket and decanting the wine.

Her frozen smile wholly synthetic, Elyse said with icy intonation, “Everyone simply must rave on and on complimenting your gown, sera. And your skin tone as well. It’s so . . . exotic.”

“It does guard against sunburn.” Her contralto drawl laden with more than a touch of sarcasm, the golden goddess turned to Elan. “And your name is no doubt a secret, bold ser.”

“Elan Grey, milady.” Asking his name directly, even in a roundabout way, was a breach of Conventional etiquette that drew a moue of displeasure from Elyse. Enjoying her discomfi-

ture, it pleased Elan to see Elyse's sharp kitty claws clipped short for a change. He also noticed a brief flicker of amusement illuminate the startling golden eyes.

"Grey, Grey . . ." repeated the golden goddess. "One of Luna's co-directors has the same calling."

"That would be my pater," said Elan. "He was recently appointed to the directorship of some dreary outworld. Since you know of him, might one inquire if you are from Luna?" It seemed the simplest way to learn who she was.

"Among other places," replied the golden goddess in an offhand manner, conceding nothing. "Tell me if you will be so kind, good gentles, what if anything does one do for excitement here in the Palace of Swords?"

"One . . . dines," said the flustered Camon. "And of course there will pattern dancing in the Grand Ballroom."

"Of course," echoed their unexpected guest, the penetrant gaze of her striking golden eyes infecting Camon with a case of mild fidgets. "The arena, so I was told, has a lively reputation for excitement." She glanced around the immense hall. "If so, it has to be a well kept secret. Am I to be disappointed?"

Elan was quick to say, "That depends on your view of excitement, sera. Several challenges are sure to occur during the evening. A brisk bout at swords can liven things up, don't you think?"

The golden lips curved in a shadow smile. "Much more so than pattern dancing, ser Grey. Tell me, are you an adept with a sword?"

Blunt as well as beautiful, thought Elan. Whoever she was, the golden goddess had a habit of taking of taking one delightfully direct tack after another. "A mere novice," he said to sustain a pose of purposeful gallantry.

"False modesty," objected Camon. "Don't believe it for one instant, sera. Elan ranks among the very finest smallswordsmen in the hall."

"Really? How fascinating." The golden eyes raked Elan in fresh appraisal. "And are you feeling sportive this evening, ser Grey?"

Taken aback by the cascade of direct, unmannerly questions, Elan decided the golden goddess was a fast mover who certainly spoke directly to the point. He chuckled in a vain attempt at self-deprecation. "I fear that I might fare quite badly, sera. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to provide excitement for one so lovely, but to my misfortune there are masters in the hall who would spit me like a plucked fowl."

"Misfortune aside," she said, drawing out the words, "I believe excitement was the topic of the moment."

"Ah, how true, sera. Would that misfortune could be cast aside and replaced with excitement. Then too," said Elan, feebly trying to retain his balance, "the burden of my trifling government post prohibits me from accepting casual challenges. I am inhibited, you see, by Congressional immunity of the very lowest order."

Raking Grey, candid disapproval in her golden eyes, she drawled, "Ser Camon, I believe you were perhaps correct. Ser Grey strikes me as an exceptionally modest swordsman."

The inference was obvious, and Elyse's sharply indrawn breath gave away her shock at hearing what she considered an extremely rude utterance.

Elan felt his face growing warm. He heard himself say, "Sera, you have me at a terrible disadvantage. Have I displeased you in some way? If so, I should like to make amends."

"Whatever made you think that, ser Grey?"

"Well, I —"

"Perhaps it is I who should be apologetic. Have I upset you in some way?" she inquired, the golden eyes keenly fixed on him. "It was my impression that all gentes simply *adore* dueling. If my sly effort to tickle you into rushing out there and offering challenge has given some form of offense, I am deeply and truly sorry."

"I, uh . . . No! Certainly not, sera. I am . . . by no means offended," he lied. Despite the disclaimer, he could not quite seem to hide his distress. "It's just that . . . Well, I have no reason to, uh . . . offer challenge."

"Is a reason necessary?" she asked, suddenly sounding ingenuous.

Bemused as well as baffled by the question's peculiar nature, Elan forced a slow grin. "Sera, not for the world give offense, but may I say that perhaps you do not understand how such things as challenges come about here in the arena. Entertaining, non-lethal bouts are arranged for sportive reasons, and nothing more. But aside from a cadre of professional gladiators, no patrician would ever dare engage in a prearranged duel. When professionals clash, the wagering is thick and fast. Enormous sums change hand."

"And are you saying, ser Grey, that you are merely an amateur?"

Elan sipped champagne, cloaking the pause needed to determine whether or not he had been insulted. The wine was as flat as his response. "I, yes . . . I suppose, er . . . I have never given the matter a great deal of thought, sera. But in a sense I have no choice but to regard myself as an amateur. Casting challenges about without provocation is considered execrably bad form. Most gentes, in fact, would consider doing so a serious breach of Convention."

"Really? Why if I may ask would that be the case, ser Grey?" She glanced toward the arena's center ring, now crowded with posturing, conversing smallswordsmen. "You should have no difficulty provoking any of those gentes."

At a loss for words, the only response Elan could come up with was a hollow laugh. "Quite true, sera. Your pardon, but may I in turn ask why you are so interested in having me offer challenge?"

The golden eyes studied him over the rim of her champagne flute. "Oh, I thought it might generate a tad of the excitement we were discussing. Other than the three of you, I am totally without friends here in the palace, and even we are barely acquainted. I like excitement," she said, as if that answered everything.

Hardly able to contain himself, Elan said, "Sera, in the face of encouragement like that, what else can one do?" He rose and bowed low.

The outré conversation had left Elyse open-mouthed, and Camon wearing an expression of wide-eyed alarm. "Elan, your imperial immunity . . . I really do not believe it would be wise for you to . . ."

Grey's stern, burning glance silenced his friend. "Camon, Elyse," he said, "will you please do me the honor of entertaining milady for a short time? Please see that she has everything she desires." He took the goddess' golden hand, touched his lips to the golden fingers. "Sera, it's my sincere hope that you will not become impatient if I leave you for a time in good company. Please enjoy yourself."

Pivoting, the ebon cape fluttering from his shoulders in a crimson-lined swirl, he made a deliberate effort to restrain his departing gait to that of a casual stroll.

* * *

But leaving the table, he began to reconsider his rash act of bravado. He had been manipulated, and he did not like it. What nonsense! Here he was, dispatched to perform like some cheap gladiator at the behest of a painted gaud. His somber cape perked up by the long, glittering line of his scabbarded rapier, he was torn between a strong sense of outrage and puckish delight at the thought of allowing himself to be manipulated, and made his way to the wide promenade that encircled the arena's center ring.

The gall of that golden wench! he thought with a twinge of bitterness.

The expansive, elliptical Palace of Swords was jam-packed in late evening, the promenade crowded with strolling patricians, their general aspect somber, in no way convivial. Aristocratic matte-black was not the merely the predominant color, but the sole color of garb worn here beside the red cork of the arena. Touchy, well-bred elitists looked pointedly through one another as they strolled, ever on the prowl for an incautious elbow, a remark overheard, or in extreme cases the haughty stare of challenge. The golden goddess had been correct about one thing: provoking a tiff should be a simple matter on this night.

He covertly scanned the knots of smallswordsmen he strolled past, nodding now and again to an acquaintance who recognized him, and was recognized by him. It soon became apparent that a number of professionals were in attendance, some effete, some extremely masculine, and all equally dangerous. As he ambled past, snatches of one conversation or another met his ear, many if not most having the sound of repetitious monotony, practically a litany.

"... hence one parries in sixte, my bold one."

"No, not the coupé. Never the coupé while overextended."

"Oh, I agree. He is endowed with fabulous reflexes, but lacks Dolph's wrist..."

Elan searched for a familiar, convenient face in the crowd. Simplest by far would be to run across Claude Graham in the throng. But, no; that amounted to an unworthy notion. Claude would be too easy. Ten paces farther around the promenade, his quest for an opponent was settled for him. Stepping around a cluster of conversing smallswordsmen, he felt something brush his cape.

A voice close at hand said, "If I'm not mistaken, gentle ser, you jostled me."

Grey halted and turned with leisurely grace, his features perfectly composed. The stocky gente who had spoken stood poised on the balls of his feet. On his head was a blond wig curled and pomaded in the fashionable, dandyish style.

"Why, yes," admitted Elan urbanely, "I believe I am guilty, gentle ser."

"Well spoken, noble gente." The other bowed. "Will it be your pleasure to make the Salute, or shall I assume the privilege?"

“Hold, Solin.” A slender, sharp-featured aristocrat stepped forward.

Elan’s erstwhile opponent hesitated. “Is this smallswordsmen known to you, Pyron?”

“I know of him.” The premiere gladiator eyed Grey archly.

Elan had immediately recognized Pyron Nyemeister. He felt a prickle of anticipation gather in his shoulders, race along his spine.

“He is none other than the Grey cub,” announced Nyemeister. His manner lofty, he did not bother glancing at Elan again, thinking it beneath him. “Best, I think, to allow him to go his way in peace since he is, as they say, politico.”

Cub! Elan felt the heat rise behind his eyes. *Damn Nyemeister!* When the gladiator finally did deign to look at him again, he found himself lock in the pitiless gaze of eyes the lackluster blue of fathomless, sunlit water. Stemming an urge to snap his fingers in Nyemeister’s arrogant, fine-boned face, anger at the “cub” remark making him thick-tongued. “One wonders, gentle ser Nyemeister, that a renowned master such as you yourself would stoop to interfere in a private dispute.”

The patrician Nyemeister had referred to as Solin glowered. Realizing he had been cheated of his sport, he said, “Off with you, ser Twinkletoes. We brook no defiance of Convention in this hall.”

“If you please, ser Peacock!” said Elan more loudly than he might have intended. Arresting the other’s departure by putting a hand on his arm — a distinct breach of Convention — he said, “Our business is far from finished.” His anger settling into a lightheaded seething, he eyed the gathering of duellists feeling ten meters tall, capable of pulling steel and spitting the whole smirking lot of them. “Althoough what your ‘fatherly’ friend tells might be true, I seem to have carelessly misplaced my Congressional Medallion this evening. Alas, for the moment I am once again a private citizen, and Convention must be served, don’t you think?”

Solin could not disguise his elation. He nonetheless looked to Nyemeister for instruction.

The premiere gladiator, obviously displeased by Grey’s “fatherly” remark, said, “Why not? One can always use sharpening, and who knows? The Grey cub could prove mettlesome. His manners are badly in need of curbing.”

“Should you care to wait,” said Elan hotly, “while I dispose of this smallswordsmen, gentle ser Nyemeister, “I shall be delighted to afford you an opportunity to ‘curb’ my outrageous manners.”

The sally drew smiles all around, except from Nyemeister. Stung by Elan’s sharp words, he said, “Were I you, ser Grey, I would tread lightly and think about curbing that wagging tongue as well. I care little for grandstanders, and none whatever for those who shower challenges knowing themselves under the cloak of imperial protection.”

Sensing he had won the exchange, the glow of impending action warmed Elan. “Permit me to make the challenge, if you will, gentle ser,” he told his erstwhile opponent. Quivering like a racehorse in the starting gate, he stepped back two paces, unsheathed his rapier, touched the pommel to his lips in salute, and bowed low to Solin. “My Grief is as that of Thirty,” he declared in ringing tones. “In my hand I hold the Avenger destined to right all wrongs.”

A mellifluous, well modulated baritone voice filled the arena. “A challenge, good gentles. Attend a challenge in the center ring.”

When Elan had announced his grief to be that of “thirty,” the knowing smiles had all disappeared. The challenge would be to the death, not the simple bout won by a high score his opponent had anticipated.

Elan noted Solin’s suddenly intense expression, the film of perspiration beading his brow and that had not been there earlier. Solin doffed his cape nervously and handed it to an attendant. The demand of fatal recourse had more than surprised him; it had apparently frightened him. He had obviously been expecting nothing more than an opportunity to outpoint Grey.

The aged Swordsmaster appeared, glibly requesting all spectators to clear the cork of the center ring. He faced the duelists standing side by side. “Are your differences indeed beyond reconciliation, good gentles?”

“I demand satisfaction,” said Elan.

His opponent’s affirmative nod was slow in coming.

Moving apart from one another *dégagé*, Elan and his opponent saluted the funereal banner of Imperium Terrestriana together, and then crossed rapiers over the Swordsmaster’s outstretched ceremonial saber. When the saber dropped, they bounded apart *en garde*, came back to recross again over the saber, again sprang apart when it fell away. When they crossed the precisely matched, Convention-set rapiers a third time, even the most distant onlooker knew the duel could only end when one of the aggrieved was either legally deceased, or too badly wounded to continue.

A hush fell over the Palace of Swords. The Swordsmaster whipped his saber downward, and Elan came face-to-face with his opponent. Moving to his right with agile grace, he allowed two experimental beats on the foible, but did not react. Parrying a half-hearted attack in fourth, he riposted nicely and came under a skillful assault, allowing the other to drive him slowly but steadily back toward the wall of spectators on the promenade ring.

Solin pressed him, leaving not the slightest doubt in Elan’s mind that if he relaxed it would be over quickly. He made a conscious effort not to think, letting the reflexive skills learned during a thousand hours of sweat and drill take over, and fell into a rhythm punctuated by the chill snick of steel on finely tempered steel.

Seconds later Solin taught him an important lesson that confirmed his love of composite attacks, most often a feint of thrust followed by a pretense of disengagement, and a lightning thrust in low line. Once, when they were *corps à corps*, the other attempted a *flèche* that Elan met, to his opponent’s surprise, with a sideways bound, a bind and a thrust in third. Solin’s parry came a hair late and seemed to discourage him slightly. Grey could hear his opponent’s heavy breathing when next they closed. Could Solin possibly be tiring so soon? He stamped hard with his lead foot, deciding it was time to go on the attack and speed up the engagement. He felt wonderful, felt as if he could go on until dawn.

It ended abruptly, and to Grey’s surprise seemingly without his volition or involvement. He had tried an *enveloppement*, failed, riposted, and tried a second time, then doubled and redoubled without following through. His rapier took the other high on the chest.

Solin made a small sound in his throat and dropped like an emptied sack. A crimson well broke the somber fabric of his tunic as Elan withdrew, stepped back and came to salute. Lower-

ing his gaze to the fallen ser Solin, he wondered at how little emotion he felt. The examiners appeared and went about their business swiftly, efficiently.

The Swordsmaster rose after having taken a knee while the examiners tended to the corpse. Turning to Grey, he intoned, "Nobly won victory is yours, good gentle," his amplified voice sounding throughout the hall. "Your worthy opponent is deceased. How say you? Have you had satisfaction?"

"I am satisfied," Elan said quietly.

"Then how say you further, gentle ser? Shall your worthy opponent live, or pass on?"

Pretending to ponder the question as a matter of form, Elan knew his reason for a "to the death" challenge had been worse than lame. In truth, his rationale for pronouncing the word "Thirty" had fallen into the deep cleft between unreasonable and ridiculous. To deny Solin life now would be not only unwholesome, but an act of sheer, vicious meanness, something so unpalatable in the eyes of everyone in the Palace of Swords as to be labeled wroth in death and envy after. Furthermore, if he dared to deny Solin life he knew the man's friends would shortly be calling on him one by one, and this man's circle of friends apparently included the premiere gladiator. On the other hand, handing Solin back his life meant that he would most likely have to face his deceased opponent again sometime in the future.

"My opponent was indeed worthy," he said. "He shall live,"

The Swordsmaster performed a deep, respectful bow. "Well spoken, gentle ser. Our most sincere compliments. You have acquitted yourself not only with honor, but with panache."

Elan paused twice before he left the center ring to bow in acknowledgment of scattered bursts of applause from the gathering. An attendant came forward eagerly and asked if he might take away and clean the bloodied rapier, forcing Elan to wait until the plebe returned his sword. Tipping the youth extravagantly, he sheathed the weapon and searched all around the arena for Pyron Nyemeister just in case the premiere gladiator had decided to make something of the "fatherly" slight. But the world's premiere gladiator was nowhere to be seen. After bathing his face in the privacy of the autolave, he made his way back to Camon's table.

His friends had for whatever reason gone elsewhere. Seated regally in the banquette, the golden goddess reposed in solitary splendor. "My," she said with maddening nonchalance, "you were gone such a long time."

"Sincere apologies, sera. The gentleman I was fortunate enough to best seemed selfishly reluctant to part with his life." Unable to keep his gaze from her pert golden breasts, he felt his irritation wither. As always after swordplay, he wanted a woman in the very worst way. Seated in golden aloofness across the table, was the most desirable woman he had ever seen, or hoped to see.

The woman in question favored him with a secret smile. She watched him pour champagne, a curious light in her enigmatic golden eyes.

* * *

Grey stumbled the act of debouching from the lift compartment. An infirm step carried him off balance, the edge of the portal did the rest. One of the public assassins had to catch his arm or he would have fallen on his face. Wrenching free with a curse, he groped for the rapier

that should have leaped out to meet his questing fingers. The move died as it began. He stared down dumbly at the scabbard bobbing untenanted a few centimeters from his left hip.

Grinning at his companion, the second proctor nudged Grey forward and he wobbled between the two public servants down a long corridor, the bright scabbard following the roll of Grey's hips like an obedient puppy, never bumping him, never out of reach.

Escorted into an antechamber, he gratefully sagged into a lounge, allowing it to mold itself to the contours of his badly used frame. He closed his eyes, and the divan immediately took on a distressful spinning motion. He knew he was about to be sick, but could not seem to think of anything positive to do about it. Twice the assassins had refused him the common antidote for ethanol.

Voices penetrated his vertigo from the depths of the antechamber. "What have we here?" inquired a soft contralto.

"Ninth assistant colonial wastebasket administrator, or some such." The proctor's deep masculine baritone was laden with sarcastic overtones. "Isn't he someone expected?"

"No-o-o," trilled the neohuman receptionist, "not to the best of my knowledge."

"Better check your database," advised the second assassin. "We got a redhot a while ago to pick him up, deliver him here."

"His name?"

Elan opened one eye. "Ser Elan Grey, milady," he heard himself announce. He clamped the eye tightly shut; the effort of speaking caused reverberations inside his head that were like a thumped tub.

"Grey . . ." the woman said thoughtfully. "One moment."

The voices dwindled to a confused, monotonic buzz. With profound mental effort, Elan began trying to piece things together. He vaguely remembered coming home and disrobing — a fair start — and tossing his soiled Blacks in the general direction of the autovalet, then . . .

Then what . . . ?

Ah, now it was coming back. Cool blue dawnlight seeping through the damask draperies shrouding his bedchamber had encouraged him to open the glasswall and step out into the terrace garden, where distant purple mountains had been silhouetted against the dim, magic glow in the east, washing the nearer towers in half-tones. Fifteen hundred meters below the terrace balustrade, a billowy fog rolling in from the Pacific had obscured the ground, making the city's wide-spaced, monolithic structures seem to float. He vividly remembered the effect, remembered sprawling in a chaise lounge and composing an impromptu ballade to the golden goddess who had thwarted his attentions so often and so vigorously, with such damnable persistence.

A siege of nausea engulfed him. He blanked his mind and breathed deeply until it passed and his thoughtstream continued to untangle.

The assassins must have come about then. Had he let them in? He didn't think so; they had appeared from nowhere, patronizing and persuasive, urging him to accompany them. Instead, for whatever reason he had clambered atop the narrow balustrade and perched there in defiance. One of the assassins had pleaded with him to jump down, while the other eased around through the shrubbery, thinking to grab him, drag him to safety. But he had outwitted the sly fellow.

No, he reminded himself, at the time he had been in no condition to outwit anyone except himself. He recalled slipping as he made ready to leap down. Then he had suddenly been hanging by his fingernails, looking down into the abyss and roaring drunken laughter.

Two pairs of strong hands had retrieved him. Sometime later, their obdurate refusal of his repeated requests for sobriety capsules had angered him greatly. But when the assassins had patiently explained before whom he was to appear, the bare thought of an audience with the Old One had severely jolted him into a semblance of semi-sobriety. Sobering as the notification had been, however, what was to come had also been perplexing. He could not begin to imagine the flimsiest reason why ser Weldon would want to see him.

Someone shook his shoulder, sending waves of pain lancing through his skull. He swung an arm to ward off the attacker and succeeded only in banging his knuckles on some hard surface.

“Ser Grey . . .”

The shaking resumed. Elan reluctantly opened his eyes and tried to fight off the attacker. The assassin with a mole on his chin was bending over him. “If I may presume, ser Grey, you had best let us help you straighten up. You’ll be called any moment now.”

In answer, Elan grinned stupidly, lurched forward and made a mess on the immaculate tessellated tilework of the director’s antechamber. The assassin almost escaped the deluge in time.

Uttering a string of soft curses, the plebe wiped ineffectively at his tunic.

“I say let’s give the foolish bastard what for,” suggested his companion.

An angry headshake. “It’s chancy. When he comes around, he’ll remember. I know aristocrats, and don’t fancy his steel in my gullet.”

“Come on, we’ll do it my way. He won’t know it, but we’ll be doing the sot a favor.”

* * *

Elan’s reaction to the jet of icy water on his bare skin was a yell not quite bottled up by the autolave walls. He clumsily punched the switch, but the opaqued-glass automatic door refused to budge, and became frantic when the needlespray shifted from cold to moderately warm, then again to cold. The water cycle repeated itself fiendishly. By the time a blast of warm, dry air hit him, he was more or less reasoning clearly, and in an extremely surly mood.

The autovalet seemed to be inoperative, refusing to give him a change of linen. His Blacks were spotted here and there with doubtful stains. Lacking a choice, he donned the garments with evident distaste and emerged, close-cropped dark hair plastered to his high forehead, a study in determined outrage.

The receptionist did not bother to look up. “You may go right in, ser Grey.”

Scowling darkly, Elan said, “Where are the assassins?”

“They were called away, an emergency of some kind.”

“They will have their own emergency when next we meet.”

The woman conscientiously ignored him. Shaking his head to ward off a siege of minor dizziness, he made his way along the familiar, curving corridor leading to the sanctum. Descending a shallow ramp, he strode unsteadily into the director’s lair.

The entrance portal dissolved behind him and immediately gave way to the holographic illusion of a surrounding desert oasis. Framed against the sunset flaring beyond the dunes, a distant procession marked the passage of a nonexistent caravan doomed to endlessly wander through the mirage from no place to nowhere.

Entering a grove of faux palms, he inhaled the faint odor of growing things wafted on a warm breeze languorously swaying the palm fronds, filling and emptying his lungs in an effort to hyperventilate until his head throbbed unmercifully. He trod a picturesque, rough-hewn wooden bridge that spanned a shallow, tinkling stream, pushed aside a clump of low-hanging foliage, and halted abruptly, finding himself locked in the dark, steady gaze of sunken eyes deeply entombed in pendulous folds of mottled flesh.

Although he knew bending forward would cause an agonizing swell inside his head, Elan stiffened, held his infirm knees together and performed a deferential bow, muttering something in the way of a greeting. The outrageous nature of the confrontation made him want to laugh aloud. Here he was, summoned into the presence of the most feared and respected neohuman in existence looking like something freshly dragged from the sea, with a throbbing head, knees shaking like castanets, and a taste in his mouth as if birds had been nesting there. Surely the Old One would see the mordant humor of it.

Unblinking as a waxen image, Ser Weldon Lovelock was not amused in the least. Sitting motionless in his virtual prison, the geriatric chair resting atop a short dais, the director's claw-like hands were folded in his lap.

Maybe he is only an image, came the inane thought. For most of his adult life, Elan had listened to extravagant tales about Terra's legendary director. Some had it that he was long deceased, that his confreres perpetrated upon neohumanity a complex hoax, a thing of platinum and microelectronics or subtle remote control. Artificial enhancements, in addition to untold organ regenerations and transplants doubtless contributed to the period-by-period existence of the emaciated icon who for many, many decades had led Imperium Terrestriana in the manner of some exalted demi-god while managing to sustain an image of truly Augustan proportions. It was common knowledge that Terra's serene, omnipotent director would never think to shirk from a vital decision, or fail to voice some artfully coined bromide of rule.

His mind watery, Grey decided the Old One was only too real. His trifling government post had thrown him into personal contact with ser Weldon on more than one occasion, and anyone privileged to come within the director's overwhelming aura in person became instantly aware of the truth. Ser Weldon Lovelock had endured an empyrean existence for between two and one-half and three centuries. Authorities differed.

The Director of Terra, presiding Planner of the Star Council, Consultant and Adviser to the Congress of Man, et cetera, et al, pointedly cleared his hoary throat, and Elan became aware of the loud silence that had dragged on to an embarrassing length. Brushing a hand across his soiled tunic, he performed a second, pain-inducing bow of deference. "All good wishes, ser Director."

"We believe you already said that, ser Grey."

Elan tugged nervously at the fringe of his cape. "Your pardon, ser Director. I'm not, er, quite myself this morning."

“So . . . ?”

Elan flushed. “I happened to be . . . That is, while entertaining friends last evening we may have overindulged a trifle.”

Dark eyes blazed, the wrinkled mask remained unchanged. “Surely you did not consume natural alcohol, ser Grey. The greenest cub could have told you ethanol is a form of poison.”

His temper flaring, Elan remembered how, during the previous evening at the arena, the premiere gladiator had also denigrated him by using word “cub.” He could see no reason for the director’s cat-and-mouse game, and dared to say, “Natural substances are something of a . . . Well, they amount to rather a fetish with —”

“—with patricians,” supplied Lovelock sourly. “Do not be ashamed of your lineage, ser Grey, if indeed you *are* an aristocrat.”

Now more than simply apprehensive, Elan sensed that this was to be no mere lecture chiding his misconduct, and took a firm grip on himself. The Old One was extremely perturbed about something. Resolving to soft-pedal whatever he had to say until he learned the reason, he said, “Ser Director, if I have offended you in some way, I sincerely regret my —”

“Be silent!” Lovelock looked down, referring to something in a small display integral to the hulking geriatric appliance he seldom felt well enough to leave. “Last evening in the Palace of Swords,” he intoned, “you provoked, challenged and destroyed a buck identified as ser Solin, doing so in the manner of some thrill-seeking professional gladiator. Your first and most heinous infraction of Convention was offering a Salute of Grievance to the level of ultimate recourse. Altogether, three serious infractions were reported. Secondly, and most importantly you, a minor government official bearing Congressional immunity, went out of your way to engage in a public duel, and then demanded fatal recourse although legal grievance was a matter of some doubt.” The hoarse, stentorian voice deepened. “The third offense we shall speak of at a later time. Well, ser Grey, what have you to say for yourself? Is there perhaps and ameliorating circumstance you wish to tell us about?”

Standing in stunned silence before the dais, Elan stretched to find an appropriate response. In his befuddled state he could think of absolutely nothing to say for himself, and came up empty.

“We see here that your opponent, this Solin,” pursued the director, “was awarded resurrection. A truly compassionate act on your parts, ser Grey. One might even say it was a gesture of gallant generosity, since *his* crime, we surmise, may have been to peer at you and your companions in some manner you judged to be unmannerly. Or perhaps Solin was simply curious to learn if the revelry at your table was commensurate with the amount of noise being made.”

Elan lowered his gaze and inspected the t paving beneath his soft boots.

“We do not lecture,” rasped the director inaccurately, “nor do we warn. Should last night’s performance ever be repeated, the consequences are better left to your imagination, assuming that such exists.” A snort of utter contempt. “Nor do we believe anything said here will leave the slightest impression on you.”

The silence grew thick and gravid. Elan shuffled his feet, beginning to feel as if he might strangle.

“Enough! Seat yourself.”

Elan's relief was boundless; a lounge had silently risen from the broad walkway ringing the virtual oasis. He dropped into the cushions and covertly wiped the film of perspiration from his forehead.

"We did not summon you expressly for chastizement," said Lovelock in a different voice, "but the report of your activities was vastly disturbing. You must be made to realize that sooner or later our indulgence will reach an undefined limit, ser Grey. You recognize the truth of that statement, do you not?"

"I . . . yes. Certainly, ser Director."

"One expects a certain amount of carousal from spirited youths, be they patrician or plebeian, but strictly speaking you are no longer a youth. There comes a time in everyone's life when he must pause, reflect, take stock and re-evaluate his goals and ambitions. In adolescence the cycles stretch endlessly before each of us, yet those cycles inexorably begin speeding past by faster and ever faster until, suddenly and to our ultimate distress, it becomes too late to rectify matters.

"You are *not*," emphasized the director, "destined to throw away your essence in pursuit of fame as some common gladiator. You know it yourself, or would if now and then you were to pause and give yourself over to serious, rational self-analysis, a willingness to realize that it was time to cease all vain, foolish pursuits. We have personally studied your genome chart, ser Grey. Your bloodline derives from among the noblest, most ancient of neohuman strains, a pedigree dotted with distinguished ancestral men and women who have consistently contributed to the law, letters, the arts and sciences.

"Therefore we do not command you, but rather implore you," added Lovelock forcefully, "to cease forthwith the life of a wastrel, and perpetuate your noble line. Nay, we *insist* that you do so! Abandon the lifestyle you have adopted and get on with a concrete realization of your potential. There, you have now had our final summation of the subject. We sincerely hope you will henceforth substitute rational thought for emotion, self-gratification, self-glorification and brava-do, or whatever else drives you at present, and begin to nurture and employ your inborn integrity. Should you neglect to take our counsel to heart, the consequences, as we have already suggested, are better left to your vivid imagination. "

"I, uh . . . do. That is, I will, ser Director."

Visibly unimpressed by the assurance, ser Weldon smacked his lips. "Now then, as to the third offense of which we spoke. Tell us if you will, ser Grey, the identity of your feminine companion last night after you slew this malefactor, Solin, in the Palace of Swords?"

"Who she . . . was . . . ?" Elan had a momentary disbelief in his hearing. His ardent pursuit of the golden goddess had been blown from his mind by the morning's explosion. "I, uh, failed to learn her identity, ser Director" He risked a fleet smile.

"Then it is our duty to enlighten you. Her given name is Minor, and her surname happens to be the same as our own. She is, you see, standing behind you at this very moment," declared the Director, his declamation Olympian. "The golden woman you found so utterly fascinating and intriguing happens to be none other than one of our distant descendants."

* * *

Minor Lovelock had enjoyed bearing witness to Grey's chastisement. When he erupted from the lounge and whirled open-mouthed to face her, she derived a flash of satisfaction at seeing her so-handsome, so-ardent pursuer in a state of total dilapidation. During the late hours of the previous evening, after drowning his earlier courtliness in champagne, he had been terribly insistent that she accompany him to his suite. Now he looked so wasted that it was all she could do to keep a straight face. And his *expression* . . . !

"Sera," stumbled Elan, "to say I'm surprised would be —"

"Let's skip all that," said Minor, biting her underlip in a hope of stifling her amusement. He obviously missed the "golden goddess" he had prated about nauseously. She was glad the whim had taken her to return her hair, eyes and skin to their natural appearance. Perching on the arm of the lounge, looked him over with an air of mock gravity. "My, you *are* a mess. Where did you go after I left the arena?"

Grey cast a guilty glance the director's way. He was startled upon learning that the dais and geriatric chair had disappeared, leaving behind a smooth, uninterrupted expanse of tessellated paving. "Where is, uh . . . ?" he asked uncertainly.

"Pay no attention to him. He's playing cupid," she explained. "He's convinced himself that I've been raising too much general hell lately, and wants me to find a steady—a 'mate.' For reasons known only to the greatest of the great, you are the director's prize selection, ser Grey."

"Me?"

"You," she declared.

"That's is a lousy joke, sera."

"Oh, I swear I'm not joking. He's serious, believe me. He's as serious as serious can get, since no one else can be quite as serious as own my great-great-great . . . whatever he is."

Elan groaned. "Please, no more; I've had a nasty morning."

She made a clean-limbed sweep of the holographic oasis and the dunes beyond. "What conclusion would you draw? He's abandoned us in the middle of his private desert. I suppose you'll think of it as an invitation to sweep me off my feet with ardor, charm and virile male finesse. You rehearsed last night for hours."

"Best, I think, if we forget . . . last night."

"Oh, never," she mocked, "shall I be able to forget last night. How could I? I will never, ever get over the way you sweetly explained the intricacies of the chase, or your view that most women, no matter how lovely and desirable, were merely items of comfort and convenience. You described how the real, the alive, the truly 'interesting' women — me for instance — were distinguishable by . . . Oh, you went into extravagant detail, ser Grey."

"Sera, I would very much appreciate it if you would —"

"No, no," she declared with a headshake that swayed her long brownette hair. "Last night will be filed away, and cherished." Minor stopped short at the hint of lighthearted wildness that crept into his eyes.

Elan reached out to capture her hand and drew her down beside him on the lounge. "Why last night's masquerade? You're ten times lovelier just as you are." He studied her with heavy-lidded amusement.

“*Still* going strong? I don’t believe this.” She pulled free. “You’re persistent, I will say that for you. The whole truth of the matter, ser Grey, is that last night’s ‘chance encounter’ in the arena was a one-thousand-percent put up job.”

“Our ‘chance’ encounter . . ? I don’t follow.”

“I was literally thrown at you, thrown in your lap,” she insisted. “Same reason I just told you about.”

“You mean, ser Weldon . . ?”

“It is the Old One’s conceit,” she said, “that nothing happens in the known universe without his knowledge and consent.”

Overcome by the knowledge that things were coming at him too fast, Elan said, “Then why so coy?” He reached for her again, pulled her close.

Minor held up a warning hand. She pretended to consider the question. “Not that I need a reason,” she said, “but when I left the arena you were falling-down drunk. I prefer my men fully conscious, and in properly robust condition.”

Elan laughed and instantly regretting the unconsidered action. He groaned, gingerly kneaded his throbbing temples.

“Hmm-m-m, I suppose a cure-all is in order,” quipped Minor. She manipulated some hidden device; a section of tilework at their feet slid aside. A small, seemingly unsupported table rose silently; resting on it was a goblet of clear liquid. “Drink it,” she invited. “Guaranteed to clear the cobwebs.”

Without questioning its contents, Elan drained the goblet and turned to her, his expression one of frank curiosity. “How is it that we have never met until now?”

“I’ve lived most of my life in Luna. As I told you last night, the co-director in Sinus Iridum was . . . is the senior member of your clan. He and ser Weldon have been acquainted for . . . let me see . . . something on the order of a half-million cycles.”

Elan chuckled. “Or longer. As I recall, we did speak of him last night. But Luna strikes me as a grim place to hide someone as lovely as you.”

“Oh,” she said, “you can get used to anything if you try. Do you imagine Terra to be a major improvement?”

“I’d like to think so. If you don’t, why did you leave Luna?”

She peered at him guardedly. “To be honest, I should explain that my famous forebear brought me here to keep an eye on me. I had gotten to be . . . He had me brought here because I . . .” She, stopped, looked away.

“Because you what . . ?”

“I suicided,” she said. “Twice.”

Startled, Elan said, “You mean you . . ? I don’t believe it.”

“Believe as you wish,” she said, annoyed by the direction their conversation had taken. It was Minor’s favorite dodge with men. She loved to tease them, get them duly ripe, and then blurt it out. Most of those professing undying admiration of everything about her had excused themselves in short order, thus relieving her from the attentions of numberless fops and boors.

“But, why . . ?” he asked.

"If I could answer that," she said, "I probably wouldn't have done it."

"Weren't you examined for motive?"

"To hell with motive!"

"Ah, now you have hit exactly the proper note. On that score, we agree totally."

Minor wrinkled her nose. "Don't believe I was serious, do you?"

"Of course I believe you," he said. "I considered it myself more than once. In fact when I was younger, and much greener — fiftyish thereabouts — I planned it with care. Then I happened to meet someone who . . . No need going into the seamy details. When the time came, I suppose I was having too much fun again."

Her lip curled. "Or else you hadn't the nerve."

"Nerve or the lack of it had nothing to do with it, Minor. Quitting an empty existence is mandatory once you make up your mind it *is* empty."

Her retort was charitable. "A very profound statement, ser Grey."

Elan kneaded his temples. "Your magic potion seems to be working. I think my head wants to stay on my shoulders after all. I'd better dash off now and straighten up."

"That might not be a bad idea."

His glance was sharp. "Brains, beauty and double meanings, all in one lovely package." He lifted her hand tenderly, pulled her close. "To borrow the director's words, sera Lovelock, you 'fascinate and intrigue' me. In truth, you affect me very deeply."

"How thrilling!"

He chuckled. "Do you always say the first thing that pops into your head?"

Minor bristled. "I say what I mean, and most often mean what I say."

"Ouch!" He quickly let go of her hand and recoiled as if avoiding an imaginary slap. "Spirit, too! I could be wrong, but I think we are going to have a lot of fun together."

"Don't count on it, ser Grey."

He rose and bowed, then awarded her a long, searching look and brushed her fingertips with his lips. His long strides carried him quickly across the rough-hewn bridge and into the nonexistent palm grove.

Her expression pensive, Minor watched the somber cape swirl about his retreating figure. "My," she murmured, "what a morbid conversation."

V

Who seeks revenge digs two graves.

A proverb of ancient China

Although it was common practice throughout the imperium to let the master integration complex sort through all other colonial capitals and randomly select an identity not used elsewhere, Holt Morrow did not care for the city's computer-derived name, Sharax.

Nevertheless, he was pleased with the city itself under still construction in all quarters. Sharax had risen swiftly under the guidance and labor of a massive imperial construction crew, and would soon achieve the status of an adolescent metropolis. Even here on the remote frontier almost two hundred and fifty parsecs from Old Terra, and in essence on the periphery of a quasi-interstellar empire growing too fast for its own good, the and engineers and builders, ultra-conscientious professionals all, were accustomed to serving worlds other than their own, and therefore the amenities had been and were being scrupulously observed.

Nothing was being done, or would be done, haphazardly. Contractors, architects and engineers representing dozens of interstellar firms had gathered in the company of a gaggle of urban planners, ecologists, agronomists and other experienced specialists, all of whom possessed unquestioned expertise. Shortly after the commencement of massed groundbreaking efforts, the central area of Sharax had begun taking shape. During one golden afternoon or another, or better still in early evening when soft radiance lit the plazas, broad esplanades and greenbelts, Holt indulged in an inspection stroll. Priding himself on his taste, he savored the newborn cityscape, enjoyed its ambience, its raw newness and vigor despite the fact that almost every building, bridge, esplanade and street was the product of what he called “cookie-cutter architecture and technology” standardized for use in every newly established State Two social matrix.

A professional explorer for more that a century after resigning his commission in the Imperial Space forces, the imperial military arm he insisted on referring to as “the Navy,” he felt privileged to have visited dozens of cities old and new, the centerpieces of neohuman colonies in one stellar system or another. An aura of “rightness” enveloped the wide-spaced residence warrens, the gigantic arcology sub-cities clustered apart from a central government complex crowned by the lofty Directorial Seat. A thousand businesses eagerly captained by colonial entrepreneurs had already sprung up like mushrooms. The riparian esplanade levels were beginning to be adorned with dignified customer lures as the fledgling colony took up age-old neohuman ways — making, buying, selling and consuming.

At one remove a lifelong observer of the neohuman condition, Holt found the majority of colonials he encountered on his walks conversing happily, and in some instances exuberantly. Taking in the balmy evening air, he strolled for block after block in an area not far from the Directorial Seat, now and again pausing to eavesdrop while pretending to consult a memo from his pouch.

“... hear yours is due any time, Seth.”

“A little more than a standard month,” replied another. “Mara’s tough to persuade. Said she didn’t want twins first time out of the gate.”

The parent-to-be added something that made Holt realize what inspired the happy faces and contented smiles. He tried to imagine what it must have been like for the childless exiles to find themselves awarded the right to bear offspring?

Wandering into an open air shopping mall, he stopped once or twice to inspect the wares on display in the few lighted shop windows. Farther along the mall concourse, he came upon a tall, thin individual who was having difficulty persuading an omnidirectional sign to stay lit. Between blinks Holt read:

WEAPONS

The Finest Conventional Swords in Dan

And likely the only ones, he thought. He entered the weapons shop for no particular reason except curiosity, he was aware of the way the dealer's eyes widened at the sight of his Blacks. Nodding cordially, he said, "Nice evening, eh?"

"Indeed, gentle ser." The proprietor stopped fussing with the reluctant sign and stepped away from the display frontage. "If you are interested in a sword, gentle ser, I hesitate to say we have just opened the shop. I apologize for the lack of automated help, and beg your indulgence for that inconvenience."

"Hadn't really thought about it," said Holt, glancing around the shop, "but it might be a good notion to take home a practice blade."

"I'll be delighted to show you what we have in stock, gentle ser."

"Fine," said Holt. "Time to start getting back in the groove. The action around here is liable to pick up soon."

Not entirely sure of the prospective customer's meaning, the proprietor said, "Yes, I imagine so. My line of weaponry was the finest in Wendalia, and will be of equal excellence here in Dan. But this new world is so young. Few here seem interested in either the sport or the Grand Device."

The euphemism earned a grin from Holt, who hadn't heard dueling referred to in that archaic term for a good number of cycles. "If I've heard straight talk," he said, amplifying his remark, "you'll soon have all the trade you can handle."

"Really? May I ask why you think that might be so, gentle ser?"

"The bad news has gotten around yet. Stage Three misfits are starting to filter out of the indoctrination center."

"Involuntaries? Are you sure that is the way of it, gentle ser?"

"Hate to say it, but I'm certain. One boatload's already been warmed-up and shipped groundside, with another in transit."

"But, it's . . . Isn't it far too early for Dan to accomodate convicts? When we woke from cold sleep, the indoctrination center counselor assured us that pending full integration no sequestrees would arrive."

"Uh-huh, that's the way it *should* be. But the Planners . . . Take my word for it: a few thousand of those lice have already landed dirtside and been turned loose."

The proprietor had difficulty interpreting Holt's pedestrian manner of speech. Brow wrinkled, he digested the information.

Morrow took a card from his pouch, seized a stylus on the counter and wrote floridly. "If the alloy's decent, these specs will do for a practice blade."

Eager to record his first sale, the dealer's lips moved as he read the data. He eyed Holt's ancient scabbard, his rapier's battered hilt. "You apparently know weapons better than well, gentle ser. Perhaps I can also interest you in a new rapier?"

"No, don't believe so," denied Holt, "I've hauled this iron halfway round the galaxy. Doubt if I'll ever part with it" He noted the dealer's firm wrists, the way he stood, his weight

balanced on the balls of his feet. “Daresay you were a smallswordsmen to be reckoned with. Care to spar a little?” Holt pulled his rapier from the scabbard.

The dealer drew himself to full stature, bowed and slipped back into the jargon of the arena he had once loved. “I was honored as Wendelian champion of the *épée* for five cycles, gentle sir, and for three with the saber. But I fear before you stands a warrior aged and worn.”

Holt snickered. “You get no argument from me. Standing before you is a warrior even older, and more worn out.”

“Ah, hah!” cried someone from the shop’s entry. “By the sacred Convention! How delightful to once again see a patrician with honest steel in his hand.”

There were three of them, pushing their way into the weapons shop as if they owned it. None wore Blacks; patrician attire had been forbidden to convicts recovering from cold sleep. Their collective appearance and arrogant bearing was unmistakable, however. All three were raffish and lean, their collective attitude one of casual contempt for anyone except themselves.

Forcing himself to remain calm, Holt sheathed his rapier.

The first to appear accosted the dealer gruffly. “You, there. What does your establishment have to offer in the way of a Conventional weapon? My friends and I are eager to belt on trustworthy steel when venturing into this barren wilderness. Or is it you I should be addressing, Graybeard?” His forefinger arrogantly aimed at Holt, the smirking buck snidely corrected himself. “I ask your pardon, good gentle. I somehow overlooked your Blacks.”

Holt did not respond. He drifted toward the rear of the shop and pretended to interest himself in the contents of a display case while fingering the hilt of a dirk nested in the sheath at his belt. A throwing knife was strapped to his left leg, beneath his plaid kilt. They were in the process of arming themselves, meaning he would have a wait. Going against three made for exceptionally long odds, but he thought the tiff might prove interesting.

Idling there, outwardly patient, he listened to the three bucks intimidate the proprietor, and eventually busy themselves hefting weapons, slashing the air and posturing dramatically, all the while joshing and needling one another in ribald terms. The noisiest of the trio, the one with the deadly forefinger, finally lifted a Convention-set rapier.

Holt eased forward and curtly dipped his head, the parody of a bow. “Now that you’ve taken hold of something unguarded, I think we should have a talk.” He drew his rapier with a flourish.

“What, Graybeard? Are you mad?” mocked the finger-pointer. “No, no; this simply will not do. One could easily lose face spitting an elder citizen.”

The other pair laughed.

“You won’t find much gray in my wrist,” warned Holt, bringing his rapier to salute. “You first,” he said, rudely pointing his index finger at the loudmouth, “and then you, and you. *En garde*. Crumbs like you don’t deserve to hear words wasted on a Salute of Grievance.”

The proprietor tentatively intervened. “Please, noble gentes, not here in the shop.”

The amusement displayed by Holt’s opponent had vanished. The picture of insolence, his eyes bright and expectant, his stance aggressive, he faced Holt weapon in hand. “You forget yourself, Graybeard!”

“Hold it!”

To Morrow's dismay, a quartet of Imperial Marines came bursting into the weapons shop and ruined everything.

"Put down your weapons," ordered a sergeant-major, his features stern above the emission bell of a hand laser. "There'll be no scuffles on my watch, or back you go into quarantine."

* * *

The trio of newly arrived sequestrees argued the sergeant-major into near apoplexy over his criminal breach of Convention in stopping a legitimate encounter among peers. Eventually the indignant trio allowed themselves to be herded out the shop weaponless throwing back contemptuous epithets at Morrow.

Holt had settled down knowing it useless to interfere, and ignored the squabble.

"Now then, ser. Who might you be?" Fully conscious of Morrow's Blacks, in the fading heat of the moment the sergeant-major was past caring if the aristocrat took umbrage.

Holt palmed his Congressional Medallion and let the Marine look his fill. "I was minding my own business, Sar-major, buying a sword from this gente, when those three lice trooped in here and started begging for trouble."

"Apologies, ser Morrow. You're an explorer?"

"Was. I was the first to set foot on this pretty lump of mud. Nor are apologies necessary. You did your job and kept the peace."

The veteran non-com thawed and motioned for his detail to relax. "Keeping the peace on your 'pretty lump' will soon get a whole lot harder, ser Morrow. A couple thousand of those sword-happy buckoes are already in the streets, with more to come. Makes me wonder if the director has his head screwed on tight. Allowing a mess like this to brew is . . . It's like turning out the wolves and letting the whole pack run wild with the sheep. What spooks me is that we've no authority to stop a squabble once it starts, only to head it off if we can."

A sober nod. "I know it's bad, and you're right; it'll soon get worse," said Holt. "But don't blame Director Grey. Someone a lot higher up the ladder signed-off on this big mistake." He offered the sergeant-major a black cigarette, called, "pack's open" and chucked the packet to the nearest Imperial Marine. "Not a carcinogen in a carload," he said, "if you put any faith in the ads."

The young marine grinned.

"But all our luck's not rotten," added Holt, waving alight a cigarette. "Right now I expect third-stage vermin are getting dumped here and there all around the periphery. At least in Dan a quota of explorers have stayed on — a few tigers salted amongst the sheep."

The non-com's shrug spoke volumes. "It'll help, sure. Explorers're tough, and if most are like you they won't back down to dandified buckoes. But even so, you and the others'll find it tough to stay alive against the likes of the scurvy bastards we've already run across. Every convict I laid eyes on looks touchy and mean, tougher than a cheap steak and aching for a scrap. What makes things worse is they figure they've got damned little to lose by doing as they please, and nothing in particular to gain by behaving themselves. They don't give a rat's ass about whether or not school keeps, don't care about anything except their stinking 'honor' and that other macho guff."

Holt dragged deeply on the black cigarette. "What can we do about it?"

“Only wish I knew.” The sergeant-major stubbed out his cigarette. “Well, good talking to you, ser Morrow. You’re a lot more sensible than most civilians.”

Gently correcting the non-com, Holt said, “I spent the best part of a century in the Imperial Navy, Sar-major. Loved the service until I got too ornery to take orders. Keep after ‘em, okay?”

“We’ll give it our best.” The non-com saluted gravely.

“By the way,” Holt called after the departing Imperial Marines, “you men must’ve been aboard *Relentless*. Any of you know who the comm CPO is aboard the big yacht?”

“Not me,” denied the sergeant-major. “I spent this cruise dreaming like a frozen mackerel. They put us in the toaster and woke us only fifty, sixty hours ago.”

“That’d be Lieutenant Douras, ser,” suggested one of the other marines. She’s nice.”

“Uh-uh, not the comm officer,” Holt told him, “the chief petty officer.”

“Oh, sure,” piped a fresh-faced young marine. “Career guy named Sance.”

“Jackpot! Garvey Sance.” Holt chortled. “Little gnome of a fella with a fringe of reddish hair and a bald spot?”

“Aye, ser. That’s him.”

Holt grinned. “First hunch that’s paid off for me in cycles. Sic ‘em, Marines. Lean on ‘em hard, okay?”

“Can do, ser Morrow.”

* * *

Toting the wrapped practice sword he had purchased, Holt strolled back toward the Directorial Seat. Just off the esplanade, a half-dozen young men lounged about on the greensward, watching another pair spar with blunted weapons. Thinking voluntary sequestrees might be among them, and itching for the fight he’d missed, he paused to analyze the swordplay. Their ineptness soon convinced him the sparring pair were harmless colonial bumpkins, not convicted third-stage sequestrees.

Approaching slowly, lolling against one tree and then another, he was buffeted by nervous glances that raked his Blacks. Drawing closer he began dropping hints, making pointed suggestions. The most daring youngster of the group finally invited his instruction.

With a guard tipping his new practice blade, Holt gave them all the advice could muster, demonstrating one technique and another until perspiration dripped from the end of his nose, and his swordarm began to ache in a familiar, beloved way.

Arriving in the recently completed apartment complex close to the unfinished Directorial Seat he temporarily called home, he used the showermassage after the recent workout, and then fixed himself a quick bite to eat. Taking took down a decorated wooden box from the walk-in closet’s high shelf, he made a project of cleaning the wicked-looking Casches pistol he had toted around for too many decades to count. The weapon, a genuine antique no one bent upon mayhem would have given serious thought to using, was an illegal, non-Conventional “burner” that endowed the user with a few stray rads when discharged. Worse, the charge exhausted itself in a single round, and two or three minutes were needed to fully recharge it — deficiencies Morrow

found acceptable, since whoever, or whatever, faced the brief inferno of the single round became charred beyond any likelihood of reconstruction or resurrection.

Buckling a worn holster over the cummerbund wound around the waist of his kilt, he fast-drew the Casches pistol several times, reholstered it, grinned a thoroughly nasty grin and felt better about things in general. Activating the vidicom terminal, he gave it a code. Seconds later, a wooden computer voice requested his ID.

“Morrow, seven nine zero three eight two. Hook me up with the starcruiser *Relentless*.”

“Is the vessel in deep space, ser, or on orbit?”

“Orbiting Dan.”

A brief flicker of random pixels gave way to a melange of colored images. A wide-eyed youthful face congealed in the holovision tank. “*Relentless*.”

“Evening. I’d like to speak to Chief Petty Officer Sance.”

The sailor consulted a duty list. “Uh, Chief has the duty now, ser. He’s listed as working in the crypto compartment. If it’s an emergency, I can switch you.”

“Naw, don’t bother the old codger. Can you leave a message?”

“Yessir, glad to.”

“Tell him his old sidekick Morrow called from groundside. Tell him he can buzz me at the Directorial Seat in Sharax if ‘n when he gets a free minute.”

“Aye, ser Morrow. I’ll pass it along right away.”

“Much obliged. You can also tell him to hurry on down first chance he gets.”

The sailor grinned. “Sounds like good times, ser.”

“Might be at that. Thanks.” In the best of spirits, Holt switched off.

* * *

When the conference concluded, Polct dared to arrest an elder in the act of departing. *O Tanis, these happenings exceed one’s understanding.*

The elder dismissed from his mind the spacetime loci of his destination. *As always, was its crisp thought, understanding is a product of assimilation and integration. The predictions amalgamated by Higher Ones into a whole. Were you inattentive to the proceedings?*

The proceedings were closely heeded, O Tanis. Yet understanding falters upon contemplating the actions of these newly arrived beings. In truth, gross dissimilarities exist between them and the first to come. The latecomers display wholly unnatural fierce-minded ferocity, generating whirlpools of emotion wherever they pass.

The dregs of a juvenile species, appraised Tanis. What of them?

Aware that inherent emotion tended to muddle its mental processes, Polct’s response was tentative. *Higher Ones intimate an approaching nodal point, a nexus when sampling might commence. Understanding falters upon questioning what might be learned from sampling such unworthies.*

Discipline thy thinking, urged the elder. A failure to understand action-decision by Higher Ones with regard to the approaching nexus is predictable, perhaps partially forgivable. Loose thinking is neither.

One senses verity in that, O Tanis. I seek only to learn.

Sampling individual specimens, while meaningless in itself, informed the elder, is mandatory in order to form a preliminary basis for eventual integration. The best is in the worst of us, the worst in best; so it is with all species. Whether sampling commences among the isolated instances of loftier, more competent intellects and works its way downward, or begins in the lower depths and progresses upward through more sophisticated levels, is totally irrelevant. Final integration is the same.

Comprehension begins to dawn.

For one whose single purpose is to learn, it is always wise to question what you do not yet understand. Form interpretations, integrate them, predict from them, and then weigh your conclusions against those of the elders. Agonies of indecision and uncertainty are endemic for younglings in your station. Waste not your essence fretting about a lack of immediate comprehension. Devote yourself to learning and rest content, young Polct.

Your wisdom is comforting and reassuring, O Tanis.

As may be. The elder's mildly caustic parting thought was a prelude to its abrupt disappearance.

* * *

Morrow was feeling under the weather, an aftereffect of a night on the town with Imperial Space Forces Chief Communications Mate Garvey Sance, who had obtained a seventy-two-hour pass and shuttled down from his berth aboard *Relentless*. After a backslapping reunion at the space terminal, Holt and his former shipmate had roamed from one to another of the few watering holes Sharax had to offer. Reminiscing about other faces, other places and other times, they had talked over triumphs accomplished, defeats endured and peccadilloes survived.

Finally slumping forward at the table in a spanking new tavern with absolutely no atmosphere, Sance had quietly lost consciousness. Knowing his old chum considered himself an elbow-bender of the old school, drinking him under the table had significantly puffed Morrow's ego. He had somehow managed to get Garvey home to his apartment in the Directorial Seat, unloaded snoring CPO on a divan and fallen into his own hydraulic bed.

Waking in early afternoon with a skull-pounding hangover, he had decided fresh air more needful than medication, and left Sance under a blanket on the lounge while he stepped out. Briskly walking along the esplanade, breathing in huge lungfuls of sweet morning air, he spotted a crowd gathering beyond the a copse of droop-limbed trees in the plaza fronting the Lovelock Foundation Tower.

Eyes narrowed, he thought, *A ruckus of some kind*. Loosening the rapier in its scabbard as he drew near, his first impression was confirmed when he heard the unmistakable sound of swordplay.

A duel in progress!

His brisk walk turned into a lope, along with a wish that he had opted for ethanol antidote instead of exercise and fresh air.

The crowd drew its collective breath, a distinctive, unmistakable sound signifying finality.

A woman's scream rent the air, short and shrill, her outcry punctuated by the muffled crack of an exploding pellet. In a single voice, the congregated individuals roared their disapproval and some backed away; others turned and ran.

Morrow halted abruptly and cleared the Casches pistol from the holster beneath his kilt. Cumbersome antique sidearm heavy in hand, he trotted warily toward the fringe of onlookers, and halted again when a gale of mirthless, hysterical laughter boiled up from somewhere inside the ring of agitated observers.

A woman gasped, broke through the ring of spectators and dashed past Holt looking stricken. He accosted a gente clad in Blacks, demanded to know what had happened.

The patrician's mouth hung open. Wearing a dumbfounded expression, all he seemed able to say way, "Gone!"

"What do you mean?"

"He isn't . . . He's no longer . . . there."

"Who's gone . . . ?" Holt gave up, yelled Gangway!" and elbowed his way through the remaining spectators.

A distinguished looking gente clad in Blacks lay face-up on the terrace in a pool of blood, his chest smashed open.

"You there!" Holt addressed one of the bystanders. "Call Sharax Medicenter. Snap it up! Now then," he said, turning to the group of stunned bystanders. "Who saw what took place here?"

The citizens, all but a few of them colonials, began to disperse murmuring among themselves. No one seemed to have his wits about him. Growing angrier by the second, Holt started to demand an answer when someone behind him said, "Ser Morrow . . ."

Holt whirled. "Yes. Did you see what came down?"

"I, uh, did . . . I'm Gailen van Maar, ser Morrow, the xenologist who spoke to you on vidicom not long after we landed."

The speaker, a stocky young man, looked vaguely familiar, perhaps a former explorer. "Sure," lied Holt, "I remember. You're an eye witness?"

"I . . . yes. But I wonder if I can *believe* what I saw."

"What do you mean? Wait, hang on a sec."

Mutterings from the thinning crowd diminished as individuals began leaving the scene. Holstering the Caches pistol, Morrow whipped off his cape and draped it over the fallen aristocrat. He took the xenologist's elbow, tugged him over to a marble bench beside the fountain and sat him down. "Now take a couple of deep breaths and spill it. What the hell happened here?"

"Not real . . . sure," the other said numbly, "where to begin."

"Always begin at the beginning. Take your time. Any idea who the deader is?"

"No, never saw him before." Van Maar blinked repeatedly. "I think the gente over there was . . . Ser Morrow, it just is not possible."

"*What* is not possible?" Holt was becoming incensed. "Come on, get a grip on yourself! Tell me what you saw or so help me I'll choke it out of you."

Van Maar licked his lips. "I had just come back to Sharax from our dig an hour ago. I had dropped off some discs of the latest data in the Lovelock Tower, and left the building walking not far behind the, uh . . . The victim. Ahead of me, another aristocrat startled me when he confronted the gente there on the ground and cried, "'Hold, ser Mason!' I'm not certain of the name. To me it sounded like Mason."

"Go on."

"The other aristocrat approached Mason and without warning slapped him very hard, a roundhouse blow that snapped the gente's around. Saying, 'Now you *will* remember me,' or words to that effect, he drew his rapier with a flourish. His Salute of Grievance exotic and, uh, flowery. It sounded rehearsed, in it a couplet of what sounded like *revanche* poetry. Mason, if that was his name, did not respond, but it was easy to see how red-faced and furious he was. He pulled a Congressional Medallion from his pouch and tossed it at the other's feet."

"At the aggressor's feet?" Holt wanted to know.

"Yes, yes." Van Maar nodded. "His Salute ended informally, a simple statement that his grievance went far beyond proven congressional immunity. By this time the dead gente had his own sword in hand, and the aggressor lunged. The duel was completely one-sided, ser Morow. Mason had no chance, whatsoever. None! I'm not much of a smallswordsmen, but no one who saw the clash could be mistaken about what an unbalanced mismatch it was. From the very first thrust and parry, the aggressor wielded his weapon like an accomplished professional, while Mason struck me as not much more than a journeyman."

"So where's the aggressor?" demanded Holt. "He run off?"

"Uh, not . . . really." A grimace of disbelief. "Mason had fallen, dead or dying. The other, he, uh . . . The aggressor sheathed his rapier and cried, "No resurrection this time!" He pulled out a pellet pistol and fired before anyone could even think about moving to stop him."

Holt glanced at the corpse shrouded by his cape. "Yeah, he was probably right about that. Then what? Where did he go?"

"That's . . . it, ser Morrow, he . . . The gente threw back his head and laughed. Sick laughter it was, the sort of meaningless hilarity you might hear in mental ward."

"That I heard myself. Don't make me ask again. *Where* did the bleeding swordsman go?"

Van Maar's squint evidenced perplexity. "He was suddenly just . . . gone."

"Gone . . . ?"

"Vanished. Disappeared."

Holt grunted. Silent for a few heartbeats, he withdrew a black cigarette from his pouch, waved it alight and drew deeply. "I sort of guessed you were about to tell me that," he said to van Maar, "and I sure as hell wish you hadn't."

* * *

"He was roughly where went it happened?" inquired Pierce Grey.

Gailen van Maar licked his lips and met the director's penetrating gaze. He estimated the distance to the corpse still shrouded by Morrow's cape. "Close to three meters this side of the fountain, he said, indicating the spot. "Wouldn't you agree, ser Morrow?"

“Near as I could tell from back on the other side of the crowd.” Holt hunkered down, resting on his haunches, and inspected the paving. “No burns,” he said. “No scars, marks of any kind.”

“Here’s Maran.” Grey indicated the approaching verticraft.

The vehicle descended cautiously, grounding in a cordoned-off section of the plaza. The hatch swung open. Roberts stepped down and loped toward them. “What is it, Pierce? What happened?”

Everyone tried to speak at once. The director shushed them and outlined the essentials in a subdued voice, choosing his words with care.

Roberts did not protest upon being told of the slayer’s incredible disappearance. His features inscrutable, he stepped over and lifted a corner of Morrow’s cape. After examining the aristocrat’s violated torso, he asked if the deceased’s identity had been established.”

“I believe it was Mason,” volunteered van Maar. “Ser Roberts, how could such a thing be . . . believed?” Unable to contain himself, the xenologist said, “The gente vanished not only before my eyes, but in clear view of everyone present. How can that be *possible*?”

“At the moment, neither I nor anyone else has an explanation. Please excuse us, if you will.” He led Holt and Director Grey aside, intending to speak to them privately. “We take pride,” he said, “in retaining a flexible outlook, yet when confronted by a manifest impossibility . . . A form of shock, I suppose. Did you actually witness the disappearance, Holt?”

“Uh-uh. Saw the hubbub from over on the esplanade and hustled this way. By the time I got here, it was all over.”

“Pierce, have you done anything yet?” inquired Roberts.

“Nothing. What is there I can do? Besides, I wanted your advice.”

Roberts frowned. “Let us hope I’m worthy of counsel. Best, I think, will be to keep the incident quiet for the time being.”

“*Quiet!*” said Holt in surprise. “Think about what you just said, Maran. By now the word’s all over Sharax. How the hell can it be hushed up?”

“Should the Directorial Seat offer neither confirmation nor denial,” suggested Roberts, “and let word of the disappearance hang in the air for a while and settle out gradually, soon even the media will shrug it off as hearsay.” Roberts folded his arms in thought. “Holt, what strikes you most in all of this?”

The question put Morrow off balance. “Well, it was the first public brawl, or so I was told, so I guess you could say —”

“Exactly, the very first ever her in Dan, at least so far as we know. Has the vanished smallswordsmen been identified?”

“His name,” supplied the director, “is Melas, Sayne Melas, a third-stage sequestree. One of my staffers spoke to the woman who counseled his group in the indoctrination center. She said he gave a classic theatrical performance, blithely agreed to undergo rehabilitation, occupational therapy, whatever else she had suggested. But once in hand, his record speaks for itself. He apparently killed Mason, the scientist no longer with us, during a similar confrontation cycles ago in Chalseanne.”

“You telling us his here and now motive,” said Holt, “was most likely plain vanilla revenge?”

“That does seem likely.”

Maran’s features contorted, then relaxed. “We knew the sequestrees would cart their lethal games along with them,” he said, rocking his head angrily. “Pierce, what *happened* to the duelist?”

Grey looked askance at his old friend. “Useless to guess. Perhaps the Danii —”

“Yes, the Danii . . . ?”

“Well,” declared the director, sounding less than certain, “a definite air of mystery surrounds the indigenes. They come and go like shadows, but have demonstrated neither any hint of belligerence, nor for that matter beneficence. They just . . . are, which amounts to a silly statement. Isn’t it conceivable that they removed the aristocrat after he, er . . . ?” Pierce fell silent, dissatisfied with what he had, as well as what he had been about to say.

Nevertheless Roberts pounced. “Removed how, Pierce? No one has ever seen a Danus holding a tool or implement of any sort, let alone a contrivance designed to snatch an evildoer from the midst of a crowd.”

“Please, Maran.”

“Hey, back off a hair,” urged Holt. “Pierce has a point.”

Roberts requested the director’s forgiveness. “Casting suspicion on the Danii does seem appropriate since there are no other suspects. What troubles me deeply is . . . We’ve lived among the Danii for only a short time. In all modesty, I presume to know them as well as any stranger, yet admittedly light-years from knowing them well.” He paused. “To put it bluntly, our intermittent communications with the Danii hint subtly at some obscure form of otherworldly belief.”

“Superstition . . . ?” Holt frowned.

“For want of a better term, yes. A belief in the supranormal is far from a unique characteristic of aboriginal cultures, if by no means at all common in more sophisticated societies. The vast majority of Class Sixteen and higher intellects thus far encountered have outgrown a need for metaphysical trappings. Not so the Danii, or so it would seem.

“In a preliminary attempt to categorize our mysterious hosts,” Roberts continued, “officials here for whatever reasons classified them in the upper sept of the Twenties. I personally believe the practice of pigeonholing not just poorly motivated, but in the present instance ridiculous. There can be little doubt — none in my own mind — as to their standing. I myself am certain the Danii belong to a highly advanced species.”

The director looked troubled. “Yet they believe in a . . . In some form of a supreme being?”

“I didn’t say that, Pierce. I haven’t the slightest idea whether the Danii hold a belief in a god, or gods. None of the criteria established to date in any way relative to what their beliefs may or may not be. Yet something colors their thinking, or at least the portion we are able to follow.”

“Sounds to me,” accused Morrow, “like *you* yourself lean toward holding the Danii responsible for what happened.”

“When I want words put in my mouth,” said Roberts, “I’ll put them there, Holt. Conclusion-jumping doesn’t become you.”

“Sorry, Maran. Next time I’ll bite my tongue.”

“I haven’t the slightest notion whatsoever, not the slightest,” declared Roberts, “with whom the responsibility lies for the gente’s ‘impossible’ disappearance. What is more, I don’t expect to discover the answer anytime in the near future. What I do know, and can say with some degree of certainty, is that the Danii demonstrate immense regard for animate life per se, and that heedless killing is, to them, starkly unthinkable — an egregious act far beyond any type of punishment. Let me stress one simple, inescapable, inarguable fact: the Danii are not as we are, do not think as we do, nor most certainly do not *act* as we do.

“We neohumans,” insisted Roberts, “are newcomers here, and therefore have no choice but to behave as if we wish to learn, and not command servitude and obedience from the indigenous population. Remember, very few deep puzzles are ever solved by beginners. We neophytes must firmly remember that *we* are the strangers here, the interlopers. Until now, neohumanity has been virtually alone in the visited galaxy. We’ve encountered primitives of all stripes and appearances, beings advanced to one stage of civilization or another, beings displaying intelligence comparable to our own, and not a few with the collective intelligence of the beasts of the field. We’ve run across countless beings who are physically grotesque, and several species of repulsive exotics. But until now no alien intelligences have overmatched the reasoning ability of a normally endowed neohuman.

“The Danii wear no bodily coverings,” he added, more or less thinking aloud, “apparently lack dwelling places or items of infrastructure, and move freely albeit mysteriously about their lovely planet. But they definitely have not retrogressed, as some of our experts would lead us to believe. The Danii have not ‘returned to nature’ in accordance with one postulate, and are not savages in any sense of the term. They may be benevolent, they may be malevolent, and they very well may fall somewhere in between those poles. As of this period — this instant in time — we have no basis for even presuming to guess.”

Pierce Grey uttered a small sound of discomfiture. “Maran, you’re ranging quite far afield. You bring out ramifications with no direct bearing on the incident at hand, or what can be done about it.”

“I’m afraid I believe otherwise, Pierce.”

“I think what he means,” said Holt, “is that we have to try and buy ourselves some time to find out where the skinny hummers’re coming from.”

“Time . . . ?”

Roberts nodded emphatically. “Correct, Holt. We desperately need breathing space in which to learn by studying the Danii, perhaps even learning to absorb wisdom in a direction foreign to the basic nature of our kind. We must think of this as the opportunity for which neohumanity has subconsciously waited untold thousands of cycles, an opportunity to get outside ourselves and for the very first time perhaps gain a pristine, truly objective viewpoint of the neohuman condition.”

Pierce ruminated. “I’ll carefully consider any advice you care to give, Maran.”

Roberts didn't hesitate. "Send the young xenologist to Terra at once," he said. "He's a credible eyewitness, obviously intelligent if perhaps a touch excitable. To the best of my knowledge, he has never been near the homeworld, and will need coaching in the urbanities. The crux of it is simply this, Pierce. He can be psyched to exhaustion in both the waking or somnolent state and will consistently give the identical testimony. We will provide him with every shred of evidence to substantiate his account of the disappearance. After all, the Planners are not fools. The most suspicious among them will *have* to give some credence to his account of the incident."

Director Grey mulled the proposal. "Reading between the lines, Maran, I believe you're suggesting that unless we stack the deck in our favor —"

"— we may be forced to forfeit the game," supplied Roberts. "And if that should happen, it's conceivable that we may never again be dealt a promising hand like this current one. I urge you in the strongest possible terms to do it, Pierce. We must try everything within reason, everything we can imagine, to convince the Planners that what happened is fact, not fiction. Your eldest son is still in Terra, isn't he?"

"Elan . . . ? Yes, it's safe to say he will never leave the homeworld."

"All well and good, but perhaps he can be helpful. Have the xenologist carry a private message to him that explains our current situation in detail, not just this incredible incident. Include what little background we've managed to gather on the Danii, and plead with him to personally intercede with ser Weldon. Everything must be tried in order to encourage a halt in colonization until this mystery unravels."

Obviously reluctant to agree, Grey eventually gave in. "I'll do so at once, follow your advice to the letter, Maran. I have serious doubts about whether Elan would be willing to intervene with the Old One on our behalf, but it might be worth a try."

"Ser Weldon Lovelock is a living legend," said Roberts. "He can be incredibly stubborn, but also incredibly astute. He must be made to accept the fact that Dan, as of this moment, is incompatible with third-stage integration, or for that matter unfit for normal voluntary colonization." Roberts placed a warning hand on the Director's shoulder. "But a caveat accompanying the dangerous message will have to be delivered subtly, Pierce, with utmost discretion. Should Lovelock suspect his empire in the slightest degree of jeopardy, no matter how fanciful that may sound, he will order the Danii destroyed."

"Really, Maran! A bit farfetched, isn't it? I'm afraid you're jumping to a conclusion that the Planners will never —"

"Best listen to him, Pierce," advised Morrow soberly.

"Never, for any reason imaginable," cautioned Roberts, "underestimate ser Weldon Lovelock. I rarely say anything against him or his diamond-hard policies. He's accomplished ten-times-more during his century in office than any other leadership figure in recorded history. But he can also be totally ruthless when he deems it necessary.

"Heed me!" said Roberts dramatically. "Genocidal 'cleansing' of the Danii is not the remote possibility you may envision. There are precedents, dark secrets locked within the Star Council archives that will never be allowed into the light. I would gladly forfeit my own life to avoid such a horror."

The director scrutinized Roberts analytically. He realized what he saw in the other's eyes reflected utter sincerity as well as an equal measure of deep concern. "We shall do what we can," he promised, "to make certain the message is listened to and appreciated by the Planners for what it is. I'll take the xenologist aside for a heart to heart talk, and then set the machinery in motion." The director turned and beckoned van Maar.

Holt trailed Maran Roberts to the cloaked figure of the slain aristocrat. A metallic glint caught his eye, and he hunkered down for a closer look.

Dried blood made a ghastly shining island of Mason's Congressional Medallion. The platinum disc depicted the stylized figure of neohumanity, arms outstretched to the universe. Holt looked up and met Roberts' brooding gaze. In a subdued monotone, he quoted the circumscribed maxim of Imperium Terrestrianum: "*Ecce homo Triumphalis!* . . ."

"I wonder," said Maran, "how much longer those deathless words will have meaning?"

VI

*None love the messenger
who brings bad news.*

Sophocles, ancient Greek
tragedian, circa 450 BCE

Limpid and clear in the shallows, gentle waves of the lagoon broke upon a long, curving beach of dark gray volcanic sand. On the verge of the strand, clusters of coconut palms undulated in the trade wind. Ser Weldon Lovelock's dais faced the sea, the ever-changing sea, purple-shadowed here and there where scudding fluffs of fair weather cloud occluded the sun, emerald green and flecked with spume-topped whitecaps out beyond the reef where a thrust of rock was alive with sea birds.

The director had just finished lunch — the scant, unpalatable ingestion of nutriments dictated to the milligram by the medical team overseeing every minute facet of his hyperextended existence. Ser Weldon contemplated the seascape with unseeing eyes and mulled the current crop of neverending, multifaceted problems. Colonia Argentia was again demanding attention. Rioting had broken out afresh over the long-standing social problems centered about overpopulation. The collateral insurgency had swelled to unacceptable proportions in the cities, and threatened to get completely out of hand.

Why was it, Lovelock asked himself, that systems colonized predominantly by Latin strains persisted in evolving into societies where population control became not only a paramount issue, but the most prominent one? Was some hyper-reproductive urge ingrained within the collective Latin genome? He made a mental note to unofficially query a close acquaintance on the Genetics Board. It might be one of those odd theories worthy of investigation.

Then there was the conundrum posed by a fellow Planner, one ser Corte Errold, who once again seemed to have transformed himself from dedicated associate to problematic nuisance. What course would be most provident in dealing with Errold? Coups and revolutionary plots,

major and minor alike, were a very old, very tiresome story to the long line of Terran directors. It was a just one more unneeded bother to be forced to order surveillance on a senior Planner of the Star Council. By this time the self-proclaimed “statesman” that was Errold certainly should have become aware of the potential consequences that might well result from his refractive diatribes. A duo-centenarian in his own right, Errold was nevertheless an antagonist who required deft handling. Would the ambitious gente never begin to appreciate the basic nature of his opposition to established policy, or most especially the potential consequences?

Not far down the current list of quandaries was the totally untoward incident reported by Pierce Grey, whom he himself and most fellow Planners considered eminently trustworthy or his appointment as director of a semi-integrated frontier planet would never have been sanctioned. Had word of the inexplicable disappearance of some sequestered aristocrat been received from anyone of lesser stature, he would have dismissed the report out of hand. But his opinion of Grey was changed. Pierce had always been, and would remain until proven otherwise, a gente of unquestioned integrity.

Detesting the pungent odor of mystery, ser Weldon had judged as mildly disturbed the combination of an aboriginal species which apparently exhibited an as yet unknown degree of superior intelligence, and then hearing of their suspected involvement in an overtly fantastic incident in a thus far unintegrated social matrix harboring prematurely dumped involuntary sequestrees. He had accepted the notification verbatim due only to Grey’s reputation for veracity, as well as his own, lengthy personal acquaintance with the accomplished public servant. But all things considered, the report of an outré occurrence witnessed by numbers of individuals with absolutely no axe to grind did not sit well with ser Weldon.

Upon receipt of the transmittal from Grey, he had ordered some quiet sleuthing on his own. This gente Melas, the aristocrat said to have vanished into thin air after slaying some scientist in an illegal duel, had turned out to be none other than the feckless scion of another personal acquaintance, ser Warren Melas. It seemed that Melas père, badgered incessantly by his dissolute offspring to ferret out the whereabouts of the scientist in question, had pulled some awfully touchy strings within the Star Council in order to ensure his worthless offspring’s sequestration in Planet Dan. It had also been reported that eight subjective cycles prior to the unheard of incident, the younger Melas, a voluntary colonial who not many cycles earlier had relocated to Chalseanne, a planet of the Lalande System, had slain the same scientist during the course of a similar illegal duel. In the wake of this original confrontation, the scientist had of course been resurrected — ultimately, it now appeared, to no avail. Driven by the most common form of all-too-common revenge, the younger Melas had not only sought out the scientist, Mason, but had dared to repeat the infamous act. Revenge was, after all, a motive ser Weldon Lovelock understood better than most others of his select peer group.

Through intermediaries, he had first let it be known by word of mouth that he was mightily displeased over the reprehensible behavior of Melas the younger, and had then forgotten the matter entirely until period before last, when the shuttle carrying Grey’s emissary had grounded on the floating metal quay of Space Terminal Pacific. During the interim since his arrival, the purported xenologist had been wrung dry in private sessions conducted by a team of trance technicians, psychologists and psychometricians. The resulting report had served only to heighten ser

Weldon's interest in the mystery, as well as his perplexity, but had done nothing to change his willing suspension of disbelief. According to Director Grey, ser van Maar, if he correctly recalled the former explorer's name, was indeed a reliable eyewitness to the unheard of disappearance, for his conscious and subconscious testimony had definitely corroborated the account forwarded by Pierce Grey, who had also cited the testimony of a dozen and more colonials prepared to swear in the name of sacred Convention that they had also seen the victorious duelist vanish in the manner of a lamp being switched off.

Ser Weldon, looking forward to an enlightening session with the outworlder, touched a switch plaque on the geriatric chair's padded armrest, activating the cyborg. "Our next appointment?"

"You requested an hour free after lunch, ser Director," the man-machine responded dutifully.

"Has the emissary from Dan arrived?"

"An hour ago, ser Director. He awaits your pleasure in the reception chamber."

"And sera Lovelock, ser Grey?"

A short wait. "They are entering as we speak, ser Weldon."

"Bid them enter first."

Ser Weldon heard Minor's quiet laughter even before the pair appeared walking hand-in-hand along pathway. Minor looked flushed, vibrant; the proprietary glance she awarded Grey opened a window on the matchmaking he himself had inspired. He grudging a faint smile that softened his wizened features. "Good afternoon, my children."

Hands clasped, Elan and Minor bowed together.

"We came as quickly as we could," said Elan.

"Sincere apologies for interrupting your holiday. A matter of some urgency has come to our attention."

"We were only sailing around out there on the briny." Minor gestured toward the faux ocean waves rolling shoreward beyond the shingle of dark sands. "Elan's teaching me how to handle the tiller and tack against the wind."

"It sounds enjoyable if one exercises proper caution. Ser Grey," he said, putting an end to the banter, "we are about to receive a visitor, an emissary from your sire. He urged us to invite you to be present during the interview."

Elan looked surprised. "Does it have something to do with me personally, ser Director?"

"In a roundabout way." Lovelock spent a moment explaining the circumstances. "Afterward, we should like your reaction to our visitor's tale, and to the gente himself as well. You see, a duelist in the recently established social matrix your pater governs as a surrogate of the Star Council purportedly vanished within view and earshot of colonials, several aristocrats, and our visitor, a former explorer, among them."

Elan blinked. "Vanished, ser Director?"

"Vanished — *zut!* Disappeared."

"That's impossible," scoffed Minor.

“So one would be led to believe, my dear. Notification of such an outré incident would ordinarily be dismissed as irrational. However, coming from a highly esteemed personal acquaintance like your sire, we believe irrationality can be ruled out.”

Grey puffed his cheeks. “I also know Pierce better than well, ser Director. He is definitely not addicted to strong waters, nor given to shading the truth, and never will be.”

“Unlike his offspring,” observed ser Weldon with sardonic intonation.

Minor stifled a giggle.

Flustered, Elan said, “In no way does Pierce resemble his wayward son, ser Weldon. I assume there has to be more to this outlandish report than seeing double, mass hallucination, or what have you?”

“That,” declared Lovelock, “is precisely what we are gathered to find out. If we recall correctly, you were reared by your distinguished parents and enjoyed a more closely knit familial situation than is the norm. Is that not so?”

Elan cast an uncomfortable glance Minor’s way. “Very much so, ser Director. I lived in the home of Pierce and Alexa from infancy until secondary development.”

A nod. “Just so. Actually, we wished to be assured of that because it constitutes an additional reason why we are anxious to learn your reaction to the fellow’s tale. Evaluate what he has to say, but without taking his statements at face value. Our reason for asking this of you is partially based upon our respect for your pater. We should like you to note any subterranean motives that might lie beneath his narrative, but at the same time remind yourself that Pierce has undertaken a difficult assignment as the director of a semi-integrated social matrix due mainly to being unprepared for the premature influx of third stage sequestrees recently thrust into his adolescent social milieu. The current situation in Planet Dan is no doubt fraught with turmoil, and brings to mind a question. As an act of, shall we say desperation, might not your distinguished sire have gone to the extraordinary length of reporting an inexplicable event simply to alleviate the problem posed by the prospective intake of yet more undesirables?”

Elan did not hesitate to say, “In my opinion, ser Director, doing anything so raw and devious would be totally contrary to Pierce’s character. Not for any reason can I imagine him stooping to fabricate a fantastic incident of the sort you describe. Reporting a falsehood, or for that matter shading the truth, would be inconsistent with Pierce’s nature, and as I said, I do know my pater better than well.”

“You have confirmed our own lofty opinion of him, ser Grey, and that should make for an even more interesting interview. Now then, shall we see what the outworlder has to tell us? He instructed the cyborg to admit the emissary from Dan.

* * *

Anxiety written large in his body language, Gailen van Maar entered the virtual seaside panorama like a lost soul. A slim black briefcase in hand, he edged along a pathway bordering the strand, and his attention strayed to the soughing surf. As a result, he was upon the trio before becoming aware of their presence.

“Welcome, gentle ser van Maar.” A tall, sun-tanned aristocrat immaculately clad in Blacks stepped forward and bowed. “I am Elan Grey.”

“Your kind greeting overwhelms me, ser Grey.” The stilted phrase he had been taught rang hollowly in Gailen’s ear. He performed a feeble imitation of Grey’s sweeping bow of deference in what he hoped was the way he had been coached. Native to a massive planet, the xenologist knew he was too broad shouldered, large-boned and accustomed to rough living in the field for courtliness to be other than foreign. No one born and bred in a high-gee world like Channus could hope to match the lithe grace of an Elan Grey.

Elan introduced Minor.

Self-conscious and extremely nervous over feeling like an oaf, van Maar bowed awkwardly over the hand of the strikingly beautiful woman.

Per Lovelock’s prior instruction, Grey presented him to the director last. Forced to bow a third time toward the aged figure in the geriatric chair, van Maar thought of the penultimate coaching session in Dan, when Roberts had stressed the fact that formal authorization for an interview with Terra’s director was dictated by imperial protocol. He therefore stepped forward and tendered his credentials, Director Pierce Grey’s Congressional Medallion, to ensure his bona fides both as the director’s official envoy. “Ser Director,” he said, beginning the rehearsed, memorized greeting, “we are deeply honored by this unexpected opportunity to visit the homeworld. It is the supreme privilege of a lifetime to convey the best wishes of Director Grey and the peoples of Dan to . . .”

The xenologist broke off in dismay when Director Grey’s Congressional Medallion tinkled on the tiles and rolled around in a diminishing spiral to stop against his polished boot. He bent dumbly, subconsciously thinking to retrieve the platinum disc, thought better of it and stood rigidly erect, awaiting he knew not what.

“Our time is invaluable, ser van Maar,” the Old One declared, his inflection ascerbic. “We would dispense with protocol. Now then, what have you in that satchel, your lunch?”

Van Maar stammered in an agony of embarrassment. “N-no, ser Director. My only wish is to —”

“Come, come. We are in receipt of an utterly outrageous communiqué from Director Grey, who happens to be not only an accomplished gente known to us personally, but an imperial public servant of the loftiest caliber. Baldly stated, the transmittal from Director Grey describes in detail the unaccountable disappearance of a sequestered transportee in plain view of a crowd of citizens, including you yourself.

“Be assured of one thing before you say further, ser van Maar,” added the director, dripping sarcasm. “We brook little patience with fairy tales, and none whatever with practical jokes. It is our desire that you forthwith furnish the names of those responsible for this hoax, and do no more. Have we made that perfectly clear?”

The director’s stentorian, hammering voice gave van Maar an opportunity to regain a certain amount of self-composure. Flushed and unhappy, he fell back on what Roberts had confided to him about the Old One. “With every iota of respect, ser Director, I must insist that there is no hoax. I pledge on my honor this to be true.”

“You overstrain our credibility.”

“Ser Director, if I may plead for indulgence,” dared the xenologist, “the incident in question begs a thorough hearing. It is deserving of a much more than a ‘bald statement’.”

Staring down at the xenologist from his high seat on the dais, Lovelock gestured impatiently with one withered hand. "Continue, ser van Maar. Please be concise."

Standing tall before what he could not help thinking of as the "throne," Gailen van Maar drew a deep breath and launched into the rehearsed speech. He characterized himself as a former explorer specializing in xenoarchaeology, a profession in which only irrefutable evidence could be given credence. "Unfortunately, ser Director, the words poetic license needed to describe the idyllic nature of Planet Dan is not mine to use. I say this in a hope that you will forgive me for not straying from rigorous scientific statement and attempting to use terms that come to mind with difficulty. In short, Dan is unique, a world of quiet dignity and beauty, and very ancient. The epeirogeny experts attached to our exploratory team estimated Dan to be much older than Terra. The indigenes whose identity we transliterate as Danii, are believed to be the members of a truly accomplished alien species . . ."

Making a conscientious effort to speak clearly, with conviction, the xenologist did his best to inject the tone and inflection drilled into him by Roberts and Director Grey. Aware that his 'performance' was at odds with his background and pragmatic outlook, he did possess an excellent memory. "The Old One," Roberts had repeated time and again, "is first, foremost and above all else a politician. Nothing you say will impress him half as much as the manner in which it is said."

Delving into the abrupt, mysterious comings and goings of the Danii, intelligent beings with no discernible habitats anywhere on the planet or beneath the surface, he explained being torn away from his work supervising an excavation at the site of a truly ancient, indigenous city in order to visit Old Terra on a mission Director Grey believed of extreme gravity. Dwelling at length on the civil chaos incurred by the premature importation of convicted sequestrees, his speech became more halting as he tried to give an impression of choosing just the appropriate term after what he had been taught would be just the proper hesitation. He gradually worked his way into the circumstances surrounding the duel, he described the climactic events in very few words as possible, and announced disappearance quietly, undramatically.

"No clue," he concluded on a solemn note, "or conceivable rationale for the gent's disappearance has suggested itself. Neither Director Grey nor anyone else in authority can begin to guess what happened to the duelist, nor had anything new come to light when I boarded ship than when the incident occurred."

Van Maar drew himself to attention, waiting for the Old One's reaction.

Sitting through the monologue, his seamed countenance a stolid mask, the Director of Terra had outwardly paid close attention to the recital. He lifted gnarled hands, beat them together softly in mock applause. "Bravo, ser van Maar!" he declared with biting sarcasm. "A sterling job of acting withal. For one who styles himself a scientist, the degree of showmanship you injected into your fanciful tale was extraordinary. We believe you could do quite well on the professional holostage."

* * *

Despite having lost himself in the blond, heavy-set outworlder's narrative, Elan Grey took the director's cue in stride. "Might we review your last statement, ser van Maar? You appar-

ently stood bare meters from the sequestered champion of the, er . . . one-sided affair of honor, but were unable to prevent him from discharging his weapon?”

“No one had an chance to intervene, ser Grey. His opponent was on the ground, in his death throes. The aggressor shocked the onlookers by taking out a concealed weapon and firing before anyone could think to stop him, and instantly was no longer there.”

His every aspect one of disbelief, Lovelock turned away to stare fixedly at the false yet convincing seagirt horizon. Elan folded his arms across his chest, a subconsciously defensive posture, neither rebutting nor commenting on the outworlder’s outrageous statement.

Hating them for their lack of understanding about the near-impossible mission he had undertaken, Gailen van Maar cast a forlorn glance at the lovely woman. He was startled to find her level brown eyes filled with, perhaps not understanding, but at least commiseration with his position. Roberts had warned him about the low probability that his tutoring would go undetected, and with a sinking feeling realized it fell between slim and none. He had also been warned that even after the stringent psychological examinations he had undergone, the Old One would never be able to overcome a centuries-long foundation in pragmatism and swallow the outrageous tale he’d had no choice but to tell. Yet he sensed that the astonishingly beautiful young woman whose features were too perfect to be real at least believed in his sincerity.

He became certain when she winked impishly.

Elan had taken to pacing back and forth across the tiled walkway. “Ser van Maar,” he asked at length, “did my pater seem well when you saw him last?”

Lovelock preempted a response from van Maar. “Enough, Elan. That will do. We shall no longer affront our honorable guest’s intelligence. Indulge us if you will, ser van Maar. Please forgive our uncouth behavior. What we have put you through seemed the wisest course beforehand, though now it appears to have been a mistake on our part. Be at ease. Will you take refreshment?”

Gailen felt a huge weight lift from his shoulders. “You are most kind, ser Director, but no thank you. I’m fine.”

The Old One leaned forward, his manner earnestness personified. “Now then, what would you — that is to say, Director Grey — suggest that we do about this . . . untoward happening? Come, what were his instructions? Do not hold back, ser van Maar. Speak frankly and honestly if your aim is to please us greatly. It will save minutes of senseless sparring.”

“You are gracious, ser Director.” Van Maar bowed, straightened and opened his briefcase. Extracting a small, flat cannister, he turned to Elan. “You asked after the well-being of your pater, ser Grey, a rhetorical question I know, but nevertheless one deserving a response. Director Grey was in excellent health when I left Dan. If you will permit me, I do not exaggerate in saying your sire is a truly exceptional gente. He urged me to bring you his message.” Van Maar performed a rather cool bow and handed over the cannister.

Elan bowed in return, his manner equally cool. “You leave me indebted, ser van Maar.”

“Not in any way, ser Grey.” Gailen looked boldly at Lovelock. “My instructions were straightforward, ser Director. I was urged to plead immediate relief from all further colonization. Director Grey believes it would be impossible to overemphasize the vast difference between Dan and all other habitable worlds. Planet Dan, outwardly a second Terra, harbors the Danii, a highly

unusual indigenous alien species about which almost nothing is known except for their radical difference from all other extraterrestrial cultures thus far encountered. In my professional opinion, Dan is the most intriguing and exciting site of any xenoarchaeological discovery in the visited galaxy.”

Gailen touched the briefcase and went on to say, “Ser Director, I have here what little data has been gathered concerning the Danii. Other than high intelligence, they bear only a distant anthropomorphic resemblance to neohumans. Their society, taking for granted that such exists, cannot be readily defined in light of the extremely sketchy knowledge thus far obtained. The Danii have proved to be incredibly difficult to investigate. I have here the views of Director Grey, as well as those of ser Maran Roberts, concerning Dan’s total absence of habitats and infrastructure which —”

“Ah, yes; Roberts,” interrupted Lovelock. “The original dispatch mentioned ser Roberts. A most able and exceptional explorer, if memory serves.”

“Very much so, ser Director. Ser Roberts believes the Danii are the most important extramundane contact in all neohuman history.” Gailen waited for a rebuttal, but was rewarded with nothing more tangible than a sagacious blink. “To preserve, protect and hopefully enrich our Danite contacts,” he continued, “Director Grey strongly advises the closure of Planet Dan to further immigration for an indefinite period.”

“Umm-m-m, yes.” Lovelock steepled bony fingers. “And we should like nothing better than to adopt that course of action immediately ser van Maar. However, as always, with each period that passes, the Star Council becomes more hard-pressed to find and utilize every square kilometer of viable living space, we alone are impotent to comply with the request you have forwarded on behalf of your director. Be assured of how simple it is to make a thoroughly valid recommendation concerning a single planetary social matrix, but the Planners are confronted with the entire imperium, and must by necessity focus out along the globular frontier periphery, where it pains us to tell you frankly only a half-dozen colonies have recently been founded. We realize a half-dozen new worlds may sound like something in the nature of a surfeit to the uninformed, yet an former explorer such as yourself must know that is not the case. Literally billions of citizen relocations are in constant demand, with almost every individual of the multitude laden with special problems associated with being separated from their homeworlds.”

“I understand only too well, ser Director.”

“The Star Council,” declared Lovelock, “will reconvene in several periods, ser van Maar. It is our pleasure to invite your company as our honored guest until that time. The fact of your personal involvement with this puzzling occurrence will once again serve us, and your director as well.”

Summoning Minor with a crook’d finger, her aged yet ageless ancestor said, “My dear, would you be so kind as to aid our guest in contacting the concierge? Give instructions in our name for suitable quarters to be found for ser van Maar here in the Directorial Seat. Perhaps later, after our visitor has rested, you and Elan would like to show him around the reservation.”

“Love to,” said Minor, her warm smile dazzling Gailen van Maar, who bowed low to the Old One. “You are so very gracious, ser Director. Thank you.”

After returning the husky outworlder's parting bow, Elan fingered the cannister his pater had sent him. His expression querulous, he watched Minor lead the xenologist away through the virtual palm grove and remarked drily, "Crude sort."

"A bumpkin, a tool." Ser Weldon's seamed visage had taken on a thoughtful cast. "Yet it verges on an overt impossibility to disbelieve your sire, and difficult to overlook his no doubt noble intentions. Pierce has always shown himself to be a thoroughly incorruptible individual." A knobby fist pounded gently on the geriatric chair's armrest. "Yet we soon *must* learn what actually took place out there."

"But a solitary case of the impossible can't be . . . It couldn't have happened as that fellow described it." Elan's tone was not altogether firm.

"A living, breathing neohuman apparently vanished before what we are forced to assume was a credible audience, or so Pierce informed us, and a 'fact' now borne out by way of his emissary."

"But a solitary case of . . . Ser Director, it's impossible to swallow the incident as factual. Some principle, some method that hasn't come to light surely is responsible. What Pierce tells us could well be a true but fragmentary report."

"A thought we shared until recently." Ser Weldon balled his knobby fists. "Unfortunately, no longer can it be referred to as a 'solitary' case of the impossible."

"Ser Director . . . ?"

The Old One fixed Grey with the penetrant stare that was particularly his own. "While young van Maar was in transit, it seems to have happened again. Not once again, but twice more. We are fast becoming convinced that everything about this strange, distant social matrix needs to be examined in great depth."

Doubly perplexed by the revelation, Elan could think of no reason to disagree with the Old One's conclusion.

VII

*Ah! what avails the classic bent
And what the cultured word,
Against the undoctored incident
That actually occurred?*

Rudyard Kipling, antebellum
British poet, ca 1890 C.E.

Verily, thought Polct, they moil like ants in a trampled hill. Is all as it should be, O Tanis?

The elder tempered his response. *Nicely off balance they are — frightened, actually, yet know not from whence such fear arises. Should the curve follow nominal predictions, a certain degree of progress will be made at this juncture.*

Is there doubt of this? Polct wanted to know.

Not doubt, merely an uncertainty factor that makes added caution mandatory. Our gambit during the succeeding phase will continue to be detached watchfulness. Fear on their part is essential, panic is to be averted at all cost. Their apprehension and insecurity must wax within certain undefinable limits, duely goaded by each sample taken.

Comprehension sits with me now.

That is well, thought the elder wryly. Sustain a high level of interpretative reasoning, O Polct. The level of stress inflicted upon their elders, here and in their native place of existence, should prove adequate. Action-decision under stress can be most revelatory.

Polct reflected on the elder's words of wisdom. A shaping forms in my mind, O Tanis. One wonders at your patience. You must think me dreadfully incompetent.

In no way incompetent. This, your pristine venture into guardianship, forms a crucial nexus on your pathway toward maturity. Were all facets of guardianship to be revealed, explained and laid before you as plain courses, would you develop intellectually? Would artificial stimulation for reaching your ultimate goal be half as valid?

Never, O Tanis. My wisdom grows.

As it should. Observe, integrate, and at every opportunity extrapolate from your sensory perceptions.

Above all else, admonished the elder, think.

* * *

After listening for only minutes, Morrow decided the conference was going absolutely nowhere, and suppressed an urge to get up and walk out of the council chamber. The most prominent example was Commodore Garrigues, who apparently considered himself in firm command of the single starcruiser making up the "task force" he never tired of prating about as the ultimate solution to the Danii and everything else in and around Dan as well.

"By all means, ser Director," said the commodore testily. "I believe your point is well taken. But isn't the question of questions how to determine what's to be *done* about the untenable situation? Every few periods another duelist vanishes without a trace, and nothing is done."

"What would you have us do, Commodore?" inquired Pierce Grey.

A refractory look, and Garrigues was off and running — running off at the mouth, in Holt's opinion — about changing the groundrules for the proctors and members of his vessel's bully squad to keep order in Dan.

"By arresting the bucks who shouldn't be her in the first place?" demanded Holt, speaking up for the first time.

Commodore Garrigues responded with a frown of annoyance.

Ennis Ladeen, the former interim director of Dan prior to Grey's appointment, suggested patience as the prime necessity while forwarding the investigation.

Patience! Thought Grey, bridleing his own impatience, or trying to make an outward show of doing so. Ennis had until then contributed next to nothing to the discussion, and the commodore's wearing habit of stringing out his words until they were afterthoughts dangling from afterthoughts had put he himself on edge. He had called the meeting in order to sound out a cadre of senior officials and trusted others in order to hopefully discover a rationale for temporarily

dealing with the inexplicable string of disappearances. Armed with every sophisticated electronic aid available, more than a dozen teams of what Holt insisted on referring to as “witch hunters” were even then in the field proving themselves wholly ineffective. A team present late the previous afternoon in the newly opened Sharax Palace of Swords had watched helplessly as the victor in a grudge duel vanished in the same way a image dies when a holovision tank is deenergized.

“Commodore,” said Pierce, breaking a brief interlude of silence, “if you have a concrete suggestion we should very much like to hear it. That was our reason for coming together this morning.”

“A suggestion?” With an unnecessary degree of petulance, Garrigues said, “But you’ve already heard it, ser Director. To my way of thinking, we have no recourse but to capture a Danus, subject the creature to rigorous interrogation. The Danii are obviously responsible for these these bizarre happenings. Who else could be the perpetrators? One or more of their, uh . . . leaders should be brought before a tribunal, tried and convicted of their crimes.”

Contempt brought Holt to the edge of his chair. “That might accomplish something, Commodore, assuming it could be done?”

“Indeed, ser Morrow.”

“On the other hand, it might make the skinny hummers sore enough to snatch you, me and every other manjack in this pretty lump.”

“Preposterous!”

“So’s the whole damn thing,” said Holt, sorry for self-righteously allowing himself to be drawn into the pointless discussion. “You’re a career officer, Commodore. Tell me, ever hear the story of the Theta Eridanus Five incident? Happened a passel of cycles ago, and a sorry business it was. Seems the interim director took a dislike to the indigenes — a feral bunch of arboreal savages with zero virtues far as he could see — and made things tough for them. All communication with the new colony stopped suddenlike. The Admiralty diverted a frigate to have a look-see, and the commander must’ve been feeling his oats because he made a serious error and dropped his ship and half a regiment of Imperial Marines groundside to reconnoiter.

“Communication with the frigate and command post,” continued Holt, “also stopped suddenlike, and a task force was ordered to tiptoe in easy and slow. Not a single neohuman was found alive on Theta Eridanus Five. What nobody knew until it was too late was that the ‘backward’ indies lived in symbiosis with a strain of mite-sized insects that carried a virus neohumans hadn’t learned about.”

Garrigues preened himself. “I clearly recall the incident from a lecture at the Academy. The Planners left not a single aborigine alive on Theta Eridanus Five. The colony prospers now.”

“True,” said Holt, thoroughly miffed by the other’s pompous know-it-all manner. “I happened to be with that task force. Not real proud of it.”

The portal dilated and Maran Roberts came in, choosing a seat at the conference table. “Sorry, to be late, Pierce. I was in the field when your summons came. Don’t let me interrupt.”

“Nobody’s saying much worth hearing,” said Holt. “What’s the latest?”

Looking unhappy, Roberts cleared his throat. He announced that a pair of duelists had vanished during the past thirty-six hours, one in the capital, the other in Euphalia on the other

side of the planet. “The buckoes have begun turning their duels games of daring,” he said. “It’s a practice difficult to understand, and impossible to stop.”

“Games . . . ?” said Grey. “What do you mean?”

“I assume it was invented to spice up the contest for both winner and loser. Seaton’s team in Euphalia reported a growing tendency among involuntary sequestrees to offer challenge simply to make the engagement that much more interesting.”

“Not sure I understand . . .” Pierce hesitated.

“Each combatant, you see,” explained Roberts, “is afraid of killing his opponent. The winner vanishes, and the loser is resurrected — a mediocre reward for winning, wouldn’t you say?”

Holt’s lips curved in an appreciative grin. “I’ll be flayed! That has to be the first new wrinkle in Code Duello since the founding fathers drafted Convention.”

* * *

An argument erupted at once, growing to louder, more belligerent proportions than Holt had anticipated. With half an ear, he heard the strong, often angry words flying back and forth and resigned himself to waiting for the rhetoric to diminish, for tempers to flared less strongly.

Turning to the glasswall of the Directorial Seat, he contemplated the cityscape, outwardly peaceful in the afternoon sun. Past the domes and high-rise towers of completed and semi-completed structures, a forest of cranes reared above numerous works under construction. Beyond the Sharax skyline, above not too distant purple mountains, thunderheads were gathering for the diurnal summer shower. From his lofty perch he watched a convertible roof slide closed a hundred floors below the council chamber.

Tiny figures dotted multi-level transwalks interlaced between buildings, and along the riparian esplanade beside the river. Each dot symbolized the aspirations and expectations of an expatriate citizen plunked down in a fresh social matrix some radical distance from his or her homeworld. But even as the relative newcomers had begun reveling in a new life, they had been confronted with something alien to the basic concept of their parent culture, something grossly incompatible and in face diametrically at odds to the sprawling interstellar empire of which each was a minuscule part.

Behind him, Holt heard the squabble deepen. Commodore Garrigues vociferously demanded the authority to gather a military force to employ against the Danii, whereupon Pierce reminded him they were in session, and urged him to restrict his remarks to something pertinent to his role as the Imperial Space Forces commanding officer on site.

Holt rejected the meaningless debate, refusing to take part. He had little patience with the positive but vaporous judgments being rendered, or occasional positive decisions that decided nothing, even those uttered by his worthy if shortsighted friends. Not that it was their fault. With the single exception of Maran Roberts, the confreres showed a lack of flexible thinking, a result he judged due to the misguided good intentions of others long, long ago. Humility had been conscientiously bred out of the neohuman species.

Surely an individual had to be more than a prisoner of bequeathed genome characteristics and the environment. The antebellum ancients, if accepted whole with their cants, superstitions and pseudo-savage reasoning, would have surely owned sufficient humility to at least *suspect* the

supranormal cause he himself, and Roberts, believed at the root of the successive, enigmatic affronts to logic and common sense now under purposeless discussion. But “supranormal” had become a non-operative term in this hyper-enlightened, millennial era of routine interstellar travel, superannuated existence, and harnessing energies beyond comprehension. The very concept of beings superior in any way, shape of form to man-risen-to-lesser-god was starkly unthinkable.

Ecce homo Triumphalis! The rallying cry of Imperium Terrestriana had been trumpeted throughout the visited galaxy. Behold Man, Victorious and Invincible!

Rousing from his reverie, Holt listened to Roberts stress the point he was trying to make. He knew his old comrade better than anyone else possibly could. Maran would forever be the same dedicated, brilliant individual he had admired and labored beside for nearly a century. And he himself was conscious of a collateral truth: the fact that he himself had begun to share Roberts’ intuitive belief in the “Higher Ones” of whom the Danii often spoke in quietly hummed, musical phrases when they bothered to contact neohuman research teams in the verdant glades of Dan.

Were Pierce to be informed of their shared, unstated belief, Holt knew he would naturally scoff. A thoroughly competent, superior individual in his own right, Grey’s intellectual curiosity was bounded by an underdeveloped imagination. A gente of scrupulously integrity, Pierce was afflicted with a sentimental turn of mind. He had entered imperial service, Morrow knew, more because there had been a male aristocrat of his line associated with government for six or seven generations rather than through any particular penchant thereto.

There was no point considering Garrigues. A career military aristocrat, the commodore struck Holt as a minor geneticist’s error, a lower caste patrician who steeped in a romantic saga, a life lived amidst ceremony and the dash and pomp of dress parade. Underbred and overindulged, Garrigues had somehow come to inherit command over men and women who in most respects except lineage were his superiors.

Returning his attention to the skyline of Sharax, he wondered what there was in the makeup of a non-intellectual vagabond like himself that permitted at least the appreciation of, if not the reality, of hypothetical beings the Danii referred to as “Higher Ones.” Pondering the question, he envisioned the elder Danus who had first intimated the existence of Higher Ones in succinct, hummed phrases, the understanding of which demanded the part of him that loved music as well as the part that relished truth. He had accompanied Roberts on that occasion, and relived the pristine encounter in his mind, overcome once again by sense of awe, a sensation of nostalgic yearning. It had been as if he and Roberts were lost children the Danus and his reed-thin companion had found wandering in the forest like lost babes and tried ever so patiently to direct, but with little success. The encounter reminded him of distant, childhood nightmares, for there had been a drawing toward as well as an intuitive urge to flee from the Danii. The remembrance caused him to cringe mentally.

Despite the inevitable consequences, he knew with absolute certainty that sooner or later either he or Roberts would have to take a deep breath and broach the subject of hypothetical Higher Ones. It was more than simply a duty. Again he felt the strangling, subliminal dread that had lately filled his nights with fitful, dozing dreams he chalked up to a ceaseless apprehension born of the dread now steeping the planet, a dread nurtured in his case by his own certain fore-

knowledge of the apocalyptic fires the Planners would visit upon the Danii should the mystery not be solved quickly, to imperial satisfaction.

He also knew time was against them.

* * *

"Holt, are you unwell?" The heated discussion had ceased. Director Grey was regarding Morrow closely.

"No, nothing like that, Pierce. Guess my attention strayed."

"You looked a bit under the weather." His expression dubious, the Director cleared his throat. "Perpetual argument is getting us nowhere. What I intend to do is review the situation as it is known, then ask each of you for specific suggestions to be acted upon if judged worthy. Maran, please show us the latest data, if you will."

Selecting a coin-sized disk from his pouch, Roberts slipped it into the holovision tank's slot. A photomural dissolved on the wall, giving way to a double-hemisphere cartograph of Dan. Spotted here and there were names and dates, their locations marked with small yellow stars. "The first we know about," said Roberts, "was convicted sequestree Sayne Melas here in Sharax. The latest duelist to vanish, was an aristocrat named Stephens in Euphalia. You'll note the predominance of incidents in Euphalia, seven, and here in the capital, five, for a total of twelve. The high incidence of disappearances in our major population centers is indicative of the involuntary sequestrees who tent to congregate in the cities. Eleven of the twelve were patricians, all but one convicted and sequestered involuntarily. Four disappearances were observed by one investigative team or another, and the first of course by ser van Maar. Absolutely nothing new has come to light concerning any of the dozen."

Roberts touched a switch plaque. The map cleared, replaced by a chart filled with curves superimposed on a multicolored grid. "Here are ancillary data — subjects correlated by lineage, by periodic time of disappearance, occupation, earnings, female, male or bisexual attachment, health, notoriety, association with other subjects, and so forth. If in any of these data some relevance can be gleaned it will be something neither I, nor the investigators, nor anyone else has been able to individually or collectively discover."

Seconds wore by. Commodore Garrigues coughed discreetly into a cupped hand. "Ser Roberts, is this all?"

"All, Commodore? Sorry, afraid I don't follow."

"Er, all you've been able to learn about these, er . . . frightful happenings?"

"Commodore, if you were to suddenly vanish from that chair," said Maran, "how, and by what venue, could we hope to find out where and how you had been taken?"

Morrow's lusty guffaw earned a stern look of disapproval from the commodore, who then seized the arms of his chair as if to stabilize his presence. "But, ser Roberts," objected Garrigues, "your casual dismissal of these happenings only makes things worse. Cause and effect are universal processes. What appears to be an impossibility never takes place without a proper, reasonable cause. Cannot!"

"Implausibility might be a better term, Commodore."

"The sword-happy buckoes go elsewhere *whis-s-st!*" summarized Holt. "Can't really argue with that cold, hard fact. So far, end of story."

“No one can argue with that statement,” said Roberts, “but there has to be a better ending to your ‘story’ than simply writing off those who vanish. Commodore Garrigues makes a valid point, Holt. Results in most cases ultimately reveal causes. In which case we have no option other than to broaden our thinking by a full order of magnitude. What if the cause that creates the effect proves plausible in a frame of reference not acceptable to us, to our kind?”

Clearly perplexed, the officer said, “Unacceptable, ser Roberts?”

“It has to do,” clarified Maran, “with what the master computer’s output after evaluating and re-evaluating every shred of all but non-existent physical evidence and available data — every meaningful or semi-meaningful item deemed pertinent or tangentially pertinent to the disappearances, including numerous miscellaneous queries such as where did the subjects go, who or what was responsible for the vanishings, so forth and so on. ‘Insufficient Data’ was the only output posted in every case except one.”

Pierce Grey leaned forward. “And that?”

“When queried about whether the disappearances were living or deceased, a curve was returned indicating a ‘vote’ had been taken between multiply redundant, parallel processors. The range was wide, yet the nominal output indicated an eighty-six-point-four percent probability that the subjects were indeed deceased. The unwritten corollary, naturally, is a thirteen-point-six percent likelihood they are *not* deceased.”

“*Not* dead.” Garrigues looked stunned. “You mean they’re somewhere alive?”

“I did not intend to infer that, Commodore.” Roberts was being patient with Garrigues. “I merely transmitted the output furnished by our ultra-sophisticated deductive equipment.”

“But must we leave such important matters to a machine, ser Roberts? Couldn’t we have deduced it ourselves?”

“Perhaps, but perhaps not,” declared Maran. “We have apparently fallen into the lazy habit of allowing multi-integrating super computers to do our really important thinking for us. Some sliver of information, some niggling fact or factor is apparently buried in the mass of seemingly irrelevant data. Whatever it may be, it has allowed the multi-integration complex in Terra to formulate a non-answer of sorts, but one that may eventually prove significant. Knowing an obscure clue of some kind lurks there in the data, the experts will dig until they find it.”

“Interesting, Maran. *Very* interesting, although it opens no path to understanding in the here and now.” Director Grey rose from his seat at the head of the conference table. Head lowered, pondering, he took to pacing the chamber beside the floor-to-ceiling glasswall, pausing to glance out at the falling rain. At last he said, “A sketchy, obscure picture of what is overtly taken place has been laid before us. Whatever agency or instrumentality is ultimately found to be responsible for the disappearances, I have concluded that the immediate quandary can be temporarily resolved only by employing some type of stopgap solution. In short, the disappearances cannot be allowed to continue. As Holt said a moment ago, ‘end of story.’”

Grey stepped back to the conference table and touched a switch plaque, activating the recorder. “Hour seven-point-two,” he dictated formally. “Director’s conference. Attendees: Commodore Garrigues representing the Imperial Military arm, former Deputy Director Ennis Ladeen, ser Maran Roberts and ser Holt Morrow, consultants to the Directorate. Each of the cit-

ed gentes are hereby directed to ponder quickly, and then furnish their personal views with regard to an immediate short- or long-term solution to the subject problem; and secondly, to suggest a proposed method of implementing each suggested solution. Whatever each cited gente is able to furnish in the way of counsel will not, be assured, go beyond the walls of the Directorial Seat. You may begin, if you will, Commodore.”

Thrust into the spotlight, Garrigues settled his bulk, shifting to a more comfortable position in the chair. “Ser Director, although it is difficult I will try to be objective about this fearful crisis. In a nutshell, my instincts shout the answer loudly. I have no idea how to reconcile the disappearances, but the perpetrators are by necessity members of the indigeneous population, and are among us. What the Danii have amply demonstrated is a talent for some alien form of kidnapping, or worse, and therefore must be held responsible. Force is required to counteract force — a firm imperial rule. I have never been one to use harsh methods in an indiscriminate manner, but in this vital instance force seems obligatory. The answer to this puzzle, and the dilemma it has brought down upon us, can be resolved successfully only if we seize and interrogate one or more of the Danii, and force the truth to be revealed.”

Pierce thanked the officer quickly before he could think of something to add. “Your suggestion will be given serious consideration, Commodore. You next, if you please, ser Ladeen.”

The only action proposed by Ennis Ladeen was not too meaningful: an even more intensive investigation of the on-going incidents. He urged dispatching into the field additional investigative teams, augmented by sophisticated devices able to record throughout the entire electromagnetic spectrum every spacetime event that took place at the instant of disappearance.

Grey thanked him. “You next, please, ser Morrow.”

Holt lolled in the chair. “I’m not exactly deep-thinker, but I’ve been around the block a few times. I’ve seen thirty-odd stellar systems and the dark, wide spaces in between, and in the course of it run across umpteen varieties of misbegotten aliens, including some you’d think twice about camping next to. Not to brag, but I’ve learned a few things along the way, too. Choose to visit hell, and you’d best decide to accommodate yourself to the warm climate, or get shut of the place once and for all.

“But after roaming around strange lumps for most of my life,” he continued, “I’ve learned to conscientiously discounting aliens outwardly, something not easy to do in lots of cases. Show me a spaceman, and I’ll show you a freewheeling, carefree, ‘you go your way and I’ll go mine’ type. That’s especially true of explorers who have to change the way they see aliens and exotics or they’d all go balmy.

“Got to confess I’ve taken a liking the few locals I saw when Maran talked with them, if you can call it that. I’ll never understand their hummed, transliterated lingua, but taken as a whole they strike me as being decent, slow-moving, slow-talking, and gentle as puppies. They’re also been pretty damned neighborly to take in a legion of castoffs, rejects and jerkjollies the Planners dumped in their pretty lump like so much trash. Maran’s sure they have plenty of smarts, enough to hold all intelligent life as precious-plus. Okay, what more can we ask?”

Uncomfortable about being called upon to formally voice his private opinion, Holt squirmed. “Let’s take a for instance. Suppose you owned a nice piece of property and some kids came by and asked if they could play in your yard. ‘Sure,’ you say. Nice little fellas; might be fun

having them around. But they sort of move in on you until, one fine period, you catch ‘em playing with fire and warn ‘em stoutly that your house is what you hold most dear. They ignore the warning, and sure enough: your fancy home and everything in ends up burnt to ashes. What do you do about it? Why you pull the handle of the automatic whatzis and it grabs the culprit, gets rid of him. And if the others gang up, thinking to stick pins into you till you come clean on what happened to their pal, you waste no time pulling the handle again, and it rids you of the whole kit and kaboodle.”

Holt cocked a jaunticed eye at Garrigues. “Figuring out why the Danii have had it with some of us is a snap, Commodore. Put yourself in the boots of a voluntary colonial reveling in a brand new chance to live peacefully on this bee-oo-tiful lump of mud. No more does the poor bastard get settled than packs of honor-crazy bucks show up and begin skewering each other just for the fun of it. Wouldn’t that make you nervous? Catch is, I’ve racked my brain and I’m running on empty, haven’t a clue what to do about it. Truth be told, I’m not certain I *want* us to do anything about it. Sticking to my analogy, it appears to me that the Danii have pulled the automatic whatzit, liked the result and kept on pulling it. Maran reported that the goners, with a single exception, were spoiled, swordwaving, scumbag aristocrats. Good riddance I say! Let’s hang back, applaud, and watch all the other Convention-happy bucks go bye-bye?”

Pierce Grey smiled lamely. “I hadn’t thought about the situation in that light, ser Morrow, but what you say does apply. Most if not all of those taken we are certainly able to spare. May we hear your views now, ser Roberts?”

* * *

The tall, slender patrician raised tired eyes. “I confess to having developed a deep, abiding interest in the Danii. Should they allow it, I’ve given serious thought to making a study of them my lifework. However, in light of the present situation my superficial acquaintance with their manners and mores exposes certain aspects of the riddle best left unmentioned in the current discussion. The imperative need at this moment is to somehow alleviate the untenable situation, and at the same time proceed with a prima facie investigation and hope it will lead to an ability to do in-depth research among the Danii.

“I will therefore briefly advise the Directorate per your request, ser Director. As a stop-gap solution, I believe it will be essential to decree an immediate planetary quarantine, and petition the Star Council to proscribe further colonization for the duration of the crisis. It may not be sufficient, but also may be the only option available within the Directorate’s emergency powers. I also warn you, ser Director, that the Planners will assuredly overrule such a preemptory decision, and almost certainly decline to respond affirmatively to the petition. Furthermore, I doubly warn you that, if invoked, such a quarantine will jeopardize your position as a surrogate of the Planners.”

Pierce nodded acknowledgment. “Thank you all for your counsel. I will not respond to any of your comments or suggestions at this time.” He touched a switch plaque and luminescent nomenclature: DIRECTOR’S LOG. “By Executive Order, the following actions are to be undertaken immediately.

“Commodore Garrigues, you are hereby directed to interdict the planet as of hour twelve point-three, this date. The masters of vessels on-orbit, or soon due to arrive burdened with trans-

portees in cryothermic hibernation, are to be offered simple choices; the respective masters may elect to return to their specific ports of embarkation, or to be shunted into parking orbits about the fourth body of this system, Carthia, where the transportees will be held in cold sleep for an indefinite, potentially protracted time until full Stage-Two viability of Planet Dan has been achieved. The master of any vessel who takes it upon himself to awaken and land hibernates is to be placed under Directorial arrest and incarcerated until a hearing can be arranged. Are the instructions clear, Commodore?"

The picture of military dignity, Garrigues rose and performed a ceremonial bow. "Perfectly understood, ser Director. It is the wisest of moves," he added, and made ready to leave the chamber.

"Stay, Commodore," urged the director. "Secondly, per Executive Order, at hour twelve-point-three, this date, an emergency edict is hereby issued proscribing any and all forms of honorable combat, public, private or professional."

"*Wha-a-t . . . ?*" Unable to believe what he had just heard, Garrigues cried, "*Prohibit Convention, ser Director?*"

"Only as far as Code Duello is concened, Commodore. The officers and men and women under your command are hereby directed to continue assisting in every possible way the peace-keeping efforts of public assassins and colonial security proctors on duty. This edict is to be stringently enforced. There will be absolutely no exceptions."

"But, ser Director, you haven't the authority to —"

"Please, Commodore; be kind enough to let me finish. The news media will be issued copies of these Executive Orders. No further colonials of any stripe are to be landed while both Executive Orders are in effect, and have not been rescinded. Any and all form of honorable combat is to be subdued by the appropriate use of force. Should it become necessary to enforce this edict, the use of energy weapons is hereby authorized. The ratio of disappearances wherein the subject was involved in an affair of honor is, for all practical purposes, one-to-one. Stop the one, stop the other. Let us devoutly hope it is so."

"But, ser Director, th-this is . . ." stuttered Garrigues. "What you are doing is an unspeakable violation of Convention," he insisted. "It is *unheard* of to ban dueling, totally unconsionable, ser Director. Code Duello is the most *inviolat*e precept of Convention. It is not for you or any other planetary director to overthrow Convention."

Holt and Maran Roberts exchanged long looks.

"It is not for you, Commodore," said Grey, his demeanor stern, unbending, "to question the Executive Orders issued by the duely appointed planetary director."

"Really, ser Grey! I cannot be held responsible for enforcing such an, unlawful . . . Not even a planetary director has the right to unlawfully prohibit those gentes who legally seek honorable —"

"Commodore, your responsibility rests entirely in carrying out the Executive Orders issued by the Directorate. It is my office that will be responsible for issuing such orders, and it is your responsibility to comply with them."

"Ser Director, I really must file a formal protest. This is most —"

“Are the Executive Orders I have issued fully understood, Commodore?”

Garrigues donned outraged dignity by drawing his cape more closely about his portly frame. “Fully, ser Director,” he gritted. Bowing, red-faced, he stalked out of the council chamber almost before the sliding pocket door cleared the end of his nose.

Pierce Grey uttered a brief summation before he switched off the DIRECTOR’S LOG. “Please don’t say anything. I know it’s a mistake,” he said drily.

“You have erred on a magnificent way,” said Roberts enthusiastically. “I considered advocating a similar radical move myself, but only in passing.”

“Magnificent by rosy red patootie!” exclaimed Holt. “You just jumped into chin-deep yogurt with both feet,” he said, jerked his thumb at the closed portal. “Three guesses where that self-important brass hat is headed right this minute, and you won’t need the first two.”

“Of course he’ll try to dispatch a scathing report to the Admiralty, but the report will have to go through official channels. In this instance the channel is . . . myself. “The Planners will hear of my decision very shortly,” said Pierce “My communiqué will reach Terra long before he can even return on-orbit. Ser Weldon and the other Planners will learn of the decision from me.”

Holt uttered something foulmouthed under his breath. “Good thinking, Pierce! But, you get no cigar.” Tapping a forefinger finger alongside his ample nose, he said, “What you’re doing gives off a strong, rancid stench, Pierce. No one dares tamper with sacred cows. Never! Hate to say dueling’s the herd’s prize heifer you just chopped into hamburger.”

“Holt is correct,” said Roberts. “You’ve thrown yourself into a hopeless battle, Pierce. As director, you can get away with a brand of heresy temporarily, but you have no bully pulpit from which to address, coerce or try to seduce the Planners. You will either be allowed to rescind the orders, or be forced to step down.”

Grey nodded. “If that scenario comes in play, a new official will soon occupy this chair.”

“A certainty, not an ‘if’,” warned Roberts. “You should either back down at once, or resign. It’s that simple.”

“Maran, you’re the worst sort of hypocrite.” Pierce sounded jovial. “Shortly after this strange affair began, you told me you would gladly forfeit your own life rather than allow the Danii to be destroyed. Shall I be less faithful to my ideals? The Planners can’t be put off indefinitely, but they can be stalled. Buying time, if you don’t mind recalling your own counsel, was cited as the primary objective during our discussion right after the first disappearance.”

“Well . . . granted,” admitted Roberts, “but if you —”

“As Director,” insisted Grey, “all official communication must pass across my desk. Garrigues is mulish and not terribly bright, but obedience to the orders of superiors is ingrained in his DNA. I and I alone am the voice the Planners in Dan. With things as they are, I speak for the Planner with the voice of their official surrogate. Appointing a rebellious planetary director is a configuration the Founding Planners might have spent more time thinking through.”

A warm, patient smile in evidence, Maran said, “All we can do is try, Pierce. Self-sacrifice is ordinarily abhorrent, but I can’t help feeling proud of you.”

Morrow rolled his eyes. “Save us, Great Fig,” he prayed sarcastically, “from idealists and hidebound do-gooders!”

VIII

*What wilt thou do to
entertain this starry stranger?*

Richard Crashaw, antebellum
British poet, ca 1600 C.E.

It was *all* city!

The floor-to-ceiling glasswall of his suite high in the Directorial Seat's north spire offered a truly spectacular panorama. To the limit of vision, beyond the reservation's expanse, the natural face of the planet had been obscured by a megalopolitan colossus, its endless skyline serrated by the near and distant forest of greater and lesser structures connected and interlaced by multilevel pedestrian transwalks. Below the flyways and vehicle arteries, wide-spaced greenbelts and esplanades. Spreading through a valley toward hazy purple mountains, as well westward toward the ocean and into it for a distance, steel and glass edifices rose in diminishing glut.

Air traffic was lighter than van Maar would have imagined. Thin streams of verticraft mixed in with larger vehicles shuttled to and from the offshore Pacific Space Terminal's metal island several kilometers seaward, where he himself had first set foot on legendary Terra, the Seat of Empire. Channeled at various altitudes, aircraft flew over the vast cityscape, but none, he noted, dared violate airspace directly above the towering Directorial Seat, or reservation parklands surrounding it.

He yawned, still tired, still recovering from the interrogation ordeal during which teams of medics, psychotherapists and trance technicians had worked in relays to figuratively lifted his brain from his skull and squeeze out every drip and dribble of information in both the somnolent and waking states. The medics had completed their examinations with a shade of doubt about their own sanity. Separately and collectively, their reports had stated unequivocally that ser Gailen van Maar had been neither hypnotized or drugged, nor was he afflicted by hallucinations, or addicted to any form of occult, mystical or metaphysical belief. The effective bottom line was that his psychomotor index, personality profile, height-for-weight-for-glandular functions, sexual proclivity and adjustment, et cetera, et al, varied by no significant degree from that considered as the established, scientifically-derived "norm."

Their aggregate conclusion, succinctly stated, was that ser Gailen van Maar, the subject outworlder who had undergone interrogation and evaluation, had seen and heard precisely what he remembered seeing and hearing.

Gailen yawned again, stretched up on his toes, hands held high above his head, and stepped away from the glasswall. At loose ends, he idly inspected the objects on a long table he knew had been placed there expressly for his examination and supposed admiration. The directorial staff, apparently well versed in making outworld visitors comfortable, had selected and assembled for his enjoyment a number of items from Terran antiquity. It was not that most of the pieces were without interest to him, but as if the staffers hadn't known many of the "antiquities"

on display were him commonplace items from half-forgotten elementary lessons designed to satisfy the diversified xenoarchaeology degree he held from Channus University. What he did enjoy was the fact that the unseen curator had chosen literal gems from the ancient cultures.

There was a striking scarletware vase, one of the celebrated Blau stele, and an exquisite statue of a goat standing with its forefeet on a pedestal of gold, all from ancient Sumer in the second and third millennia, B.C.E. Dynastic Egypt offered strong entries — Great Pharaoh Pepy kneeling, holding a small libatory jar in either hand, and next to Pepy rested the deathless bust of Nefertiti. A beautiful checkered pot with a swooping handle from Phrygian Gordium, a faïence statuette depicting the snake goddess of ancient Crete, a terracotta humped bull from the Indus Valley, and a Roman legionary's gladius hispaniensis completed the collection.

Or almost completed it. At the end of the table was an oddment, an electronic voicewriter the placard defined as of 2073 vintage, C.E. recovered in the early thirtieth century during extensive postbellum digs in the ruins of an ancient city called Chicago. The voicewriter was of course the only authentic relic on the long table. The remainder were simulacra, reconstructed from ancient digital images that somehow survived The Holocaust in archives scattered here and there around the globe. With the exception of a few luckily placed paintings, sculptures and manuscripts, the art treasures and masterworks of Terra's many-historied past had vanished during the thermonuclear horror ending their epoch of civilization, along with more than eight-tenths of their twelve and one-half billion denizens.

It was mind-boggling to think handfuls of survivors had fathered the thirty-odd billions now crowding every square meter of the land masses in either hemisphere, not to mention numerous island, seaborne and underwater habitats. Not that Terra struck van Maar as overcrowded on the government reservation, where one rubbed elbows with diplomats, envoys, plenipotentiaries and leaders from hundreds of outworld colonies. Even so, the reservation struck him as more congested than his homeworld, Channus, which was to be expected.

He tried to imagine living out among the swarms, and decided it would be a very difficult existence to endure.

Dusk was descending Lights were beginning to illuminate myriad windows in the aggregation of monolithic buildings. Restively wandering back to the glasswall, he gazed at the cityscape, wishing for a quick way to return to Dan and resume supervising the dig, prompting and guiding the workers, discussing and collating the finds. He visualized the flurry of activity going on without him and worried across the parsecs about potential damage to some irreplaceable object while he was engaged in this ridiculous errand foisted off on him by Director Grey.

Not that he was bored with the homeworld. In its own peculiar way, Terra was proving itself a fascinating place to visit. He had arrived with every intention of do everything possible to enjoy his stay during a brief visit. But Terra and seemed utterly foreign, and its peoples not entirely to his liking. Most of his youth and early maturity had been spent in study, and most recently in the field during pristine and secondary exploratory missions. Here on the government reservation, a prime example of strangeness, he had discovered that nearly every adult male had a sword strapped to his waist, and looked as if he might be eager to use it at the slightest provocation. As a youth, he had naturally undergone the customary drill and practice sessions, mostly at the urging of friends and classmates, but had lost all interest in swordwaving while still an

adolescent in his forties. Yet here he was on the reservation, wearing Blacks of course, since he was an aristocrat on an official mission, but without a weapon bobbing at his side. Going about unarmed had earned any number of curious glances from numerous black-clad aristocrats frequenting the reservation, and several from a few armed plebs. Feeling himself the object of an undue degree of attention, he had retreated to the tower suite and meant to stay here until he was again summoned.

Yet all things considered, the pressure of being free to do as he pleased was beginning to wear thin. It made him yearn once again for some magical, instantaneous way to transit to Dan and get back to work. He had rushed to the holovision tank in his suite after overhearing rumors of subsequent disappearances in Dan. Minutes of frustrated experiment had finally netted something other than one of the interminable dramas devoted to bedroom intrigue, swordplay, or most popular of all, revenge that clotted the entertainment holovision channels. He had eventually found a newscast, or what passed for one.

His manner frosty, the polished, urbane commentator had treated the Danite incidents as insidious hoaxes, devoting only a few snide words to a story he spoke of as, “less than newsworthy.” The suave anchor had capped his denigrating description of the disappearances by sarcastically intimating that charity be shown toward the poor, sequestered inhabitants of Dan and all other outworlds.

The “newscast,” if one could call it that, had irritated him. Angrily punching the AMPLIFY switch plaque, he had been treated to the serio-comic portrayal of a “typical” disappearance in Dan that made him want to simultaneously laugh aloud, and retch. He learned it to be a standard feature of so-called “news” reportage. All one had to do to view a playlet related to the pertinent subject was request amplification.

What a world! He would have gladly boarded the first vessel outbound to any sector of the visited galaxy within Dan’s general locus. The more he thought about it, the more he looked forward to a few quiet, subjective months in transit. In his briefcase were hundreds of stereographs, and a much larger assortment of flat photos duplicated on holodisc, that comprehensively recorded the Danite tell from all angles, as well as a few semi-preserved implements, crumbling chairs, and other incidentalia of furnishing, plus numerous items of shattered and partially shattered ceramics and crystal ware — and best of all the black statue his third crew had discovered. A truly extraordinary find, the distinctive alien work of art made pale the entire tableful of objects gleaned from Terran antiquity. Wrought of polished obsidian, the statue depicted a pair of Danii kneeling, not touching, but embracing one another with their dark, liquid eyes.

A feminine contralto voice issuing from the portal broke his reverie: “Might ser van Maar be at home to receive callers?”

Startled, Gailen called, “Who is it, please?”

“Sera Lovelock,” was the prim response.

* * *

The portal dilated. Minor stepped into the loggia sheathed in a gown of shimmering, dark green gauzy material that came only to mid-thigh. A stiff, beaded collar at her throat framed a large, pendant blue diamond. The gown had been designed to show off to best advantage her firm, provocative bare breasts.

Van Maar flushed to the roots of his hair. A strangling sound escaped him.

“Good evening, ser van Maar.” A warm smile. “Why, thank you; I haven’t been stared at with that much enthusiasm for cycles. Are you only a flatterer, or aren’t women permitted in . . ? Sorry, if I ever knew, I have forgotten the name of your homeworld.”

“Ch-channus,” he stumbled. “But, sera, can you, uh . . ? What I mean . . . is it acceptable fto go around like *that*?”

“How very unkind you are,” she said. “A great amount of consideration went into selecting and ordering this gown. I think it’s rather chic for evening wear, if only on the reservation. But then who would ever dream of leaving the reservation?” Gailen’s expression prompted a little laugh. “Forgive me, ser van Maar; I love to tease. I suppose a first visit would leave any out-worlder more or less fuddled. Do you really find things so different here?”

“Not exactly . . . different, sera Lovelock. In a way, it’s . . . I feel like . . . well, a fish out of water if you’ll pardon the cliché. Everything is so . . . formal.”

“Yes, I imagine that might be trying. At first Terra also struck me as being far too stiff. You must learn to relax, to take things as they come, and you will get along wonderfully.”

Searching for a way to pull his attention from her semi-nudity, Gailen knew his remark would sound inane, but said it anyhow. “Meeting Director Lovelock was an experience. I wanted to dash out of his fancy desert and keep running all the way back to Dan.”

Minor shrugged. “His bullying is tiresome,” she said. “But if you should be granted another audience, try and remember that his bite is much worse than his bark.”

Van Maar blinked. “Don’t you mean . . ?”

“I meant what I said, ser van Maar. Which reminds me why I decided to intrude on your soliltude.” She dug in her pouch of her cummerbund. “My illustrious ancestor asked me to return this to you.” She handed over Director Pierce Grey’s Congressional Medallion.

“Ah, yes; my official credential. In the heat of the moment, I completely forgot about it.” He laid the platinum disc beside one of the ancient artifacts resposing on the long table. “As I recall, the director more or less threw it at me?”

“You really should think about keeping it on your person at all times,” she admonished. “It worries me to see you go about the reservation wearing Blacks, yet unarmed. If you insist on doing that, wouldn’t it be prudent to keep the medallion in your pouch.” Noting his look of inquiry, she added, “In case you’re challenged, I mean.”

“Sera Lovelock, how did you know that I, uh . . ? We’ve only met once, there in the Director’s seaside palm grove, and I was told that armed men are never allowed in his presence. What makes you think I go about the reservation unarmed?”

Intrigued, Minor said, “Seriously, you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

A tinkling laugh of delight. “You, ser van Maar, are — or were until last period — the holovision celebrity of the hour.”

“Me . . ?” A grimace of discomfort. “People have been watching *me*?”

“*Are* watching you,” she corrected, “by the billions. But not here in the privacy of your quarters, of course. The peculiar incidents supposedly still taking place in . . . whatever that out-

world is called, are causing oodles of comment. Terrans are bored, starved for anything out of the ordinary. The first disappearance, the one that sent you to us, was shrugged off as a tall tale typical of the benighted outworlds. But when that singular report was followed by a rash of other alleged vanishings, the subject turned into a universal topic, mostly I think because the disappearances are connected with every buck's favorite pastime, dueling.

"But what amounts to small talk for everyone else, deeply concerns my illustrious ancestor," she said. The odd happenings have aroused an abiding interest in the disappearances for the first time in anyone's memory."

"Me on holovision," declared Gailen, shaking his head. "Hard to believe. I'm afraid to ask what monumental event knocked me out of the limelight."

"Oh, it *was* monumental. Late last evening, ser Pyron Nyemeister accepted a challenge."

Van Maar looked askance at the lovely, half-naked woman. "Sera Lovelock, will you make me ask who whatever his name did to replace me?"

"Sorry, I suppose you have no way of knowing. Pyron Nyemeister is the world's premiere gladiator, the champion of the might and the right, the idol of duelists everywhere, and the object of maidenly dreams. He spitted his man after a boring, lengthy engagement."

"Good for him."

"Why, ser van Maar, you don't seem properly impressed. All right, enough. I for one will tease you no more. I shall call you Gailen, and you will henceforth address me as Minor. Who knows, we may become lifelong friends."

"Done!" Van Maar could not help glancing at her bare breasts. "You," he said, "are an extremely beautiful young woman."

"And you," she said, "are a most refreshing young man. I may adopt you and your cause, coach you in local custom and the urbanities. I volunteer to be your sponsor as long as you're here with us, Gailen."

"Sort of like a combination hobby lesson in manners," he said ungraciously.

She wagged a be-ringed forefinger. "Better be nice, Gailen. I'm certain you could stand a few dollops of advice on the nicety of manners. Take my breasts, for example."

He groaned. "Please, Minor!"

"Please don't try to be cute," she said, "and listen. If a particularly shapely young woman in a nue gown were to attend some fashionable affair, a sophisticated buck might remark that the merchandise on display amounted to no more than a few grams of fatty tissue. Get the idea?"

Gailen frowned. "*That* would be considered appropriate? I suspect it's you who needs coaching, Minor. I'm neither blasé nor cynical, but in Channus or any other outworld that much bare skin would amount to an open invitation. And should some loudmouth make a crack like that about a woman I was with, he might lose some teeth."

Minor was aghast. "You wouldn't strike him?"

"Maybe, maybe not. The urge would certainly come over me."

"Never even *think* about losing control of yourself here," she warned. "Strike another gente for any reason whatever, and the public assassins would have you spitted and hung out to

be admired with the other scum who defy Convention. Men make rude jokes about the Code of Life, but they live by it.”

“Or die by it,” he observed.

She admitted the truth of his response with a rueful head toss and went to the long table and lightly ran speculative fingers over the simulated bust of Nefertiti. Strolling the length of the table, she gave most of the simulacra a cursory inspection, but stopped short and pinned van Maar with a withering stare. “You,” she accused, “are the worst sort of hypocrite, Gailen.” She had lifted the Cretan snake goddess figurine.

A rueful grin creasing his lips, van Maar said a touch sheepishly, “An accident of hospitality. “Bare bosoms were acceptable in ancient Minoa. In fact, in some ancient societies bare everything was the norm for any of the four genders.”

“Go on,” she instructed in a theatrical drawl, setting down the Snake Goddess, “educate me, I dare you.”

Gailen happily catalogued the cultural backgrounds of several objects on the table, explaining his familiarity due to university undergraduate studies. Warming to the subject, he described the behemoth sandstone sculptures found in Carina, the Devonset culture that in some remote age had spread through the entire triple-star Porcian System. He told her of the intricate mosaics found buried in San Xavier, the jeweled tableware discovered in Lothir, and suddenly fell silent when he detected the twinkle in Minor’s soft brown eyes. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to run off at the mouth.”

* * *

“Don’t apologize,” she said, touching his arm. “I enjoy the company of sincere people, probably because so few are around. You’re a rare bird, Gailen, even for an outworlder. I wonder if you appreciate how fortunate you are.”

“Fortunate in what way?”

She ruminated, suddenly looking distant. “Oh, to have something to tie yourself to, an aim, a direction in life. A goal. I wager you’ve never been bored.”

“A fairly shaky bet,” he told her. “Everyone goes through slow periods in life. But I will admit that in my profession there are so many, many unknowns, and such a variety of places worthy of in-depth investigation, that if I were to live twenty centuries I could never exhaust a certain degree of interest.”

“You make investigating the past in distant, exotic locales sound exciting.”

“Oh, it can be. Xenoarchaeology has fascinated many better people than me. A slice of the good fortune you mentioned fell our way not long ago. Before I was ordered to depart for Terra, one of our teams was investigating an extremely intriguing find, an entire city complex we assume had been deserted by the Danii eons ago. Finding a pristine site of that scope and complexity is a genuine thrill. At the opposite end of the spectrum, uncovering simple implements or buried potsherds can also be thrilling, if to a lesser degree. The fact that such items were shaped and used by intelligent beings in the distant past lends them a mystique, a romantic aura.”

“You personally discovered this lost city?”

“As team leader, I was credited with the find. We had been in the field less than two subjective weeks before turning up the complex. It’s undoubtedly Danite, since no other culture

seems to have ever existed there. From what little we learned before I left, the site had never burned, bombed or sacked, but simply abandoned. You can't begin to conceive the enigmas surrounding a find of that magnitude. What happened to the inhabitants, and more importantly, why did they simply walk away, die off, or whatever? We found fragments of a written language in the ruins of what was might once have been a library. The crumbling shelves were filled with remnants of what professionals call xenoapocrypha."

"Pardon me . . . ?"

"It's a catch-all term for alien written material. What stories must be locked in those fragments! What pained me most was the fact that before we could even begin trying to decipher the material I had to turn my back and to run off on this silly errand. Why, cycles will pass before the excavation of hill Three-six C-N alone can be properly evaluated."

"What," she asked, "is hill . . . whatever?"

"An inferred, unusual type of alien power reactor," said Gailen eagerly. "Here, let me show you."

Minor looked bemused watching him empty the contents of a bulging briefcase on the divan. After pawing through dozens of stereographs and digital still photos, he eventually held up an aerial view displaying the ghostly outlines of buried foundations.

Minor sank down beside him on the lush carpeting. Together they pored over the material, van Maar babbling happily, Minor listening, her attitude meek and appreciative. She asked question after question. When at last he came to a holograph of the black statue, she studied it for a time in silence. "Why, this is . . . It's absolutely gorgeous!" she exclaimed. "Are they . . . the, uh, natives?"

"Danii, yes."

"Are they all like this?"

"Can't tell one from another," he said. "Their coloration is actually a shade lighter than that reproduced in the holograph. Otherwise, they're exactly as pictured."

About to voice a comment, Minor pursed her candied lips and concentrated on the holograph. "May I ask a favor, Gailen?"

"Anything in my power," he said.

"After you return, will you have an ortho-simile of this statue sculpted for me?"

"The moment my feet land groundside," he promised. "You show excellent taste, Minor. As works of alien art go, it's nothing less than a masterpiece."

"They're so . . . regal," she said with feeling. "The way they're staring at one another. Those enormous, limpid eyes." She glanced at her finger chronometer, and rose quickly "Oh, my! Elan will be furious. We were to meet him in the arena, show off our visiting celebrity."

His expression wary, van Maar cleared his throat. "Afraid I'd be a drag. There's some material I planned to look over this evening, and —"

"Oh, don't be stuffy," she said. "It's unhealthy to vegetate in the tower. I promise a good time will be had by all. The Palace of Swords may be a snobbish place, but think of it as an aristocrat hangout mixing excellent cuisine and a dash of deluxe gymnasium. We'll dine, enjoy some

wine and good conversation. There are bound to be a few bouts at swords later in the evening. Also," she added coyly, "you'll be my escort."

Van Maar grinned. "I hope you won't think me cowardly, Minor. I'm beginning to feel more a touch afraid of you *and* your world."

"A coward," she pointed out, "wouldn't have said it."

* * *

Taken aback by his first impression of the Palace of Swords, Van Maar thought I distinctly at odds with Minor's offhand description of an "aristocrat hangout." The arena's open space alone struck him as the most immense, sumptuous hall in the visited galaxy. Elliptical in plan on a gargantuan scale, the vast hall enclosed three expansive rings of red cork on the lowermost level, surrounded by a broad esplanade. Rising above the arena in majestic tiers, tables decked with snowy linen permitted each curving terrace an unobstructed view of the battlegrounds below. Rippling sinusoidal walls of red plush climbed vertiginously to the simulated, starry night sky high overhead. Only the lower levels were softly lighted. Mounted on huge, curved pilasters of polished stone, bold escutcheons, heraldic devices and coats-of-arms belonging to ancient patrician families reflected the luster of precious metal.

Above the tiered floor, a minimum of one hundred or more shallow discs of pastel hues floated aloofly above the faint tinkle of cutlery and crystal, the subdued murmur of a thousands of conversations. Descending the broad-risened grand stairway with Minor Lovelock on his arm, Gailen idly wondered what purpose the floating discs served, and awarded only cursory attention to a drill taking place in the arena's center ring, where a swordsmaster conducted hundreds of tyros in a performance as stately and formal as a minuet. Remise, reprise, beat and attack, the repeated phrase rang in metallic unison, muted by distance, from punctilious rows of uniformed cadets. The few black-clad sophisticates parading around the esplanade paid appeared to be paying no attention whatever to the drill.

Assaying his interest, Minor said, "Impressed?"

"It isn't much," he said, tongue in cheek, "but it's intimate, homey."

"Now you're getting into the spirit of things."

"The hall is so huge," he remarked, "it must have its own weather. Does local rain fall inside?"

"I don't believe so."

"What impresses me most of all," he said, "are the flocks of uniformed retainers and servers dashing about."

"Plebes," informed Minor. "They love serving here."

"Really? How can they pay anyone enough to do menial service?"

"They aren't paid, Gailen. Pedestrians would be shocked to hear a suggestion that they be paid. Serving here is a signal honor. People study protocol, groom themselves for cycles living on the basic citizens' allowance, just hoping for a chance to serve anywhere inside the reservation."

"I can't imagine how that would be true. Why."

“Because,” she said, “it allows an insider view of what plebes consider a glamorous lifestyle in an atmosphere so uncrowded and exciting that working here is a privilege boasted about for cycles. Waiting on we so-called aristocrats here at the hub of the universe is the epitome of plebian aspiration”

Gailen swept the length and breadth of the enormous elliptical hall. No more than a few hundred tables were occupied. “Uncrowded says it all.”

“A slow night,” she assured him. “You should have been here the evening Pyron Nye-meister accepted a challenge. Even standing room was not to be had.”

“Who . . ? Oh, the gladiator you mentioned.” Van Maar’s sidelong glance reflected secret amusement. “Must be nice to have a first-class hero hanging around.”

Despite Convention, heads turned in an unmannerly fashion when they reached the foot of the grand stairway. He asked Minor how they could hope to find Elan Grey in the vast hall.

“You’ll see,” she told him.

Clad in scarlet livery, the maître d’ made a short leg to van Maar, and awarded Minor the full, sweeping bow of deference with a pair of assistants and a half-dozen pageboys bowing and scraping behind him. “A distinct honor, sera Lovelock,” intoned the plebe officiously, “to have you once again grace us with your presence.”

Ignoring the other’s obsequious manner as well as his words, Minor said, “Call down ser Grey’s cupola.”

A finger snap. The nearest pageboy bowed quickly and scampered away. The maître d’ and his entourage stepped back and transformed themselves into a line of graven images.

“Now what?” asked Gailen.

“Watch over there.”

Judging ‘over there’ apparently a spot halfway up the arena’s soaring, crimson-ribbed wall, and weary of the cascading Terran revelations and mysteries showered upon him since his arrival, van Maar was contemplating a cutting remark to that effect when a pale amber disc detached itself from a flock of slowly circling companions and slid down a long ramp of thin air toward them. The disc hovered for an instant before silently descending to the broad expanse of marble tile adjacent the broad foot of the grand staircase. Seated in the disc, his expression null, was a very surly Elan Grey.

“See there?” Minor was enjoying van Maar’s reaction. “Dining cupolas, aren’t they clever? Elan practically lives in this one.”

Grey rose in the three-sided banquette, and dipped his head in surly greeting. Attendants ushered Minor and the outworlder aboard, stepped back and ceremoniously bowed a concerted farewell, as if the cupola were about to depart for some distant sector of the galaxy.

“I’ve been waiting here,” complained Elan, “trying to imagine why you were angry with me. Had my sturdy craft been higher, I would’ve leaped some time ago.”

“Feeling sorry for ourself, are we?” Minor patted Grey’s hand. “We’re not at all upset with you. It’s just that Gailen was such fascinating company I couldn’t tear myself away. He showed me some unbelievable stereographs of the outworld your pater governs.”

“Etchings?” inquired Elan, immersing the question in drollery.

Minor's laughter tinkled as the cupola rose beneath them. The sensation was that of a smooth lift compartment, solid and trustworthy.

"Tricky," said Gailen. "What keeps it up?"

Elan shrugged. "Good wishes, perhaps."

Van Maar did not feel miffed by Grey's attitude until Minor said lightly, "Pay no attention to him, Gailen. He's in crusty form tonight?"

"Am I being crusty? Drat! I've neglected to take my anit-erethism capsules. It always seems to slip my mind."

"Nasty begets nastier still," Minor told him, her manner overly casual, her steady gaze was anything but casual. "Keep it up the annoying manner, ser Grey, and I may decide to go back to Gailen's suite. He has a whole bagful of . . . etchings."

Elan's features tightened irritably, and then relaxed. "As always, you have astutely judged my lack of sociability." He rose in the banquette and performed a short bow, one hand resting lightly on the perforated hilt of his gleaming rapier, the other held over his heart. "M'lord, M'lady, will you graciously accept the sincere apologies owed both of you in equal measure?"

"Don't overdo it," said Minor.

On inspiration, Gailen decided to play Elan's game. Feeling slightly foolish, he stood clumsily in the banquette and returned the short bow. "You honor us indeed, ser Grey," he declaimed, and bowed again in the manner coached by Roberts.

"Oh, do sit down!" Minor laughed good-naturedly. "Champagne all around?"

Elan looked wistful. "Alas," he said with theatrical intonation, "your distinguished ancestor swore me to a blood-sealed oath of sobriety."

"How unkind he can be. I shall speak to him about that."

But when, at Minor's command, a dewy silver flask rose within the banquette, escorted by a second bowl fish eggs, and a salver of buttered toast, Elan relented and made a project of pouring for them, and held his champagne flute aloft.

"To our threesome! May we thrive."

* * *

An hour later, drifting in simulated twilight high above the arena, van Maar began feeling at peace and content for the first time since setting foot on Old Terra. He attributed his convivial mood due partly to the excellent wine, enhanced by the glow that warmed him every time Minor Lovelock tilted her lovely throat in laughter, and also, he admitted, because of a growing admiration for Elan Grey.

Earlier, upon being summoned to stand before the dais in the torture chamber of the director's illusory sanctum, it had been deceptively easy to dislike Grey intensely. Despite a deep respect for his pater, his original impression of Elan had been a matter of encountering a sulky, proud, touchy aristocrat, exactly the sort of self-centered, dandified elitist for whom he had always felt uneasy antipathy. But champagne apparently agreed with Elan; it dissolved his shell of haughty formality and revealed a humorous, intelligent, interesting gente who at times reminded him of Director Grey.

Conversation while dining had eventually gravitated from cautious inquiries by Elan and Minor regarding Planet Dan, its environs and his xenoarcheology work, to answering his own basic questions about Terra and its ways, and then to lighthearted self-deprecation. Minor had given a giggling account of her bare-bosomed entrance to van Maar's suite, at which Gailen had found himself laughing harder than either companion. She had then related two rather scandalous anecdotes, with the names of course changed to protect the "innocent." Elan's burlesque of ser Weldon's tongue-lashing technique had left he and Minor gasping.

Slouched in a corner of the banquette, Gailen became intrigued when a sonorous baritone voice filled the arena, interrupting one of Minor's recitals in mid-sentence:

"A challenge, good gentles. Attend a challenge in ring two."

Minor leaned back and peered downward. "A squabble in the making, Gailen. Would you care to see it?"

"Uh, yes. I suppose so."

Elan uttered a soft-voiced command. Their cupola began a gliding descent toward the far ring and slowed to a hover not far above the arena's periphery, furnishing a front row seat to the goings-on said to be about to take place below. Other cupolas gathered around them, forming a huge dishlike amphitheater.

"The gente on the left," said Elan, "looks from a distance like an acquaintance, Claude Graham. Wonder who the other is. I don't recognize him."

Watching one of the mannequins wearing Blacks perform the posturings and bows of the Salute of Grievance raised van Maar's hackles. He vividly recalled the last such affair he had witnessed, and its bewildering aftermath. "Will it be to the death?" he inquired.

Elan's glance was penetrating. "You are apparently not an aficionado, Gailen. We won't learn that little detail until they cross swords. But I doubt if it's that serious a challenge. I hope you'll forgive my forwardness, but I can't help noticing that you wear Blacks, but go about weaponless."

"I learned the rudiments in school, certainly. Since then, I've been too busy to even think of practicing. Many outworlders have neither the liesure nor patience to indulge in either the sport, or the . . . Grand Device."

"How interesting," said Grey flatly, his intolerance for the Code Duello euphemism obvious.

"Please, take no offense," Gailen hurried to say. "I'm of the opinion that the homeworld is cursed, or blest if you will, with too much time on its hands. Could that be one reason why dueling is so popular?"

"An arresting theory," said Grey, a hint of even more frost in his diction. "You might reconsider voicing such a radical theories among we . . . liesure-lovers."

Van Maar felt the color rise in his cheeks. "I regret . . . That is, I had no intention of giving offense."

Elan stared coolly at his guest. Then his expression gradually softened. "It is I who should beg forgiveness, Gailen. You have a perfect right to your opinion. But will you accept a word of caution in the spirit of friendship?"

"I'll welcome it."

“It would be prudent to keep such opinions to yourself.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re lean and young and obviously keep yourself fit. You wear Blacks, yet go about the reservation unarmed. I realize you are far from well acquainted with the customs of Convention, and sympathize. Even so, your indifference to bearing arms in customary fashion is disturbing.”

“How can that be? I have no interest in duelling.”

Elan searched for just the proper response. “I realize that, but others do. Sooner or later, your carriage and manner is bound to attract the attention of some buck who believes himself a smallswordsmen nonpareil, and might decide to offer a casual challenge simply to check his timing. Many times duels have occurred in just such a way.”

“A challenge . . . to me?”

An emphatic nod from Minor. “Remember what I told you in the suite, Gailen? Better listen to Elan.”

“To to put a cap the sensitive matter,” continued Grey, “you have become something of a magnet for exactly the sort of challenge I mentioned — a public figure known to billions on sight due to your notoriety over the strange yet newsworthy incidents in Dan. Were one to tote these ingredients, and . . . To be unmannerly and blunt, had I not known your situation it would have been tempting to, er . . .”

“To challenge me yourself.”

“Precisely, Gailen. If you were to persist in going about weaponless, the most sincere advice I can or anyone else can tender is to conduct yourself with great reserve. Say nothing if you’re approached by some stranger, else risk provoking umbrage through inexperience.”

“Sounds like sterling advice.”

“The Salute is over.” announced Minor.

The black-clad figures below crossed swords in classic stance. The Swordsmaster brought down his saber and the duellists bounded apart, *en garde*, but did not engage. Again the Swordsmaster held out his ceremonial blade. The figures advanced, again crossed Convention-set rapiers again over the saber. This time, when the sword fell they separated, circled one another with cautious purpose, and engaged viciously.

“It will be to first blood,” said Grey, absorbed in every move of the duelists. The snick of steel on finely tempered steel emanated from below. Thinking aloud, he noted in a murmur, “Stay clear of low line, Claude; the other looks a hair quicker in riposte.”

The duelists were circling for position, causing van Maar to lose interest in the contest. His attention was drawn to their cupola’s departure point, foot of the grand stairway. A collection of a dozen or more patricians had gathered in conclave, talking and gesticulating among themselves. The group broke apart and a slender gente wearing Blacks accosted the maître d’. The plebe gestured upward, and of a single mind, as if the move had been rehearsed, the entire group of patricians craned upward, looking directly at their cupola. They moved forward as one, disappeared from view beneath the other hovering cupolas

Gailen dismissed it as another Terran idiosyncrasy. He returned his attention to the ongoing duel.

* * *

“Claude may have been pinked,” remarked Elan.

Gailen idly inquired if that amounted to what he’d termed ‘first blood.’

“Technically it does, yes,” informed Elan. “But deciding whether or not a ‘pink’ of doubtful significance proves the winner is actually at the discretion of the swordsmaster. I myself think Claude has marginally outpointed his opponent, so the swordsmaster had probably determined that neither smallswordsmen will be satisfied until a more severe wounding occurs.”

Suddenly, with a duel in progress and absolutely no warning, their cupola began drifting sideways and downward, and then descended rapidly to ground on the red cork of the center ring with a slight jar.

Elan jerked to his feet at sight of the somber knot of aristocrats gathered alongside the cupola on all sides.

A tall, slender gentleman impeccably clad in Blacks stepped forward and bowed with consummate grace. “Good gentlemen, can we ever hope to earn your pardon for this rude intrusion?” His indifferent stare centered on Gailen, he said lightly, “Might one inquire if he has the honor of addressing ser van Maar?”

Elan stiffened. In a stage-whisper, he said, “Say nothing!”

Studying the array of stoic, aristocrats staring at him in a bold, unmannerly way, Gailen wondered what in all the convoluted hells of this lunatic world was happening. At length he said, “I’m van Maar.”

“Condemned fool!” whispered Grey.

“Of course you are,” said the tall patrician, smiling thinly. “Allow me to apologize once again for our uncouth behavior, ser van Maar. Our common purpose behind this despicable lack of manners is that we, my friends and I, have a burning desire to inquire how far you outworld barbarians mean to carry out your desecration of Convention?”

“Our what . . . ?”

“My meaning, gentle ser van Maar,” intoned the accuser, “is straightforward, quite simple to comprehend even for someone as backward as yourself. It has to do with the news you surely must have by now. Apparently the erstwhile official charged with conducting affairs in your benighted outworld has seen fit to take upon himself a disastrous revision of the Code of Life. On this wayward planet, and only there among all civilized worlds, is it now impossible for wrongs to be righted in the ancient way. We find the situation too shocking for words, ser van Maar. But perhaps you disagree?”

Unable to hide his astonishment, Gailen was speechless. “Are you saying that dueling has been *prohibited*?”

“Verily, ser van Maar. See there, you do take my meaning after all. Code Duello has been abolished by your upstart director in defiance of a precedent so hoary that its innovators are legendary. We, my friends and I, deem the distressing act to be that of a fiend or a madman, ser van Maar. Nay, more than simply distressing, it is utterly disgusting. One might even go so far as to say that I personally find it *insulting*.”

Open-mouthed, Gailen glanced at Elan, hoping for a clue. He became doubly concerned when he realized how pallid Grey had become. "It has to be . . . It must be a mistake," he said lamely.

The aristocrat's stare was fixed, unblinking. "Do you actually dare to refer that standing before you is a fabricator, ser van Maar?" The other made a project of slowly tugging off one black glove a finger at a time. Stepping closer to the grounded cupola, he raised the glove and flicked it lightly across van Maar's cheek. "Be thankful, all present," he said in glowing tones, "that in our enlightened society an adjustment of such heinous abuse may still be achieved. I believe the privilege of making the Salute falls to me, ser van Maar."

Angrier than he would have thought possible, Gailen gathered a handful of his oppressor's black tunic, yanked him forward, drew back his fist.

Elan cried, "No!" and hung on van Maar's arm until a quartet of public assassins materialized from nowhere and wrestled free the ruffled aristocrat.

"No, no," declared the slender patrician coldly. "Code Duello, if you please, ungentle ser van Maar. We of Terra do not indulge in barbarian scuffles. You will now either arm yourself before I finish my Salute, or prepare to face me sans weapon — definitely an option most unwise."

The patrician drew sword with a flourish and stepped lithely to the center of the ring. "My grief," he announced is as that of Thirty. In my hand I hold the Avenger destined to right all wrongs."

A softly modulated baritone voice spoke throughout the vast hall. "A challenge, good gentles. Attend a challenge in ring one."

Looking stricken, Elan said, "Your Congressional Medallion, Gailen." His voice barely audible, he added, "Throw down Pierce's medallion, and declare your immunity."

Van Maar fumbled in his pouch beneath his cummerbund. It was empty. "Must've left it . . . in my suite."

Elan sucked in a deep breath. Pulling his rapier from the scabbard, presented it hilt first to van Maar on the crook of his arm. "May fortune favor you, my friend. I advise you to go all out from the very start. It is your only . . . That is, it offers you the . . . best chance."

"You've seen this arrogant bastard before?"

"A number of times." Elan looked even more distraught. "I'm not sure whether it would be better for you to know, or —"

"So who the hell is he?"

Grey's snort of disgust said it all. For the first time van Maar noticed the anguish in Minor Lovelock's clear brown eyes.

She refused to meet his gaze, looking away quickly.

"Who *is* he?" demanded Gailen more insistently.

"His name is . . . Nyemeister." Elan gave the name the inflection of a curse.

The Salute of Grievance ended in a flare of rhetoric from the premiere gladiator.

The Swordsmaster came forward and held out his saber expectantly.

IX

*But helpless Pieces of the Game He plays
Upon this chequer-board of Nights and Days;
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays
And one by one back in the Closet lays.*

*The Rubaiyat, Omar Khayyam,
Antebellum poet circa 1123 CE*

One moment the gente was not there, then abruptly he *was* there — a bedraggled apparition sprawled on the lawn at the edge of the spacious plaza leading to the Lovelock Foundation Tower entrance.

With all the scare stories being bruited about concerning anything at all out of the ordinary, it was not surprising to hear passersby cry out and shrink back instinctively. A small crowd gathered slowly, careful to keep its distance. Speechless, the colonials watched the pathetic figure clad in soiled patrician Blacks roll over, crawl across the velvet lawn and slump with his back against the bole of a parkway tree.

Sense their overwhelming fearfulness? thought Tanis, observing from afar. *A riptide of emotion drowning and sluicing away every vestige of rationality.*

It is red and raw, thought Polct. *A tangible emotional deluge, it approaches the threshold of physical pain.*

Attend the unfolding events, instructed the elder. *Those in authority come near.*

A quartet of Imperial Marines emerged from the the tower's high-arched entrance and jogged across the plaza until a sergeant-major motioned for his men to halt. Tentatively walking near the reclining, vacant-eyed patrician, he bent forward and asked cautiously, "Are you all right, ser? What's troubling you?"

There was no reply to the non-com's purely rhetorical query. The gente in question was obviously not all right. In an absent, accusative manner, the emaciated patrician's pale blue eyes tracked the sergeant-major without actually seeing him. A drool of spittle trailed from his parched, cracked lips.

Bending as if to help the bedraggled patrician rise, the Marine recoiled when a whiff of skatol told him the derelict had soiled himself. Revolted, he said gruffly, "Who are you?" He waited. The patrician said nothing. "Come, ser. We're here to help you if you let us."

No response. When the non-com again made as if to help the patrician to his feet, the gente's eyes defocused as he looked through rather than at the proffered hands, and then favored the sergeant-major with a sly, vacant stare.

Mumbling absurdities intended to calm the disheveled aristocrat, the sergeant-major reached beneath the soiled cummerbund and gingerly opened the gente's pouch. He touched a sheaf of thousand-credit notes, and pursed his lips in a silent whistle. "Not poverty stricken, are we?" Shuffling through a sheaf of credentials and private papers, he came upon a chit identifying the derelict as a lifetime member in the Chalseanne chapter of Fraternity Duello. The sergeant-

major grunted and replaced the papers. "Easy does it, ser. You'll be cared for right smartly, I promise."

The aristocrat was listening to other voices.

The sergeant-major turned to his squad. "Call Sharax Medcenter," he ordered, "and get an air-ambulance over here on the double. Tell the dispatcher the gente in distress is a patrician named Melas."

* * *

What will become of the miscreant? inquired Polct.

One senses compassion, replied the elder. *The pristine sampling, it will be afforded better treatment than it deserves for radiating naught but unthinking malevolence before its mental processes began to disintegrate.*

Did Higher Ones intend for matters to fall out thusly? asked Polct.

Childish rambling! How can you imagine Higher Ones would stoop to permit accidental happenings at this juncture? Our peers move with ever more certainty as this juvenile species begins to reveal its true self. One senses a rising tide in the predicated confluence of events, precisely as the generating circumstances created. Sampling should now become less general, much more specific.

And we? inquired Polct.

As always, was the elder's serene response, *we shall abide, and observe.*

* * *

Holt Morrow enjoyed the ritual of opening mail. Grunting from time to time as he read, he waved alight a black cigarette and noted each computerized return address and postmark before opening the sealed flimsy, skimming the digitized printout. One letter earned the signal honor of a half-smile, and he slipped it into his pouch. The remainder he touched briefly with the cigarette, watching them curl one by one into a residue of ash. Near the bottom of the pile was an oddity, a sealed envelope of greenish flash-paper lacking the interstellar Hydrogen-Phoenix postal symbol.

"What d'you know," he muttered, "local mail." Getting a fingernail under the flap, he unsealed the flimsy and read the note, then quickly went back quickly read it again. Tossing aside the unopened letters, he folded the single sheet of green flash-paper, tucked it in his pouch, donned his kepi, he left the suite in something of a hurry.

Air traffic was all but nonexistent as he lifted a verticraft from the roofpark of the Directorial Seat. Below the vehicle, boring toward the space terminal, the scene resembled an armed camp. Most colonials had retreated indoors for the duration, with only a few scattered figures visible in the esplanades and walkways. Squads of Imperial Marines toting energy weapons patrolled on foot, or rolled about in armored vehicles. Elsewhere, small cadres of public assassins and colonial security proctors roamed as well. Like everyone else, the military and civilian peacekeepers were afflicted by a dread of the unknown that had become a fixture in Dan. The verticraft passed over a checkpoint for arterial ground traffic, one of four at the cardinal entry points of the broad boulevards leading into Sharax.

Ground ing the vehicle on bull's eye landing pad on the space terminal's southern outskirts, Morrow handed the verticraft over into the care of the robotic attendant, watching suspi-

ciously as the lift whisked it down to hangar level. Whistling tunelessly through his teeth, he sauntered a few paces toward the Armory Dome, took two quick steps and boarded the perimeter walkway and let it carry him at a sedate thirty klicks-per-hour around the edge of a vast flatland studded with ground-to-orbit shuttles squatting on the hardstand.

Riding alone, he experienced a bout of mild nostalgia. How bleak and barren the space terminal looked in comparison to the green, rolling meadowland into which he'd been the first to poke his nose. Gone were the groves of huge trees, unhappily replaced in his view by square kilometers of sterile gray concrete dotted with elephantine propellant vans, cargo-handling flatbeds, ponderous vehicle-spotting trak-truks and the like. Already dingy, it's every aspect that of gritty, about-to-be-used, now-useless service equipment exposed to the weather, indifferent abuse, and the solitary tedium of space terminals everywhere.

It's what, he thought darkly, is called progress.

Towering a distance from the forest of shuttles, a single black military pinnace hulked higher on the windswept hardstand near the Imperial Space Forces Dome. *Good news*, thought Holt. With only a token presence groundside, it meant the canteen should be lightly populated. He stepped off the slidewalk in front of the main gate, long force of habit caused him to salute the funereal banner of Imperium Terrestriana when it reminded him for the ten-thousandth time of the victorious, invincible nature of his species.

Having witnessed a civilian salute the imperial banner, a young Marine on sentry duty snapped to attention at sight of Morrow's Blacks.

"Afternoon," greeted Holt. "Mind if an old-timer visits the canteen for a spell?"

"Your ID, if you please, ser."

Holt palmed his Congressional Medallion and let the youngster look his fill. He saw the frost of mild suspicion give way to sudden deference. "You'll be going no farther than the NCO Club, ser Morrow?"

"Nary a step. Felt a need to heist a glass, belt down a grog or two and wash the stench of civilians out of my skull."

The young marine smirked. "Know what you mean, ser Morrow. Even officers have a tough time rounding up a date in this port." The youth presented arms, the bell of his laser rifle at precisely forty-five degrees to this cummerbund. "Welcome aboard, ser Morrow."

"Thanks, Marine."

Holt spotted Chief Petty Officer Garvey Sance even before passing his kepi to the autoattendant. He waited until the machine rolled away, but refrained from approaching his old shipmate. Instead, he made a show of sauntering around and to inspect the military trophies and stereographs in a wall-filling display case, and then gazed with a wistful expression at the duty roster in a large flat-panel display on the wall above the loggia. Casually approaching the gleaming bar, he ordered grog in a monotone. Carrying the glass halfway around the non-commissioned officers club, he stopped as if by chance, drew out a chair and sat down two meters from the back of Sance's head.

Three or four sailors looked up, casually noted his arrival. A group across the way got up and left, their departure accompanied by chair scrapings and rattles of glassware. Holt sipped his

drink, looking straight ahead, and said in a low voice, "Hello, you old binnacle stomper. How're they treating you?"

"Tolerable," replied Garvey Sance in a monotone. "Got my note, did you?"

"Only reason I'm here."

"That really the only reason? Thought for sure you'd be homesick for your old berth aboard a starcruiser, Holt. You weren't cut out to be a ground-pounder."

Morrow snickered. "You" he mimicked, "weren't cut out to be a communications CPO, either." Unobtrusively sliding over to Sance's table, he chose a chair directly opposite his old friend. "Surprised me to hear from you this soon. Never thought things would pick up so fast."

"Me neither," declared Sance. "Don't have all that much to tell you, come right down to it. But I've got a sheet of comm flimsy that'll punch every one of your interest buttons, and punch 'em hard."

"Uh-huh. Relax and finish your drink," suggested Holt. "Leave it folded, tucked under the glass when you leave. Now then, what's come down that's got you so riled up?"

The veteran CPO's neck swiveled. Panning the canteen, he caught the bartender's sensor by holding up two fingers. When the machine rolled up and took their orders, Sance made no objection when Holt showed his credit voucher to the sensor. "Shapes up like this," said the CPO once the bartender had rolled away. "Ever since your, uh . . . Friend put his chop on the no-dueling bull and made it official, the Planners've been burning a hole in the sky 'twixt here and the homeworld. So far your Friend's stall has kept the redhots from meaning much of anything, but who knows how long that'll last. You with me?"

"My Friend's neck is out about fifty parsecs," said Holt, "but it's his neck. Forge ahead, Garvey."

"Well," related Sance, in a low-voiced confidential manner, "due to all the hooraw the Pirate's been hurting real, real bad."

"Garrigues is in a sweat?"

"No names, okay?" Garvey said hastily. "The 'Pirate' is my shipmates' pet name for that buzzard. More 'n once I've been in the comm compartment aboard *Relentless* when a redhot sizzles in. The Pirate, he howls his head off each time the ultraband hyperspace receiver spits out a new one. They're all official, see, except that means damn little to the Pirate 'cause his hands're tied, know what I mean? Your Friend has the say-so out here, at least for a while longer."

"That's the way we like it, Garvey."

"Likewise." The CPO took a long pull at his grog, carefully replaced the glass in a watery ring on the table, and again made a surreptitious survey of the all but deserted canteen. "Two watches ago I'm aboard *Relentless*, sound asleep in my fartsack, mind you. I get roused to the comm compartment on the double when a hypersecret, codeword redhot with 'For Your Eyes Only' and all that guff lights up the receiver. After holding a comm rating more 'n a century, I'm the designated crypto chief aboard the big yacht. The Pirate, he stands over me on one foot then the other while I decode in the crypto booth. Second I finish, he tears the printout flimsy outta my hand and tells me to delete the message."

"Skip the rest of the potatoes, and get to the meat."

“Well, I sure enough deleted it, but what the high ‘n mighty Pirate don’t know is that the de-crypt message’s in both the software and firmware till you delete it from the primary and backup databases. I printed a copy on the sly before bilging the backup.”

“So what the hell does it *say*?” Holt demanded impatiently.

“The short ‘n sweet version tells the Pirate the Old One has had it up to here.” Sance chopped lightly at his grizzled neck. “This particular redhot’s not aimed at the Pirate’s heart, but at his soul if he he’s got one. It’s marked personal, with no flowers and nice music. It’s mean, and I mean *mean*.”

“Sidestepping my friend,” guessed Morrow.

“You guessed right, Holt. As of right then ‘n there, on the spot, the Pirate’s directed to stop taking orders from your Friend. First he’s directed to wake the hibernates stuck on-orbit and bring ‘em down to the party; that goes down period after next by the way. Seems Lovelock and the other heavy-duty thinkers want things out here run *their* way from now on. No more coddling the skinny hummers on this pretty, off-brand lump, either; nor any more loose talk about philosophy. What should also interest you a whole lot is that the Pirate’s been told to let the buckoes unlimber their swords again. Another first line starcruiser’s being diverted here from sector nineteen, somewhere roundabout Capella, best I can remember.”

Holt chewed over the information with a sinking feeling, he said, “Period after next kicks off the rule change on duels?”

“Right. As I was leaving *Relentless*, the master of one of the cattle-cars on-orbit came aboard to palaver with the Pirate, who’s slated to come groundside himself late this evening. Never felt smart enough to give advice, Holt, but you’d best tell your Friend to buckle onto a stout line quicklike. If he doesn’t, he’s liable to find himself drifting in vacuum with no pressure-suit.”

A sober nod from Morrow. “No one’s ever praised the Planners for their patience. They want someone out here who’ll jig when they whistle, not a sterling gente like my Friend.”

“Appears to be that way,” said Garvey Sance.

“Any notion how and where he could hook up to that stout line?”

A derisive grin. “You know me, Holt. I’m not the one to think my way through this hairy mess. And, oh, one more thing. I’d as soon my name didn’t come up if and when the blowoff I smell coming blows off, okay?”

“That won’t happen, Garvey. Guaranteed.”

Sance downed the dregs in his glass. With a casual sleight-of-hand move, he slipped a folded square of flash-paper under the glass as he set it down. “Best be getting back up to my berth now. The pinnacle’s slated to lift off right soon. Guess I must be getting old. I don’t feel so hot anymore with full weight on my tender feet.”

Holt clapped his old friend’s shoulder. “Can’t thank you enough, Garvey. This puts you one up on me.”

Sance made vague, circular motions with his hands. “Scratch me and I’ll scratch you. I’ll never forget the scrape you pulled me out of in Cibania ninety, a hundred cycles ago.”

“Which scrape was that?”

“Oh, you remember that gal with big feet and freckles. Her pussyfootin’ boyfriend developed a sudden urge to carve me up some. You hampered him just in time.”

“You mean that time we were beached in Cibania with zero credit? Yeah, I do recollect a lively fracas in a tavern out that way. Good times, Garvey!”

“You’ve got that right. A while ago . . .”

“Longer than it seems.”

“A lot longer,” said Sance, looking far beyond what he was able to see. “Level with me, Shipmate. What’s the straight skinny on these Danii? Why’re they hell-bent on snatching every swordwaving buck who wins a squabble? At first me and the other non-coms laughed off the whole ditsy rigamarole until the weapons officer aboard *Relentless* ran into a challenge over in Euphalia, and *whis-s-s-st!* Gone! Good officer, too. Kind of took a shine to him.”

“No one has a clue, Garvey. That’s the honest truth. I’ve been around a while, but I’ve never seen anything half as deep as the weird goings-on in this pretty lump. It’s got me plenty spooked along with everyone else.”

The statement drew a frown from Sance. “Now that bothers me a whole lot. You never did scare easy. Well, got to run. Keep breathing, and don’t look back.”

“Count on it, Garvey. Thanks again. I won’t forget the favor.”

* * *

That night it rained, beginning as a half-hearted mizzling shortly after the dinner hour, later picking up a stiff gale that drove the wet in under the broad soffit shielding the entrance to the space terminal’s Armory Dome, where Morrow waited. By midnight the storm had settled into a genuine howler accompanied by a steady subtropical downpour.

Holt liked the feel of rain on his face. He loved wet nights when everything took on a glossy, just-created look and the heavy, humid air softened his palate, making smoking an added delight. Waving alight one black cigarette after another, he kept an eye on the sky, anticipating the flare of the shuttle Sance had informed him was due to ground sometime after twenty-four hundred hours.

After his meeting in the NCO club, he had spent the afternoon on the vidicom in his suite, chasing down the whereabouts of Commodore Garrigues. After fixing himself a hasty meal in his suite, he had stretched out in a lounge before the glasswall to watch the storm blow in and sketch out his planned moves.

Checking the time on his wrist chronometer, he waved alight another black cigarette and inhaled deeply. When he looked up, a dazzling violet star burned through the sheeting rain. He chucked the cigarette, adjusted the hood of his slicker and hurried out to the landing pad. His verticraft was where he had left it despite the autoattendant’s warning, parked close to the nearest bull’s eye pad.

Staying on manual control, he guided vehicle bucking and bouncing in a strong cross-wind across a thousand-odd meters to the cluster of heliports adjacent to the section of hardstand reserved for Imperial Space forces use, where he centered the illuminated bull’s eye in the head-up display, he let the verticraft settle to the landing pad. Shutting down the ducted fans, he engaged the transmission and drove over to the perimeter parking area with the windscreen wipers working furiously. The storm had turned into a tempest, upping his sense of well-being tenfold.

He stepped down from the verticraft and slammed the hatch. Across the way, a lightless, twin-ducted military bus was all but invisible in the driving rain. Holt sloshed toward the larger vehicle. As he approached, the red dot of a cigarette flipped from the driver's window instantly quenched in the deluge. A muffled voice called, "Nice night out?"

Holt kept his reply purposely stern. "Yeah, for fish. Sailor, don't you know Commodore Garrigues' pinnace is on the ground? Why're you sitting out here twiddling your thumbs?"

A dim, disgruntled face appeared when the window slid open all the way. "Who're you?"

"Just a politician, Son. I'm here to meet the commodore. Now then, why haven't you trundled this rig over to the gate?"

"Didn't know his plans had changed, is all," protested the sailor. "He's supposed to meet with the Marine commander before I'm due to pick him up. Chief said he'd call on the squawk-box when the commodore's ready to trot."

Holt forced a sheepish expression. "Sorry, I wasn't told about that. Mind if I crawl up there out of this monsoon and wait with you?"

"Sure, no problem. Come aboard."

Holt joked with the kid for ten minutes until he relaxed. Holding his breath, he hit the sailor in the face with a spray of placidyl from the thumb-sized cannister he had palmed.

The young enlisted man sat bolt upright in shock and tried to say something, then slumped over the airbus's joystick. Holt caught him, eased him back upright. With one hand, he switched off the cabin light, reached across the sailor and worked the lever on the outward-opening hatch.

Using the fireman's tote, he carried the sailor through the rain to his verticraft and had trouble stuffing him into the rear seat and rolling him into the fetal position with his boots neatly tucked up on the cushions. As an afterthought, he rummaged in the underseat bin, took out a blanket and threw it over the unconscious lad. He banged the hatch closed, peered about guardedly through the darkness and rain, and hustled back through the rain to the airbus.

Three black cigarettes later the squawkbox erupted. "Spaceman Arkins, time for duty, Arky. Up 'n at 'em."

Holt popped the switch. "Aye, aye, Chief. On my way."

"Smatter, you sound extra hoarse? Catch cold out there, what?"

"Helluva wet night, Chief. The brass all set to go bye-bye?"

"Five, ten minutes, give or take. Watch your step with the commodore. He's had more than a few, if you catch my drift."

"Gotcha, Chief. I'll mind my manners."

Holt wound up the first stage turbine, energized the glowcoils. The engine caught and rumbled into life. He trundled the airbus over to the circular drive in front of the ISF Dome's lobby, parked between the fountain and the guards' cubby and kicked on the brakes. The brightly illuminated apron was too well lit for his uses, so he kept the hood of his slicker pulled up around his ears, hoping it would get him by for the short time he would be exposed.

Minutes later a pair of uniforms made their way out beneath the lobby's canopy and ignored the guard's salute. Holt got out in the rain, hurried aft and held open the 'midships hatch,

keeping his head low to obscure his features, and realized he need not have bothered. Glassy-eyed, Garrigues breathed stertorously from the act of heaving his bulk aboard the airbus. Holt recognized the other officer from a previous meeting — the executive officer of *Relentless*, an ambitious bootlicker whose name he had forgotten if he ever knew it.

Closing the hatch on the pair, he trotted forward in the rain, vaulted into the cabin and energized the bus. Trundling the large vehicle out to the takeoff pallet, he went airborne without asking permission to lift.

The intercom cut loose at once. “Hey, up there! What’s the rush?”

“Sorry, ser,” Holt responded meekly. “Thought you gentes might be in a hurry. What’s our destination, if you please, ser?”

“The commodore’s residence warren on the double.” The XO didn’t sound at all mollified.

“Aye, aye, ser.” Holt knuckled a switch, snapping off the intercom. *Let ‘em sweat*, he thought, wondering if either passenger was observant enough to discover the deceitful switch of destinations in this heavy weather. Fortunately, the airbus was driven by twin-ducted fans, with the passenger compartment tucked between the fore and aft ducts. There was no way for his passengers to come forward and harass him in any event.

Lighting the radar beacon, he punched the autopilot with the code of the Directorial Seat’s roofpark, and lolled back, watching rain flatten against the windscreen as the airbus transitioned from vertical to horizontal flight. Anticipating the confrontation he knew was inevitable, he unlimbered the antique Casches pistol strapped to his upper thigh, where the weapon had been effectively concealed beneath his slicker. Seating the charge firmly, he screwed home the arming pin and flipped off the safety.

Minutes later an obnoxiously pitched series of beeps told him the autopilot had completed its assigned task. Buffeted by wind and rain, the airbus had come to a full hover one hundred meters above the inputted destination. Holt reassumed manual control and let down cautiously, jockeying the craft until the bull’s eye glowed at the crosshaired center of the head-up display. Lowering the airbus, he grounded with a gentle nudge, taxied clear of the bull’s eye landing pallet, and cut all power with a slash of his hand. Kicking on the brakes, he bolted from the forward hatch into the rain.

The XO was peering from the window, waiting for the driver to open the ‘midships hatch. When it didn’t happen immediately, he stared hard at Morrow through the rain-beaded glass, and decided to open the hatch himself from inside.

The executive officer froze, then jerked back in alarm when he found himself staring into the emission bell of the Casches pistol in Morrow’s hairy fist.

“What the hell is this, a gag?”

Holt kned the hatch out of the way. “Fraid it’s for serious. Get out of the bus, and bring your friend.”

More than half-seas-over, the commodore had been dozing during the brief flight. The XO roused him none too gently and helped him alight. The rain on his face partially revived Garrigues. Fixing Holt in his bleary field of vision, he said uncertainly, “Morrow . . . ?”

“In the flesh, Commodore. Into the lobby, both of you. Go!”

The XO said something profane. “We’ll do no such thing.”

“Walk, I said.”

“You haven’t the guts to use that silly old toy,” challenged the XO, gazing semi-hypnotized into the Caches pistol’s emission bell.

“One quick way to find out,” said Morrow coldly.

More or less aware of the threat, inebriation had clouded the commodore’s thought processes. Regarding Holt with watery fascination, he said, “Have you lost your reason, Morrow? Put that thing away!”

“Walk or you’re cinders,” Holt told the pair flatly. “Your call.”

In a half-hearted gesture, the XO’s right hand strayed to the hilt of the rapier at his side. He dared to take a half-step forward. “Whatever it is you have in mind, defying Convention won’t get it done. Put the energy weapon away and pull sword like a gente. I’ll be delighted to carve some manners on your chest.”

“Some other time,” denied Holt, his grin wolfish.

“Why, you infantile —”

“No more time wasting. If you don’t decide to move out right smartly, I’ll make sure you’re permanently stationary.”

Garrigues clutched the arm of his companion. “Humor him. He’s obviously deranged.”

“But, Commodore, we can’t allow —”

“Do as I say.”

The pair of recruited security colonials on duty in the roofpark lobby of the Directorial Seat were busy staying warm and dry. “Hey,” called Holt, “can you please step over here.”

The taller of the pair set down a coffee cup. “You sure picked a nice night to be . . .” The proctor fell silent and glanced warily from the indignant officers to the Caches pistol in Holt’s hairy, rock-steady fist.

“By the authority vested in me by Director Grey,” said Holt, palming his Congressional Medallion for the colonial’s benefit, “I hereby order you to place these gentes under close arrest. Please stow them stowed in the basement lockup until the director can be notified.”

“This p-person is *insane!*” faltered the XO. “He kidnapped us at gunpoint.”

“Commodore Garrigues and his pal will have ample chance to have their say,” assured Holt. “Won’t hurt either of them to spend an hour or two in the lockup, will it? If I’m on my way to the snake farm like this officer says, you’ll find out soon enough and turn ‘em loose. Is that fair?”

The XO shouted dire threats at everyone concerned. The security proctors put their heads together in a brief consultation. Morrow hoped his lack of emotion under the torrent of aristocratic abuse would help them make up their minds.

The apprentice public assassin Holt had first spoken to approached. “Don’t see how you gentes expect to be cleared of charges unless you —”

“There *are* no charges,” raged Commodore Garrigues. Sobered in some measure by what was happening, he was absolutely beside himself.

"I believe you, ser? Even so, I'm obliged to accept the word of this gente until . . . I mean when the director is notified and the matter settled. Please step into the lift."

Holt said, "One thing more. My verticraft is parked on the other side of the space terminal, at the Armory Dome. Can you send someone over, have him fly it back here to the Seat?"

The assassin looked dubious. "'S'pose so, ser Morrow. Sure you know what you're doing?"

"Dead certain," emphasized Holt meaningfully. Glaring at the accused, he added, "These two are suspected of high treason. See to it that they don't run off."

The statement earned a frown. "Ugly word, treason. They'll be downstairs, ser."

"Thanks." With no little satisfaction, Holt noted the frightened expression that had transformed Garrigues as, despite their protestations, he and the XO were led away and ushered into the lift compartment.

* * *

Maran Roberts skimmed the interstellar communications flimsy Holt had obtained from his former shipmate. He looked up from the creased flash-paper document, alarm written large in his expression. "Is this genuine, Holt? Where did you get it?"

"One of my private spies bootlegged it right after it came in aboard *Relentless*." Holt doffed his wet slicker and chucked it in the general direction of the autovalet. "I promised to keep the name of the fellow who passed it along hush-hush, but I'll personally vouch for what's in your hand, Maran. It's germane—the genuine goods, and genuine bad news."

"Umm-m-m. If so, it tells us Lovelock has decided to bypass imperial policies, procedures, traditions and whatever else is in the book, including Convention. He has in effect decided to act as the prime mover in this affair."

"Sure does look that way."

Roberts cogitated. "The other Planners cannot be aware of this radical departure from established imperial policy. Neither the Star Council nor Congress would even dream of countenancing a flagrant breach of Convention of this magnitude. Direct orders to a military mission on detached colonial service are absolutely unprecedented. An appointed director is an irreproachable surrogate of the Planners themselves, and therefore considered inviolate within every planetary jurisdiction. A director can be removed from office if convicted of malfeasance or misusing his authority, but he or she cannot be overruled until that takes place. In all seriousness, the Old One could find himself unseated if a violation of this can be proven."

"Maran, you're preaching to the choir," said Holt.

"We shall need confirmation."

"It's in your hand," said Holt. "But take some sound advice and give the whole bleeding mess a long, hard think before you wave that flimsy in front of anyone in authority. Lovelock's successor would most likely be a lot harder to anticipate than what we're used to. What it boils down to is that we'll probably be better off with devil we know than one we don't."

A dispirited nod. Roberts folded the communiqué printout and slipped it into the slash pocket of his tunic. "A council of war is definitely in order. We'll run this incredible item of evidence up to the directors suite. Determining what immediate use to make of this ammunition is imperative. We simply cannot allow Garrigues to carry out these instructions."

“Uh, listen,” said Holt sheepishly. I, uh . . .” He hemmed and hawed and eventually admitted that for the time being he had more or less squelched the comodore’s ability to carry out his orders.”

“Squelched . . ? What does that mean?”

Holt folded his arms across his chest. “Now don’t get sore, Maran. I got crowded for time after finding out about the redhot you just tucked away. If the commodore had ordered the hibernates stashed on-orbit warmed-up and shipped groundside it would’ve confronted Pierce with not just an accomplished fact, but one damn near impossible to reverse. We may have to tweak the skipper of the cattle car on-orbit to make sure he doesn’t bulldoze through the landing anyhow, commodore or no comodore. My guess is he’s already been told to wake the sleepers and dump them groundside. Then Garrigues is to declare martial law and run everything from here on in under Lovelock’s personal direction. The Old One supposedly has some emergency legislation he’s set to ram down the Council and Congress throats.”

Roberts looked devastated. “Wait, what was that last? How did you —?”

“It’s part and parcel of my spy’s verbal input,” informed Morrow. “The Planners are said to be split down the middle over the million-decibel uproar over the ban on dueling and its generating circumstance, the rash of body-snatching Pierce did his best to deal with on this beeyoot-i-ful lump of mud. Dueling won out, no surprise. Code Duello is to be reinstated first thing after Pierce is clamped in the brig aboard *Relentless*, or worse.”

Roberts was aghast. “This transmittal mentions no such highhanded —”

“I know, but others did. My private spy, he’s sitting in the catbird seat. He gets a first peek at every news flash that sizzles in from the homeworld, and he took a king-sized chance smuggling one out.”

Roberts spent a moment digesting the information. He placed a weary hand on Morrow’s shoulder. “You’ve convinced me. How did you ‘settle’ matters with Garrigues?”

Holt drew a deep breath and told him.

Roberts blinked. Then his lips twitched. A twinkle of delight invaded his eyes. “You *kidnapped* them?”

“Uh-huh, in a . . . Well, in a manner of speaking.”

“Were there any witnesses to what took place at the space terminal?”

“In that?” Morrow gestured. The glasswall of his friend’s suite was running rivulets in the driving rain.

“And on the roofpark at the Seat?”

“Only a pair of colonials on watchdog duty. Seemed like good sorts, too. They listened to my fairy tale, made up their minds.”

“Are you certain?”

Morrow shrugged. “Pretty sure, yeah.”

Brow furrowed, his mind working overtime, Roberts clapped his hands. “We’ll soon know whether you’re a hero or a goat. Either way, your reasoning is difficult to hard to argue with. The paragon of military commanders and his XO will have dropped out of sight exactly as if among those being taken.”

“That’s sort of how I figured it,” said Holt drily. “Except no one who’s acquainted with that pompous jackass would believe he work up the guts to accept a challenge.”

“Be that as it may, Holt, you’ve provided us with breathing space in which to unravel this twisted skein. Were you told of the important event which took place this morning?”

“Event . . . ?”

“Come into the study. I want you to hear something.”

Roberts led the way. He immediately punched the switch plaque of a recorder integral to the desk. A well-modulated baritone voice began repeating the same questions over and over:

“What is your name, ser? Where have you been? How did you return?”

The pauses between questions were filled by someone making indecipherable labial sounds, slurred in a way that that raised Morrow’s hackles. Becoming distinctly uncomfortable the longer he listened, he waited for an explanation.

“The unanswered questions,” Roberts told him, talking over the recorded dialogue, “were posed shortly after the noon hour by a team of medics, neuropsychiatric therapists, and a behavioral specialist. The replies, to generously call them that, were uttered by someone we never thought to see or hear from again, a patrician sequestree identified as ser Melas, Sayne Melas. The name mean anything to you?”

“Melas . . . ? Holt’s high forehead creased. “Not the bucko I just missed seeing spit the scientist, then blowing him away, the first to get himself lifted?”

“The same,” said Roberts. “He reappeared from nowhere on the plaza in front of the Lovelock Foundation Tower, his mind shattered by the experience, whatever it may have been.”

“I’ll be flayed twice over!” Holt wagged his head. “Every period this crazy business gets a couple of shades deeper. Don’t suppose the witchdoctors got anything out of him.”

“Only what you are hearing. He was filthy, starved, dehydrated and suffering from mild exposure. Unable to take nourishment unaided, he is incapable of saying anything intelligible. The vengeful aristocrat snatched from our midst has returned as an empty shell.”

Holt listened to the questions, the chilling groans, the meaningless sucking sounds. He reached over, switched off the recorder.

His manner resolute, Roberts said, “I intend going to the Danii with this latest puzzle, Holt, and I intend to obtain some sort of meaningful answer.”

Morrow was dubious. “You’ll need a large dollop of luck. The skinny hummers you care about so much only seem to provide more questions, not answers. What makes you think they’ll explain this latest weirdness?”

“Because I will *make* them explain. We have very little choice, none in fact. We simply must to get to the bottom of this mystery, and is much happen *soon*. ”

“Easy, Maran,” soothed Holt. “Don’t get all lathered up; it only makes things worse.”

Roberts nodded tiredly. “I envy your coolness. It’s this . . . not *knowing* that makes me frantic . . . I know myself well enough to believe I’m able to face anything tangible, but fighting ghosts is . . . Well, it’s unnerving.”

“Know how you feel, ‘cause I feel the same way. Let’s run upstairs and fill in Pierce. But you’d best soft-pedal it about what took Garrigues and the XO of his big, fancy new sky yacht out of action. Learning what I did on my own hook is bound to shake him up.”

“We’ll break the news gently,” assured Roberts.

* * *

Collecting his slicker from the autovalet, Holt followed Roberts into the atrium. Riding upward in the lift compartment, he realized that he had failed to appreciate how radically the strain was affecting Roberts. His thin features looked even thinner, and a touch of pallor had replaced his former ruddy glow. Worst of all was the fact that his old friend was beginning to doubt his ability to cope with the mystery. For some reason it angered Holt.

The lift eased to a stop. Maran said, “It’s late. He may be asleep.”

“Then we’ll have to wake him.”

Security provisions prevented the lift doors from rolling apart on the director’s residence level until the occupant looked into the scanner’s hood and allowed their iris patterns to be checked and recorded. They debouched in the hallway across from Grey’s suite. “Roberts and Morrow here,” announced Holt at the portal. “Got a minute, Pierce?”

There was no response. Holt tried again. After a short wait, the door slid into the wall. Wide-eyed Leighton Grey rushed into the atrium, looking very happy to see them.

“Hiya, kiddo,” greeted Holt. “Is Pierce busy?”

“I th . . . think so, but . . .”

“What is it, Leighton?” asked Roberts, alarmed without knowing why.

The boy shuffled his feet. “They’ve been in there such a long time. And I can’t hear . . . humming any more.”

“*Humming!*” Roberts paled.

“We were in the study watching holovision,” said Leighton. “I went to get something to nibble. When I came back, two of them were there, standing in front of Pierce.”

“Two of *whom?*”

“The, uh . . . them. The natives.”

“*Here*, in the Seat?” demanded Holt.

“In the study,” said Leighton. “Pierce was excited. He’d turned on the transliterator gadget, said he wanted to talk to them and asked me to wait outside. He closed the door, said everything was all right, but . . .”

Holt beat Roberts to the study door by two steps. It was locked. “Leighton, is there another way in?”

“Uh-uh. No, guess not.”

Holt pounded on the stout door, judged that nothing short of two or three strong men could force it. Stepping to the glasswall, he stabbed a button to retract it and dodged out on the rainswept terrace with Roberts at his heels.

“Can you see in?”

“No, ‘fraid not,” denied Holt. “The drapes’re drawn. It’s a long stretch from the top of the balustrade to the window; not much to hang on to, either. Go back in, Maran. Bang hard on the door, and bang hard. If you can’t raise Pierce, I’ll lean out, see if I can break the window.”

Holt waited, the raindrops pelting his unprotected face and running down the nape of his neck. But it was not the cold water that chilled him to the core, bringing on an involuntary shudder. He could hear muffled pounding coming from inside the suite.

Roberts reappeared seconds later. “Not a sound in there.”

Lithely mounting the balustrade, Holt freed the Casches pistol from the thigh holster beneath his kilt. “Grab my boot, Maran. Hang on tight.” Pressing himself against the Directorial Seat’s metal façade, he leaned out over thin, rain-washed air and tapped the pistol’s butt against the window. The sturdy, dual-pane transpex proved to be tougher than he’d anticipated.

Drawing back carefully, he swung the Casches pistol in a high arc and managed to smash a corner of the window, almost losing his balance in the process. He struck again and again. Most breakage shattered into hundreds of safety shards, but a portion broke cleanly and fell toward the shrubbery more than a kilometer below, scratching his hand as it fell. He chipped away at another segment higher up, then worked steadily, knocking away jagged pieces clinging to the bottom of the frame.

Swinging his weight back to the balustrade, he handed the weapon to Roberts, quickly stripped off his tunic. “I’ll see if I can throw it over the window frame, then hang and scramble in.”

“Risky,” warned Roberts. “Can you do it?”

“Got to try.” Holt made three passes before the wet tunic landed the way he wanted. He slipped from the balustrade, hung for an instant against the structure’s naked, rain-wet facade, and then chinned himself, muscled up and disappeared headfirst into the study amid a swirl of draperies.

Roberts dashed back inside.

The door to the study soon slid into the wall. Clutching his bleeding hand, an expression of intense dismay twisted Morrow’s wet, disheveled features. He said dolefully, “Gone! Room’s deserted.”

Leighton Grey began sobbing hysterically.

X

*He Who is wrapped in purple robes,
With planets in His care,
Had pity on the least of things
Asleep upon a chair.*

William Butler Yeats, revered
antebellum poet, ca 1880 CE

There was an odd pattern on the wall, a swatch of dappled sunlight that shifting and danced in rippling, hypnotic rhythm. The sundance occupied his aimless attention for an indefinite length of time. Later, when his consciousness began to fully congeal, he became aware that it was not a wall but the textured ceiling that lay in his hazy field of view. The shimmering ceiling absorbed his limited powers of concentration for an even longer period. Gradually, surprised to learn that doing so took considerable effort, ser Gailen van Maar rolled his head on the pillow.

He had not the slightest notion where he was, or why he happened to be there.

The hydraulic bed's linen gave off a faintly antiseptic odor. He strained to lift his head a few millimeters and inspected what could be seen of the small, neat room, the utilitarian, metal-framed bed in which he lay, and wondered where in the grand scheme of things he was. His memory seemed faulty, clouded; he certainly had no recollection of retiring in this room. In truth, he could not remember much of anything about the previous period or for that matter his prior life.

He yawned and stretched and was jolted by knifelike pain in his chest. Startled, he made a feeble attempt to sit up and grunted when the wrenching pain grew sharper, forcing him back on the gel-filled mattress.

"Some discomfort?" inquired a solicitous baritone voice.

Gailen rolled his head the opposite direction. The door had slid silently into the wall. A saturnine individual clad in the gray-green smock of a Giver of Life stood close beside the bed, gazing down at him "Gentle ser," informed the physician, "your distress will wear off in a matter of hours. If you feel up to it, I would like to check you over now and perhaps administer additional analgesic."

"Where am I? Can't remember . . . a thing."

"Which is quite natural," soothed the medic. "Abrupt enzyme imbalance accounts for much of the problem. Neural tissue — the synapses — undergoes severe deconditioning when one has, er . . . Let me put it this way: while you were gone, your brain functions underwent —"

"Gone . . . !"

"Er, yes." The doctor's solicitous manner verged on embarrassment. "When deceasement occurs, you see, the arterioles supplying blood to one's brain —"

"You're saying I've been *dead*."

"We avoid using that harsh term rather stringently, gentle ser. I appreciate what a severe shock it must be for most patients. You were, however, gone only several hours."

Van Maar regarded the medic with awe. "Several . . . hours."

"It would be terribly unwise," warned the physician, "to try and move about suddenly during the next few hours of recuperation. You see, your cerebellum is not yet completely trustworthy. Incompatible sense impressions from the otoliths, labyrinthine canals and optic nerve might cause your cerebellum to discharge the vagus nerve and bring on severe nausea. It has happened thus to any number of resurrected patients who fail to heed medical advice."

Gailen reacted as if he had absorbed a body blow. "Will there be any lingering . . . ? What I mean is, will I be permanently handicapped in any way because of . . . dying?"

“Oh, no; not in any way,” was the reassuring reply. “Nothing whatever to fear on that score. Barring minor scar tissue any cosmetic surgeon can eliminate at your liesure, you should be precisely as you were prior to deceasement. Do you feel well enough for me to check you over now?”

“Uh, yes. Guess so.”

The medic pulled back the coverlet. Gailen suspiciously eyed the half-dozen tubes entering a large white disc attached to his chest. He felt his wrist lifted, the flesh of his forearm kneaded. “You obviously enjoy excellent health, gentle ser. Your muscle tone,” remarked the Giver of Life, “makes it easy to see that you’re a very active young man.”

“How did I . . . die?” inquired van Maar cautiously.

As if he had not heard the query, the medic uncovered a panel in the bedside table and began touching switch plaques and examining the displayed data. “Heart action strong; tachycardia has all but disappeared. Lungs excellent. Hmm-m-m, yes; everything quite as it should be. With full geriatric treatment, you should live well into your third century, and perhaps beyond.”

“What happened to me?” Gailen posed the question more aggressively.

Heedless of the query, the physician busied himself removing the placenta from van Maar’s chest. “Your friends are waiting to see you, gentle ser. I’m sure they will be happy to answer all your questions. I do not even wish to know your name.”

“Friends?” Rankled, Gailen said, “What friends?”

“I have no wish to learn their identities, either.” The physician drew the coverlet back up to van Maar’s chin. “If you wish, I’ll be happy to send them in now.”

“Thank you,” Gailen told the retreating figure. The door slid closed, he was alone again.

Memories were flooding back in surges and fits and starts — a flashing impression of the Palace of Swords, the blood red cork of the arena, his blind rage at being challenged by an accomplished professional gladiator. In short order, most of what had happened became clear, at once making him feel demeaned and elevated. He had not exactly failed to prove himself, to prove his manhood, but in another sense had failed something larger than personal self-respect by accepting provocation and being slain by a pluperfectly dandified idiot sure of himself in his role as a professional smallswordsmen. If dueling was for fools, professional gladiators had to be far and away the grandest, most glorious fools of all.

Outrage and frustration made it impossible for him to lie peacefully in bed. He experimented with a quadrate of controls and finally lowered the hospital bed’s safety rail. Sitting up very slowly, a few millimeters at a time, he gingerly swung his bare feet over the edge of the hydraulic mattress and felt his toes touch the floor. The activity made the room waver and spin in an alarming way, but the dizziness quickly passed. Seated on the bed, he fumbled into a white hospital robe folded on the bedside table. Tremulously standing erect, he made his way to the glasswall with short, hesitant steps and learned what had caused the rippling pattern on the ceiling.

A dazzle of sunlight, reflecting from the sheen of ocean hundreds of meters below, played through a clump of twisted eucalyptus trees on the terrace swaying in the sea breeze. He was in a room high in one of the seatowers girdling the space terminal where he had arrived on his mission to Terra. Atop the floating metal island off to the right, a half-dozen ground-to-orbit shuttle-

craft stood like candles on a plate. Beyond, to the extremity of vision, the sparkle of the broad Pacific terminated in a subtly curved, unbroken horizon.

Feeling shaky, Gailen settled in an armchair and allowed it to automatically adapt itself to the contours of his body. He was contemplating the fantastic notion of death and resurrection when a voice from the portal swept away his reverie.

“May we come in?” inquired Minor Lovelock’s liquid contralto.

* * *

She entered hesitantly, as if uncertain of the welcome. Behind her, Elan Grey looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“It’s wonderful to see you up and about.” Minor performed a searching inspection of the patient. “Do you feel well enough to have visitors?”

“I feel well enough to feel very strange,” confessed van Maar. “Even more muddled than usual, you might say. The doctor told me it would wear off in a few hours. I have a hard time believing it really happened.”

As if reluctant to say anything at all, Elan murmured, “We . . . That is, Minor and I feel terribly guilty about allowing you to be subjected —”

“Don’t,” said Gailen quickly. “Be fair to yourself. If I had listened to you there in the arena I wouldn’t have gotten involved in the nonsensical brawl.”

Grey thought that over. “I appreciate your attitude, but I’m afraid it was our fault. We should never have allowed you to —”

“Please, neither of you should beat yourself up over what happened. I acted like a dunce last evening. First I refused to heed your counsel about not offering provocation, then lost my temper at the wrong time, in the wrong place, to the wrong sword-happy idiot, not to mention neglecting to keep your sire’s Congressional Medallion on my person at all times. That was really stupid, especially after Minor went to all the trouble of returning it, warning me never go about the reservation without it.”

Elan searched for sarcasm. Finding none, he said hesitantly, “Gailen, I’m afraid last evening . . . It pains me to have to tell you the duel took place four periods ago. Your . . . funerary disposition was undertaken shortly thereafter. Officially, you are deceased.”

Gailen did not try to hide his astonishment. “What do you mean? I’ve been revived.”

“Say it softly,” urged Minor. “Only Elan and I, the Giver of Life my beloved ancestor browbeat into caring for you, the assassins who brought you here who were sworn to secrecy know of your resurrection. Should the truth ever come out, it will be extremely awkward for all concerned, especially the illustrious director of Terra.”

“It will much worse than ‘awkward,’” amended Elan. “After you were . . . That is, in the wake of the duel your opponent refused to relent. It is not Nyemeister’s habit, nor that of most professionals, to permit the resurrection of an opponent he has bested. For anyone who lacks evidence of immunity, it’s actually an egregious violation of Convention to resurrect the deceased. Misplacing or forgetting to carry Pierce’s Congressional Medallion denied you your status as my pater’s surrogate.”

“Then, how . . . ?” began van Maar.

“Thank Minor,” said Elan. “If she had failed to intercede with ser Weldon and plead with him, your ashes would now be in transit to your homeworld.”

His mouth dry, Gailen managed to say, “I do thank you, Minor.”

“Oh, by all means show your appreciation, Gailen. My, weren’t we kind?” she said in a caustic tone of voice. “It was I who insisted that you accompany us to the arena and unwittingly exposed you to a challenge you were in no way prepared to accept, yet felt obligated to so anyhow. If you feel a need to *thank* someone for your shoddy treatment, tell the director how grateful you are. I did beg and plead with Weldon, but it was an act of anguish, a last ditch impulse to spare you. I didn’t believe for an instant he would bend and dare *do* anything so rash, take such an unreasonable risk. There’s something you have to understand, Gailen. Weldon has held his chair for more than a century, and like every politico in the universe he has enemies, in his case more many than the average number. It seems to go with the territory; the loftier one’s position, the more numerous and powerful are one’s enemies. If he were to be unseated over an extremely serious breach of Convention like this, his legion of enemies would consider it the political coup of all time.”

“I see,” murmured van Maar, actually seeing very little. “In that case, I suppose we’d best keep me under wraps until . . . Oh, now I *do* see – the space terminal.”

“Just so,” complimented Elan. “You’ll begin your injections as soon as the medic announces your recovery sufficient. Ser Weldon has arranged for you to be surreptitiously taken aboard a vessel outbound for sector sixteen, not many parsecs from the Danite System. You’ll be dropped off there incognito, and second-leg transport will be made available.”

“Cryothermia?” Gailen frowned. “Is that really necessary? I went that route coming here, but I have work to do. Can’t it be arranged for me to stay awake during transit?”

“Weldon would never hear of it,” Minor told him. “Staying awake in transit would not only endanger you, but doubly endanger the director as well. You’re to be advertised to the ship’s master, and officially listed on the manifest, as a medical patient, with written instructions not to open your chrysalis and bring you around under any circumstances. In that, you are forced to respect the director’s decision.”

“Well, yes . . . suppose I agree. But it’s galling to have real-time standard months evaporate for no purpose when I could use the time to great advantage.” He shrugged, bringing on a twinge of pain in his chest. “I suppose that sounds ungrateful. I should be overjoyed to still be breathing.”

“We owed it to you tenfold, Gailen. Minor touched his hand. “Elan and I felt so terrible about what happened. You can’t imagine our distress when that posturing fool —”

“Please, no apologies,” Gailen hastened to say. “Really, there’s no need.”

“Ah, but we believe there is,” Elan said gravely. “There’s more than ample need for a sincere apology, Gailen, not only from us but from Nyemeister. His challenge was despicable, in addition to being thoroughly unworthy of Convention. In challenging you, he radically violated the spirit of Code Duello, demonstrating not only a distinct lack of breeding, but a monumental instance of bad taste. I would never have imagined it from someone of his stature.”

A wry smile. “I don’t doubt for a second,” said van Maar, “that the duel-happy gente was motivated not by malice, but popular indignation over Pierce’s proscription of dueling. Admit it,

Elan; you said something along those lines yourself while we were enjoying ourselves floating above the arena.”

“My friend, you shame me.” Elan sounded disgruntled. “For the first time in my life I confess to skepticism about the wisdom of Code Duello.”

“Forget the shame,” urged Gailen, “and retain the doubt. Doubt is always healthy. Anyone with a smidgen of common sense pauses now and then to question certain fundamentals. Every statesman since the holocaust has probably argued the good versus evil of an armed, aggressive citizenry, and all it implies.”

“Possibly, yet I do feel —”

“Face it,” insisted van Maar, conscious of Grey’s frown, the tense, rebellious set of his mouth. “Now and forevermore will society be confronted with the same inescapable choice: *du-ellum*, or *bellum*.”

“You may be correct, but Nyemeister was still very —”

“Adept,” supplied Gailen.

“Adept! I should hope to tell you he’s adept. Faultless poise, blinding speed, a firm wrist and a goodly stretch of arm, not to mention workouts that keep him supple as he was a century ago. Behind that haughty, formidable mask lies a giant reservoir of single-minded purpose. Pyron may not be overly intelligent, but he nevertheless *thinks* his steel into your flesh.”

“I was a hair overmatched,” admitted van Maar.

Minor smiled. “Even so, we were proud of you.”

“For getting myself killed?”

“No, no,” objected Elan. “You acquitted yourself honorably, Gailen. No discredit accrues in falling to a smallswordsmen of Pyron Nyemeister’s caliber.”

“Comforting. But as I said, anyone looking into the affair more deeply will realize his animosity, fed by that of his friends, was directed toward the reviled, barbaric outworld whose director stepped on the toes of Convention, and then flaunted it publicly, threw it in the empire’s face. As an individual, I happened to be a convenient pincushion, the ‘object’ used to provide an object lesson.”

“There’s truth in what you say,” conceded Elan. “Nyemeister is the type of celebrity who is never offstage, never out of the limelight. He enjoys the constant, heroic posturing before the plebes. Yes, I’m forced to agree, Gailen. The driving force behind his challenge was the abolishment of dueling. The disappearances in Dan, incredibly difficult to believe as they are, struck everyone as a the flimsiest excuse to abrogate Convention by striking down Code Duello. That’s why I feel so guilty about what happened. It was, after all, my own sire who —”

“Hold it!” said van Maar, beginning to lose patience with Grey. “Can you please forget finishing your guilt trip. If necessary, I forgive you, absolve you of all guilt, and take pleasure in calling you my friend.”

“I’d like to believe you mean it.”

“I do mean it, Elan.”

Grey bristled at the sound of the opening portal. The Giver of Life appeared in the doorway looking agitated, and bowed obsequiously. "Good gentles, might one inquire if ser Elan Grey happens to be visiting the patient?"

Elan's voice cracked harshly. "What made you ask?"

The medic quailed. "Please, gentle ser; take no offense. I have been instructed to advise those, er, present that someone . . . on vidicom in *person* wishes ser Grey to report to the Directorial Seat with all due haste."

"Thank you," said Elen. "I will give ser Grey the message. Now do yourself a favor, Doctor, and forget you ever heard that name spoken."

"Consider it forgotten, gentle ser. Absolutely! Thank you. Thank you very much." The medic hastily backed away and the portal slid closed.

"You have a nasty habit of frightening people," accused Minor. "That poor man was terrified."

"I wanted to frighten him out of his skin. We shall hope he keeps his tongue well back in his mouth." Elan shifted his weight restively, making ready to leave the infirmary compartment. "I must run off and learn what I've done now to displease the Old One."

"Then this has to be . . . goodbye," said van Maar.

"Farewells are a bother and a nuisance, Gailen. Pleasant dreams during transit. When you awake, please offer my best regards to Pierce and young Leighton. Assure Pierce that I'll be doing everything in my power to smooth his differences with the Planners."

"I will, Elan. In turn, will you please convey my respects and deepest appreciation to Director Lovelock for what he has done. Who knows, we may meet again somewhere, sometime."

"I'll look forward to it." Elan bent over Minor's hand, straightened and smiled into her eyes, and rushed out of the compartment.

Minor regarded van Maar analytically. "You meant it. You really have forgiven us."

He met her steady gaze. "There was nothing to forgive."

"But I sense that you . . . It's my impression that you somehow resent Elan."

"Actually, I admire him."

"I can't imagine why." Looking troubled, she added, "He's brusque, self-centered, the perfect model of a sulky, touchy patrician, quick to anger, so very obstinate."

"And a dynamic, thoughtful individual as well."

"Umm-m-m, I suppose so," she said, sounding unconvinced.

"At our first meeting there in the director's lair," said Gailen, "he struck me as what you described, the perfect model of a self-centered, ego-driven aristocrat who reveled in swordplay and life's pleasures. Once he finds himself, develops concrete goals, that will change. Wait and see."

"Why, you really *do* like him."

"Elan's very easy to like. You should know; you're in love with him."

Minor turned to the glasswall. She searched the seagirt horizon, her expression pensive. "It is that obvious?"

"Does he love you?"

A shrug. "I'm not sure either of us knows the meaning of that ambiguous term."

"If he doesn't, he soon will."

She came to perch on the armrest of the bedside chair. "Saying that was noble and sweet, but then you're a sweet and noble person, Gailen." She bent mischievously and kissed him full on the lips.

Gailen van Maar blushed to the roots of his blond hair.

"As my . . . as Elan said, pleasant dreams on your journey." At the portal, she turned back and mischievously quipped, "Keep a sharp lookout for bare-busted maidens, Gailen. It was wonderful to have had you here."

"It was . . . wonderful," he faltered, "to have been here. Goodbye."

"Say au revoir," she amended Minor, and was gone.

The portal slid closed, leaving him alone with his sorrow.

* * *

Elan paced the director's reception chamber for the best part of an hour, sullenly watching one dignitary or group of officials after another precede him into the sanctum. When at last the Plenipotentiary from Endorus trundled past encased in an ugly, bioregenerative tank pressurized to several atmospheres of vile methane and other compounds, he fumed a while longer.

He eventually charged the neohuman receptionist and demanded to know if it would be presumptuous to ask when ser Lovelock would be free. "He did summon me to an immediate audience, you know."

There was neither sympathy nor warmth in the woman's cool professional smile. "A minor crisis has apparently disrupted the Star Council session, ser Grey. A shame to keep you waiting, but the Endorian is his last formal appointment. I realize how anxious he is to speak with you. You will be informed the instant he is available."

Elan fidgeted for another twenty interminable minutes. When attendants wheeled the Endorian's life support tank past in the opposite direction, the receptionist wordlessly dipped her head toward the entrance.

He hurried along the corridor, descended the shallow ramp and entered a nightmare scene depicting a lovely summer day in far Endorus. Sheet lightning flickered in heavy umber clouds boiling around a vast mountain. Beyond the craggy peak, an ammonia sea reflected garish yellow light from the stellar system's invisible primary.

Ser Weldon Lovelock's dais protruded from a simulated plain strewn with huge, jagged boulders rimed with simulated frost. Hunched in thought, his posture one of Olympian detachment, with one skeletal hand cupped beneath his emaciated chin, the director watched the play of distant lightning.

Elan performed the deferential bow. "Ser Director."

The Old One's head, overlarge in proportion to his emaciated frame, turned very slowly. He regarded Elan with lusterless dark eyes until, amazingly, the thin lips curved in a shadow smile. "Ah, ser Grey. Allow us to apologize for your tiresome wait. We've eagerly anticipated your arrival. First, however, shall we rid ourselves of this Endorian inferno?"

The holographic scene faded with disturbing abruptness. Suddenly he and the director were alone on an empty plain beneath an arching, featureless sky stretching to infinity.

“Problems in Endorus?” inquired Elan, hoping the Old One would welcome a conversational gambit.

The Terrestrial Imperium’s hoary ruler placed one hand atop the other. “Actually a matter of little consequence. Long ago the fifth planet of the Endorian System was rationalized for neo-human tenancy. Now the Endorians are prospering, beset with indigenous population pressure of their own. They plead with us, saying it would be greatly appreciated if neohumans were to vacate the premises, as it were. Protocol demands that we treat directly with alien societies in certain sticky matters such as this. It’s fatiguing and endless. Stamp out a brushfire in Endorus, and seventeen others precisely like it spring up here and there, more than taking its place. Something of this nature is always in the wind.”

Shifting mental gears, the director invited Grey to make make himself comfortable. “We shall divest ourselves of this platform, sit down together and converse like gentlefolk.”

The dais silently descended out of sight, leaving ser Weldon’s polychrome-metal geriatric chair floating decimeters above the tiles. A scene congealed around them — a quiet, booklined study carpeted in lush, multi-patterned floor covering. Deep leather armchairs faced a heatless fire crackling in the hearth. The geriatric chair glided near the illusion of flames and ser Weldon stretched as if to warm his fragile hands. “We bear grievous, desolating tidings,” he announced without preamble.

“Oh?” Elan sat forward in the armchair. He felt the other’s penetrating gaze rake him.

“Although an unbearably painful task, we must impart some rather dreadful news. Your sire no longer directs affairs in Planet Dan.”

“Pierce . . . ?”

“He has disappeared.”

“My . . . pater?” Elan felt his throat constrict. “Ser Director, are you saying Pierce somehow became engaged in an affair of honor?”

“In this singular instance, that was not the case, no,” denied Lovelock. “And that peculiarity in itself is most disturbing since it breaks an established albeit unnatural pattern in the world Pierce devoted his energies to govern in the name of the Planners. You cannot imagine the shock and horror that descended upon Star Council when word came that a gente of your pater’s sterling quality and exalted station had been lost. Strange as it may sound under the circumstances, however, we advise you not to despair of Pierce entirely. We have been given reason to believe he may not be . . . gone from among us permanently.”

Elan let the news sink in slowly, his subconscious jarred by the other’s circumlocution avoiding a direct reference to death. The reason for the overly polite greeting and fireside chat was now apparent. “This is . . . It’s difficult to comprehend, ser Director.”

“And utterly impossible to accept,” said Lovelock hoarsely. “Something dire is taking place in Planet Dan, nor do we say that lightly. The reported happening in that particular out-world alone are quite beyond the pale. Heretofore, we have tended to view the strange, inexplicable disappearances afflicting Planet Dan with less than total credence. Such laxity, we assure you, no longer obtains.”

The Director cleared his throat. "Reflect along with me, if you will, upon the chain of unreasonable events. The vanishings themselves, upon which not one scintilla of light has been shed, engendered immediate disbelief, of course, and were therefore treated as a truly serious matter only in Planet Dan itself. The subsequent usurpation of Convention by Pierce raised an unprecedented furor, causing media pundits throughout the visited galaxy to bitterly condemn the violation of Convention, and naturally demand to know why a stable, experienced career official charged with the governance of a newly established social matrix in an extremely hospitable new world would dare to arbitrarily abrogate the validity of Code Duello. Elan, it will interest you to learn that, public opinion to the contrary, we have come to believe your pater's universally vilified action evolved from strict necessity, and not panic.

"Only now," pursued Lovelock, his hoarse, stentorian voice deepening, "do we learn that this selfsame official was somehow abducted from his private chambers in the Directorial Seat during the *same* period in which the original victim of whatever, or whoever, is acting against the empire in Dan, was returned."

"Returned . . . ?" The statement brought Elan up short. "How, ser Director?"

"No one has the slightest inkling of how, why, from whence or by what venue or mechanism the miscreant sequestree was returned to neohuman ken. Since his inexplicable reappearance, however, four additional victims have been found wandering aimlessly in the manner of lost children. Nor is that a figure of speech; all five of the individual who reappeared were in fact mentally and emotionally children, diagnosed as husks sucked dry of personality as well as almost all rationality, the useless shells of what had once been unexceptional yet purportedly normal neohumans."

Elan speculated. "Is that why you suspect Pierce may not be among the —?"

"Precisely," said Lovelock, once again evading the use of a term he abhorred. "A vague pattern is inferred to be gradually emerging from this cascade of mysteries." The radiant power of the Old One's dark, hypnotic eyes, probed Grey, weighed his reaction, analyzing him clear to the marrow of his bones. "Neither your comparative youth," he pursued, "nor present trifling government post entitles you to certain knowledge. But since your connection with this unheard of affair is personal, we choose to make you privy to information which, should you fail to heed our counsel and allow yourself to become indiscreet, could seriously damage our own position. What we are about to reveal is not to pass beyond these walls, ser Grey. Do you pledge total acceptance to that condition?"

"Gladly, ser Weldon." Elan suspected that his prior promise to keep his mouth shut had more to do with van Maar's illegal resurrection than anything else.

"Very well, then let us take last things first. The Star Council has opted to appoint a former undercommander of explorers, ser Ennis Ladeen, as Planet Dan's interim director. There were but two candidates, although our first choice, ser Maran Roberts, while uniquely capable and competent, is considered by we ourself and most of our fellow Planners far too valuable conducting the investigation to be distracted by the burden of governance. Ladeen had assumed the interim directorship during first-stage integration of the planet, hence his appointment should pose no problems.

“Yet from our standpoint,” continued Lovelock, “appointing Ladeen amounts to a partial, temporary solution. We have sensed an abiding need to have someone out there upon whom we have implicit reliance, someone willing to act immediately upon the receipt of orders, someone acute, capable and trustworthy in every respect. In essence, we therefore mean to dispatch an envoy to Planet Dan who shall be our personal surrogate, and therefore with full power to act *in loco primus*. He will be our alter ego, our strong right arm and, should the need arise, our sword.”

Fearing what might come next, Elan quailed. “Whom have you selected, ser Director?”

“You, ser Grey,” announced Lovelock. “We have chosen you to undertake the vital mission.”

* * *

Elan’s reaction caused the Old One to abandon himself to wrinkled amusement. Then his manner turned solicitous, and in fact patriarchal. “No, there is no cause for alarm,” he soothed. “Experience of this nature is not merely invaluable, but mandatory if you are to realize your full potential in later life.”

“Ser Weldon, I —”

“Now, now.” An Olympian chuckle. “Be at ease, we beg you. You have more than once reminded us of your maternal great-grandsire, a truly exceptional gente with whom we were privileged to be intimately acquainted. While resembling you in appearance no more than superficially, he exuded the same troublesome gusto, the same flair for peccadillo and the sword. Being of rather serious inclination, we despaired of him ever rising to a post of significance. Yet he eventually served a century and more as Director of Wendalia, repeatedly proving himself a successful, dedicated, thoroughly competent executive.”

Rocking forward in the geriatric chair, the director lowered his voice to a conspiratorial register. “You do harbor an ambition to sit in this chair, do you not? We appreciate a candid response.”

Elan’s jaw dropped. “Ser Weldon, that question is —”

“Do you, or do you not? Come, ser Grey. We insist upon a straightforward answer.”

Dazed by the unbelievable direction their discussion had taken, Elan had difficulty finding his tongue. “No, ser Director. Uh, not really,” he said at last.

A caustic snort. “Are you fearful of speaking your mind?”

“N-no, not at all,” stumbled Elan. “Fear has no part in my . . . In all fairness, let me say the thought of supplanting you has never occurred to me.”

“*Supplanting!*” Lovelock’s deep-set eyes widened in amazement. “What nonsense! Not at the present moment obviously.”

“Forgive me, ser Weldon. I thought you meant . . . That is, the shock of hearing about Pierce, and being selected for a mission to the outworlds has left me . . . well, fuddled, somewhat at a loss for words.”

The Old One relented only a trifle. “One does suppose what has passed between us could be thought of as an unkindness on our part. It is we who should request forbearance. Suffice it to say,” he pursued, “that every chief executive since the interstellar diaspora — nay, since recon-

struction and amalgamation of the western hemisphere in the wake of the Holocaust — has nourished an ambition to claim this seat. It is the noblest of pinnacles, an empyrean station aspired to by every right-thinking, ambitious official.”

“It is . . . for some,” said Elan weakly.

“Then you actually *meant* what you said?”

“It’s . . . simply . . . I have no desire to follow that path, ser Director. “I’m deeply honored to learn that you could even begin to think I am —”

“Well, what manner of future path *do* you intend to follow?”

“I’ve . . . given it little thought.”

“In that event,” said the director archly, “perhaps you feel unable to accomplish the mission to Dan we have outlined.”

Elan rose from the armchair and touched his chest, his forehead, the scabbard bobbing untenanted at his waist. “As always, ser Director,” he declared formally, “my mind, heart and sword are yours to dispose in any way you see fit. Do with me as you will, but please believe me when I say my lack of ambition has nothing to do with loyalty to the Imperium, nor most certainly to you personally, or to your highest of high offices. It is . . . Call it a matter of personal preference.”

“Humm-m-mph!” The other’s corrosive appraisal of his disclaimer was troubling to Grey. “We hear the egocentric indolence of late adolescence speaking. You have inherited the blood, brain and assertive nature of one eminently qualified to rule, but not the inclination to do so, an outlook and absence of ambition difficult for us to conceive. Ambition lays her seeds in each of us, and when they sprout . . . Ah, but why go on? We shall follow your progress as the cycles pass, certain that your woefully lagging ambition will sprout wings with advancing maturity. But we have strayed from the subject at hand. Back to our muttuns.”

The cumbersome geriatric chair glided forward until Lovelock was practically nose-to-nose with Grey. “Not long since,” intoned the director, “we were forced to make a critical decision, its aim to gather the unlikely goings-on in Planet Dan more firmly in hand. Although contrary to established doctrine, and in truth a damning tactic should it come to light, we dispatched a series of direct transmittals to one Commodore Garrigues, the flag officer in command of a task force consisting of a single starcruiser currently orbiting Planet Dan. These directives were received, but never acted upon, whereas the career senior officer and executive officer of the vessel in question unaccountably dropped from sight.”

“More of the same,” suggested Elan.

“So it seemed at first glance,” declared the Old One. “But serious doubt arose due to a peculiar side of the affair. An enlisted man who was to have chauffeured the officers told a tale of some unknown aristocrat who accosted him in the rainy night and rendered him unconscious with medication, an allegation supported by biomedical testing, in addition to the testimony of a pair of colonials whose reliability is perhaps considered questionable.”

“Have either of the officers been returned?” asked Elan. “Like the five you mentioned earlier, I mean?”

“Not as reported to date, no. But that in itself is immaterial. The commodore, a nobody who happened to be in the proper place at the proper moment, was directed to immediately re-

scind the proscription of honorable combat in Planet Dan. Widespread public outrage has reverberated through the Star Council and Congress ever since the Planners became aware of your sire's unheard of edict. A corollary problem related to the disposition almost one hundred thousand convicted sequestrees and voluntary transportees Pierce had ordered held on-orbit in cryothermia for the duration of the Danite emergency. The commodore was instructed to wake the miscreants, utilize imperial shuttles to bring them to ground, and thus present Pierce with an accomplished fact."

Elan reflected on what the Director was telling him. His abiding loyalty to Pierce came to the fore. "Wouldn't additional involuntaries have been extremely difficult to handle under present conditions in Dan?"

"Granted. Yet where could they be sent? The fourth body of the system, Carthia if memory serves, only recently acquired a tenable atmosphere. The extensive terraforming project will require most of a standard decade to afford first-stage habitability, and it is still in the early phases. All nearby worlds, as we Planners are only too aware, are bursting their seams. Every established social matrix within the imperium is steadily shipping its quotas to the outworlds, while our exploratory teams beat the bushes along a spherical periphery an indecent number of parsecs in radius."

"Where were the sequestrees sent?" inquired Elan.

"We shall return to that subject in a moment." Lovelock's dark eyes swept Grey with sharp inquiry, ascertained that he would not pursue the topic, and retreated into the veil of wrinkled flesh. "We have ordered a second task force — a starcruiser and light-weapons ship — diverted to Planet Dan. Eventually a full task force will be at our . . . That is, at your disposal.

"Elan," continued Lovelock earnestly, causing Grey to wonder again at being addressed by his given name, "several real-time periods ago the latest data pertaining to the disappearances was processed through the multi-integration complex. The output proved disturbing. Ignoring 'positive' unknowns, a totally unprecedented postulate intimated that some unknown entity inhabiting Planet Dan may be engaged in investigating *us*."

Elan spent second or two digesting the concept. "In my opinion, ser Director," was all he could think to say, "that sounds as highly implausible as the disappearances."

"Less so than one might think," denied Lovelock. "Cycles ago the likelihood of our expanding imperial sphere intersecting that of major galactic culture was tendered and bruited about in Star Council for some time. No one can of course say whether it is, or is not, the case. But the peculiar developments in Dan have certain earmarks, or so we have been informed, that might pertain to just such an eventuality."

* * *

The director paused to sip water from a crystal goblet. “Think hard on what I am about to tell you. Our pristine settlers in Dan encountered an obviously intelligent species, these so-called Danii, and were purportedly accepted by them in the same fashion our Endorian friend’s ancestors chose to accept migrating neohumans. And then, before five subjective Danite cycles had passed, winning duelists began being snatched from the eyes of the populace — survivors in affairs of honor — in hope of a postulated entity discovering what? Their reason for dueling, for winning, for merely existing? What . . . ?

“Teleportation is apparently an accomplishment shall have to concede to these Danii, in itself illustrating the loftiness of this unknown, thus far unknowable species. Rigorous scientific investigation of paraphenomena predates the Holocaust. For centuries the potential reality of an arcane talent like teleportation has been postulated and discussed by scientific progressives.”

“I imagine so, ser Director. Yet it’s difficult to believe —”

“Bear with me, ser Grey. Let us assume for the moment that the disappearances have shifted from random victorious duelists to more specific, more important individuals. Who other than the supreme neohuman authority in Planet Dan would be a natural subject for examination, if that term should prove appropriate?”

Elan frowned. “That thesis sounds . . . reasonable, ser Director. But if so, what can possibly be done to circumvent beings who possess such a fantastic ability?”

“Dismiss that question for the nonce,” instructed the Old One. “Do not trouble yourself with policy. Imperial policy is and shall always remain within the purview of we Planners. Even so, we should like to clarify one basic fact. Let us make it crystal clear, the operative emphasis on *clear*, is that to our way of thinking your pater’s embarrassing decision to prohibit Code Duello has been fully vindicated.”

“Are you serious, ser Director?”

“Never more so. We strongly suspect that it was indeed a fortunate circumstance to have an unknown someone out there sufficiently shrewd and perceptive, not to mention sufficiently rebellious, to surreptitiously tap our line of supposedly ultra-secure communication and nullify our orders before the commodore could carry them out. We bow to the individual, whoever he or she may be, should such an individual even exist, for our decision was *wrong*. ”

The Old One leaned even closer. “Now attend me. Planet Dan is in no way similar to any other colonial matrix within the imperium’s vast boundaries. No raw colonials, voluntary or sequestered, are to be landed there until the situation has been resolved to the Planners’ total satisfaction. The reinstitution of all facets of Convention will be advertised here at home, but only as a sop to public opinion. Individual combat will continue to be forcibly banned in Planet Dan itself until the order is rescinded by the Star Council and Congress, or we ourself. Is that understood?”

“Completely, ser Director.”

“Keep the primary objective in mind during every subjective waking moment, ser Grey. The instant you set foot in Dan, steel yourself grasp the nettle firmly, while at the same time staying in constant contact with us. We wish to be advised of every leaf that falls from those lofty trees. Your primary objective, as we said, will be to preserve the status quo and simultaneously forward the investigation. The team assembled and directed by ser Roberts will receive all our

instructions and suggestions by means of communications through your office. Specifically, we tell you here and now that one or more individual indigenes Planet Dan are to be confined and interrogated at the first opportunity.”

“That sounds difficult to accomplish,” objected Elan. “Beings able to teleport are —”

“An inordinate degree of difficulty may be involved,” admitted Lovelock. “Specific means and methods of accomplishing the feat must be left to the finesse and inventiveness of those of you out there at grips with the problem. There is simply no question that it *must* be done.”

“Pierce always spoke very highly of ser Roberts. He will surely have some ideas on that subject.”

“One sincerely hopes that to be so.” Lovelock sounded less than confident. “Unfortunately, it may no longer be possible for us to place our implicit trust in ser Roberts. These peculiar happenings may have affected his mental state. His most recent transmittal hinted at a belief in . . . We hesitate to utter such childish nonsense. He intimated the ‘probability’ of a supranormal cause at the root of the incidents in Planet Dan.”

“That is . . . even harder to believe, ser Director.”

“Very much harder to believe,” was the director’s response. “But even the best of minds sometimes bend and break under an inordinate degree of stress. Doubtless Pierce’s disappearance has grossly affected ser Roberts. His recent transmittals repeatedly mention Danite references to ‘Higher Ones,’ conceivably members of a galactic civilization as postulated by the multi-integration complex. Ser Ladeen, Roberts and the other members of the current hierarchy must be watched closely. The unknown frontier possibly reached by Imperium Terrestriana in Dan could be critical to the continued health and expansion of our species. Mentally and emotionally insecure authorities are not to be tolerated for an instant, especially the interim director and Roberts, the principal investigative authority. We feel certain you agree.”

“Absolutely, ser Director.”

“Enough for now,” The geriatric chair backed away and glided in a half-circle. Facing the nonexistent hearth of the virtual fireplace, Lovelock said, “You will need a little time for departure preparations. On the period you are due to leave, we shall sit down together for a final briefing.”

“When will that be, ser Director?”

“Oh, let us say in a period or two. Whenever doing so is practical.”

Elan rose and bowed. “I sincerely appreciate your trust and confidence. I can’t thank you enough for this opportunity, ser Director.”

The Old One’s thin lips twisted in the parody of a smile. “It has been our firm conviction that intuition is a path leading nowhere. Yet in your case, we sense you are capable of much, much more than you yourself may realize.”

“I will not to disappoint you, ser Director. Until later.” Elan bowed again. In the faux library’s doorway, he paused and looked back. “There is one small matter I can’t help wondering about, ser Director.”

“Any number of riddles have arisen in Planet Dan.”

“Just a loose end. You mentioned the problem of dispositioning the thousands of colonials under cold sleep, and it made me curious about where . . . ?” Grey broke off when it became apparent that he had inadvertently mentioned the unmentionable.

Ser Weldon’s wrinkled visage turned sphinxlike, a mask inured to pain, oblivious to any form of joy. “We had no choice in the matter,” he said. “An unpalatable decision concerning their disposition became mandatory. We have never enjoyed the role of judge, jury and executioner.”

Aghast, Elan said, “Was there no other way?”

“There was,” declared the director firmly, “no other way.”

“I can’t . . . It was unconscionable, ser Director.”

“In that you are entirely correct, ser Grey. The unseemly deed forced upon us illustrates only one facet of the dreadful mantle you yourself may eventually inherit. One learns to live with such scarlet stigmata.”

“Never!”

“We shall see.”

Writhing inwardly, Elan suppressed an urge to go back, take the Old One’s scrawny neck in his hands, and twist. He bowed again, but this time not too low, his outrage nakedly transparent beneath a cloak of breeding and training. “Have I your permission to depart, ser Director?”

“Go,” ser Weldon Lovelock said softly. “Sometime in the not too distant future, you may learn it no easy thing, to rule.”

XI

To resist him that is set in authority is evil.

An instruction of Egyptian

Ptah-hotep, circa 2675 BCE

“Come with me,” insisted Elan for the fourth or fifth time. He searched for some sign — any sign — that her obdurate refusal might be softening.

Standing at the glasswall, Minor gazed with indifference at the cityscape looming beyond the reservation. Lofting towers banded with glowing pastels soared in the hazy twilight. Lifting her eyes, she was able to pick out the faint gleam of only one dim star able to compete with the perpetual smog, the refulgent glow of the megalopolis. “Out there . . .” she said, hugging herself as if chilled, “frightens me, Elan.”

“I know. I feel the same way.” He touched her bare shoulder. “I won’t pretend to be other than apprehensive about the mission your beloved ancestor is commanding me to undertake. But we belong together.”

“Do we? After living apart most of our adult lives, what is there about ‘us’ that makes you so sure?”

“I’m certain, or I would never say it.”

She looked up again at the lone star's twinkling gleam. "Here I know where I am, and who I am. Out there I would be just one more ant crawling among trillions of other ants. How I feel about that is . . . It's not an easy thing to . . . find the right words."

Elan grimaced. "You sound almost as confused as I am. After cycles of not knowing what I wanted from life, it's a shock to realize there's suddenly an objective, a reason for being. Worse, I no longer seem able to appreciate other women."

"How awful!" Her smile piquant, Minor said, "That doesn't sound like the Elan Grey I know."

"I . . . suppose in a way it isn't . . . me," he faltered.

"Exactly what does that, ser Grey?"

"Forget it." He chuckled. "I'm babbling. I never used to babble."

"You're a sweet babbler."

"Minor, come with me to Dan."

"I . . . can't."

"Why not? You must!"

"Must I?" She circled his waist, brushed her cheek against his chest. "Ask yourself one burning question, Elan. It's can be called the question of questions. What are we to each other really? We make love, enjoy one another's company most of the time, share the same half-hearted, supercilious outlook. But what do we actually have in common. What is it that binds us together in a . . . well, a permanent way?"

"The answer," he said, smoothing her hair, "if I could think of one, would be even more complex than your question. Offhand, I don't believe there is a simple answer, except for being pretty damned privileged all our lives."

"Spoiled . . . ?"

"Probably more apt than 'privileged,' yes."

"Now there's a hearty recommendation for togetherness!"

"Happens to be true, though. How could either of us have turned out otherwise? What amazes me is that for the first time in my life I'm beginning to appreciate Pierce's side of our endless arguments. I can't imagine how he kept his temper as well as he did, as long as he did." Elan held her at arm's length, then pulled her close, gazing into her eyes. "Knowing each other's faults will help us see it through. Please come with me, Minor."

She hugged him. "'Please' sounds so unusual coming from you."

"I'll say it again. Please!"

"But, the outworlds . . ."

"There! Again you've put your finger on the root of what bothers you. Deep space carries with it a connotation of otherness: denial, sequestration, punishment — a string of negatives. Instead, look at the obverse side of the coin. There are positives as well."

"Such as . . . ?"

"The romance of far places, a beautiful, uncrowded new world, honest work to help solve the mystery out there, a chance to —"

“Honest *work*?” she interrupted. “Elan, what do you know about work, honest or otherwise?”

“That,” he said, “is an unkindness.”

“With or without integrity,” she pointed out, “it would be work for *you*. I’d be a stray ornament, a bauble banging about aimlessly a herd of colonials, an uprooted aristocrat stuck in an improbable world where people instantly vanish in plain sight. I would be an item of excess baggage, a dragging anchor.”

“Not at all,” he denied. “You would be the surrogate director’s woman, *my* woman.”

Minor sparkled. “Hmm-m-m, hearing that from anyone else I’m sure I would be offended. Coming from you, I rather like the sound of it.”

“Then you’ll come?”

“Be serious, Elan. You know my illustrious ancestor will never permit it.”

Balking at her response, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully, he said, “Who can begin to guess what goes on behind that inscrutable mask. What ser Weldon might or might not permit is . . . What makes you so sure the Old One would never endorse togetherness during the outworld venture he’s ordered the, ahem! mate he selected for you to undertake? Didn’t he arrange to throw us together in the first place?”

Minor shrugged. “In a manner of speaking.”

“No, no; not in a ‘manner of speaking.’ He *literally* threw us together. Come anyhow,” he urged, “and to hell with Lovelock!”

“And defy him? One does not defy ser Weldon. Besides, you can’t expect to smuggle ‘your woman’ aboard a starcruiser without his knowledge and consent.”

“Why not? I’d wager that, or something very much like it happens all the time. What could be more natural that for us to go together? Would you expect any patrician, especially the Old One’s designated surrogate, to depend on *colonial* women?”

Minor laughed aloud. “Certainly not.”

“Seriously,” he said, bearing down, “there in his lair something was discussed that I haven’t mentioned.”

“What might that be?”

“The fact that I suddenly seem to be a rising figure in government. How often is a relative unknown suddenly empowered to act *in loco primus*, a surrogate of Himself, an extension of his will and authority. Dispatching me to Dan in order to help find out what in the hell is going on out there is apparently not a straightforward errand-boy mission. I’m being groomed for something much more important.”

Minor looked up at him strangely. She said nothing.

“Another thing,” he added, “is that the alarming discontinuities associated with this outworld have led the Planners to suspect we may have touched base with some alien super race.”

Displaying sudden interest, she said, “What makes them suspect anything like that? Are they sure?”

“No, far from it. Part of my assignment will be to forward the investigation and hopefully learn if there’s a atom truth in that premise. Recovering my pater, if possible, is only one piece of

the puzzle. All of this, everything I've told you, has to be kept under the rose unless you want me ostracized and sequestered in Dan instead of acting in ser Weldon's name."

"He swore you to secrecy?"

"Triply."

"He's obviously taken a personal interest in you, in helping you build a career."

"Only because of you, Minor."

"Absolutely not," she protested. "That doesn't ring true, Elan. You don't know my ageless ancestor anywhere near as well as I do. He wouldn't dream of sending you on an important mission if it were simply a question of providing me with suitable consort. No, there has to be more — *much* more — to selecting you from the crowd. He isn't simply playing cupid, believe me."

"I hadn't meant to bring it up, but . . ." Elan broke off. "We also had a short, man-to-man chat about the possibility of me eventually inheriting his office."

Minor's sharply indrawn breath gave Elan pause. "So you've been added to the list," she said thoughtfully.

"A list . . . ?"

"The list of candidates, your competition."

"I have no knowledge of any competition, should such exist. Are you inferring that I've been placed in nomination without being consulted in the matter? Are you yourself aware of the others? Who, and how many?"

"I know of only one or two by name, but there have to be others. Of those I do know about, you're far the youngest, in fact the infant on the roster. The others I do know about are at minimum duocentenarians."

Elan said, "No major surprise. Maybe he wants me to undergo a longer grooming period to see if I'll break down under the bloodshed and pressure."

"My," she drawled, "you don't sound keen on the notion. Isn't it what you want?"

"I don't know, I don't think so," he said. "Self-torture isn't one of my foibles. I'd have trouble sleeping if I had committed . . ."

"Committed what? Out with it, Elan."

He commanded the glasswall to slide open, stepped out into the terrace garden and went to lean on the balustrade. He gazed past the reservation at the city, his manner pensive.

Sensing a drastic mood change, Minor came to his side. "Don't hold back. Is there something you feel you can't tell me?"

"Ser Weldon is . . . He's like an ancient god who's lost all touch with neohumanity. There isn't a microgram of empathy left in him, no sympathy for that matter, or any hint of remorse. He ordered the obliteration of a transport filled with helpless, dormant convicts and voluntary colonials — more than ninety thousand neohuman sleepers — as casually as the flies swatted on a summer morn. A moment ago you spoke of trillions upon trillions of crawling ants. The director thinks of individuals as *less* than crawling ants."

"I've known about that facet of my dear ancestor for some time," she said. "It horrified me when I was younger. I couldn't bear to be in the same room with him. Later I found

out what bothered me so terribly was slaughter retail. There are worse instances of slaughter . . . wholesale.”

“I could never be like that.”

Minor shuddered slightly and rubbed her bare shoulders. “It’s chilly out here. Shall we go back inside?”

He ushered into the suite. “Want to go out and dine?”

“On your last night in Terra? I don’t believe so. We’ll stay in, order something sent up.”

“Say *our* last night in Terra,” he pleaded.

Her smile was tinged with sadness. “I’d love to, want to, but . . .”

“No buts, Minor. Tell me once and for all what it is that holds you here? Is there someone else?”

“No one,” she said, “I care for as much as you.”

He held her close, then pushed her back and searched her sensitive brown eyes. “If we’re halfway honest with each other,” he said with conviction, “we’ll have a good chance.”

Feeling defenseless, her gaze locked with his, she said, “Will you promise never to hold back? When you tire of me, I want to know. Will you tell me?”

“I’ll never . . . Oh, for the sake of argument I’ll concede the remote possibility . . . I promise, Minor. Will you do the same favor? Tell me, I mean?”

“I . . . yes, I will.”

“Then it’s settled.” Jubilant, he said, “Pack only what you may need in transit. I have an instinctive aversion to cryothermia, and I doubt if you fancy being frozen solid for a few standard months. I’ll fly out to the launch site early in the morning and use my newfound authority to arrange for the inclusion of some fictitious woman in the passenger manifest.”

“What shall we tell my illustrious ancestor?”

“Not a word,” he said, and grinned. “Meet me on the quay around noon. We’ll send the Old One a bye-bye transmittal from deep space.”

Minor chortled infectiously. “He’ll be furious.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I wonder if he’ll even care.”

She sobered, touched his cheek tenderly. “I’m coming with you. “I want to, would have anyhow. But there’s something you haven’t said, Elan.”

“What do you mean?”

“Go on, say it.”

“But,” he objected, “it’s the most trite, overused —”

“You *have* to say it,” she insisted.

“I love you,” he said, folding her in his arms possessively.

* * *

Pacing the metal quay with restless steps, Elan paused now and again to check his wrist chronometer. He wished for something to occupy his time while awaiting preparations for departure. The activity a short distance seaward brought home to him the fact that what he had been looking forward to as an exciting, adventurous game was to be played in earnest, replaced by the apprehension of leaving behind everything fond and familiar except for Minor

The quay was deserted in the late morning sun. Two-thirds submerged in the long Pacific swell, the ogive prow of the squat ground-to-orbit shuttle resembled a pointed iceberg of polished metal. In a matter of hours it would carry him and Minor up to match orbital vector and velocity with the starcruiser for the subjective months-long transit to Planet Dan. At the moment, however, the shuttlecraft succumbed placidly to robotic equipment busily loading the topside hatches with cargo modules lifted from a pair of sleek, shallow-hulled barges. Everything that happened was happening out there, a half-kilometer from the corroded quay where he paced and pondered the upcoming journey.

For whatever reason he had never ventured into deep space. He had visited Luna any number of times during Pierce's tenure as co-director, learning to dislike the utilitarian atmosphere of the sub-lunar cities. He had also transited to Mars during post-adolescence, sometime in his middle-fifties, cycles before his mater had passed away. He had also bad-naturedly endured a sightseeing tour of the major planets, discovering that majestic Saturn, as viewed from space, looked precisely identical to a good holograph of the ringed planet, and that that endless trajectory within the confines of a cruise vessel offered nothing more appealing than period after period of boredom, close confines, and unappetizing shipboard meals.

Thoughts of being carried on the order of two hundred parsecs from everything and everyone he knew struck him as roughly equivalent to dying. If not for Minor's decision to accompany him, he thought he might have refused to go, and quickly reconsidered after trying to imagine talking the Old One out of performing in his stead. The more he thought about it, the more the mystery surrounding Pierce's disappearance bothered him more deeply than he thought possible. Never before had he actually felt a sense of responsibility toward either Pierce or young Leighton. In fact, with the passage of time it had become difficult to conjure up a mental image of either his pater or younger sibling.

He and Pierce had had their differences, had never been close, but why was that so unusual. He knew less than a handful of peers who had enjoyed anything more than a casual, nodding acquaintance with either parent, let alone any who believed themselves members of an antiquated 'family' — an archaic term at best. A cynical adage had it that a man's best friend was the bottle in which he'd been born. Now he was determined to put behind him whatever conflicting views he and Pierce had once held. He very much wanted his pater to be found alive and well, and decided to encourage the investigation with vigor the minute after taking his first step in Planet Dan.

A matte black verticraft thrashed low over the quay, startling him. The vehicle circled, came to a hover and descended near the seatower at the opposite end of the quay. Assuming that Minor had arrived early for perhaps the very first time in her life, he jogged toward the grounded vehicle.

The verticraft's rear hatch cycled open. A slender figure clad in Blacks alighted with a graceful bound and stood poised, watching Grey approach.

Elan halted instinctively. As if of its own volition, his right hand dropped to the hilt of his rapier.

The newcomer performed a low, sweeping bow of deference. "We beg your indulgence for this impromptu visit, gentle ser Grey." Pyron Nyemeister repeated his bow. "I believe it will be of mutual advantage should you condescend and allow a few words to pass between us?"

Physically and mentally tense, Elan thought to return the bow, then changed his mind, thinking better of it. Meeting the gaze of pale, blue-green eyes with the texture of steel marbles, he loosened his rapier in the scabbard.

Nyemeister noted the move, reacting in a bemused mannner. "You do me a gross injustice, gentle ser Grey. I come before you humbly, sans-weapon." Lifting his arms wide, Nyemeister illustrated the truth of his statement by rotating his hips left and right. "My sole purpose in disturbing your meditation on this sunlit morning involves petitioning a moment of your time in order to enjoy a peaceful exchange of views. Might such an exchange be acceptable to you, gentle ser Grey?"

Chagrined at having missed noticing the fact that the premiere gladiator was unarmed. With every sense at hair-trigger, Elan felt his rapid pulse rate diminish. Adopting the other's formal tone, he inquired, "Your wishes shall be served, gentle ser Nyemeister?"

"A simple chat, then, nothing more." The other's arctic smile washed over Grey. "To my deep regret, our paths have not crossed since the unfortunate evening at the arena. I bear you no malice at all, gentle ser Grey. In truth, I find your swordsmanship admirable, and seek only to renew our all too brief acquaintance, and perhaps put it on a more cordial footing."

"A signal honor, gentle ser Nyemeister," drawled Elan, "that you would come a distance merely to renew acquaintances. You leave me indebted as well as surprised."

"You are quite preceptive," admitted the gladiator. "Yet I do look upon to your prowess with enormous respect, gentle ser Grey. Nay, one might even say with envy."

"You flatter me beyond all bounds of reason, gentle ser Nyemeister."

The gladiator reprised his chill, predatory smile. "Since you have condescended to spare this poor petitioner a moment of liesure, might we stroll together and perhaps begin to know one another. The matter I wish to discuss is of grave importance, as well as with potentially grave consequences."

Every sense on guard, Elan fell in step with the gladiator. Peripheral vision allowed him to glimpse a pair of public assassins alighting from the grounded verticraft. "Forgive me, gentle ser Nyemeister," he said, thinking to goad the gladiator into revealing the reason for his unheralded appearance. "I neglected to congratulate your recent victory. You disposed of the outworlder with such consummate ease. An altogether magnificent performance withal."

The sarcasm did exactly what Elan had hoped it woule: fraying Nyemeister's outward composure, and earning a grimace of distaste. "A most unseemly incident, gentle ser Grey. Had I known the other unschooled in the veriest fundamentals I would have left his . . . instruction to another. But in your own thoughtful way, gentle ser Grey, you have touched upon my purpose for disturbing you this morning."

"Will you ever forgive me for asking what that purpose might that be, gentle ser Nyemeister?"

“More than one gente among my circle of close friends and associates has advised me of something untoward which occurred after the . . . triumph you were kind enough to praise. I was informed that the outworlder I was fortunate to best had been illegally resurrected.”

“Preposterous!” Elan chuckled to mask the sudden pounding in his chest and made a deprecatory gesture. “I fear you have been grossly misled, gentle ser Nyemeister. How could such a blatant violation of Convention be remotely possible?”

“It is my most fervent wish, gentle ser Grey, that it will be you who enlightens me on that score.” Nyemeister halted and turned to Elan, gauging his reaction.

“The scenario you put forward is altogether too outrageous for comment.”

“Ah,” breathed the premier gladiator, the picture of wide-eyed sincerity, “in that event I must say your response strikes me as equally outrageous. The Giver of Life was so certain, as were the pair of assassins who became accessories to the crime. And, of course,” he concluded, “we must not forget the involvement of sera Lovelock.”

A red haze clouding his vision, Elan’s right hand dropped to his sword. Nyemeister had been playing him like a hooked fish. “I trust you left sera Lovelock in excellent health,” he said, exposing several millimeters of naked steel.

A thin smile. “Allow me to remind you, gentle ser Grey,” Nyemeister declared suavely, “that I come before you unarmed and in peace.”

“Whether you go about armed or unarmed is entirely your affair,” said Elan. “You will either explain your reference to sera Lovelock, or I will run you through here and now. Which is it to be?”

“Sera Lovelock is of course unharmed,” assured Nyemeister, his composure outwardly ruffled by Grey’s affront to Convention. “One finds it doubly distressing to discover an immune official would even consider descending to the level of a pedestrian simply to —”

“A bloody-handed butcher like you will *not* lecture me on the niceties of Convention. Where is sera Lovelock?”

“Quite comfortable, I would imagine.”

“What do you want of her?”

Nyemeister’s maddening smile struck Elan as a synthesis of every insult imaginable. In an offhand manner the gladiator said, “My friends and I debated a resolution to this extremely serious matter at some length before daring to confront a gente of your stature with the unsavory business. You will no doubt think me mad for exposing my reputation to skulduggery, but I must say that I —”

“Get to the point,” said Elan tautly.

“The point, less than gentle ser Grey, is quite obvious, is it not? One suspects you will refuse to acknowledge the point, or reluctantly admit that such a point does indeed exist. My point is that Director Lovelock, sera Lovelock, and yourself, are all implicated in the commission of a monstrous crime.”

“Nonsense!” To Elan, the other’s indictment sounded like a bluff, but *was* he bluffing?

Folding his arms across his chest, Nyemeister tried to stare down Elan. “Admit your guilt and have done with it, ser Grey. Your pretense of innocence is useless. Despositions furnished by

the public assassins and physician were explicitly detailed. You are embroiled in a criminal act so vile that not even Director Lovelock will be able to shrug it off. Why not confess here and now? Let me assure you that doing so will tend to ease the punishment.”

“You are a meddler and a fool,” Elan said matter of factly. “This time, your meddling knight-errantry has caused harm once too often. You could easily drop from sight.”

Again the maddening smile. “Your concern for my continued well-being is sorely misplaced, ser Grey. It is instead *you* who might vanish in the same manner as your sire, the mysterious outworld’s guilt-ridden director who dared to defy Convention. Consider if you will the alternative to your proposed journey to the outworlds. Rather than fleeing from the scene of the crime, you shall be spitted and hung bleeding outside the Palace of Swords.”

Unable to to restrain himself, Elan slowly drew his rapier from the scabbard. “How did you learn of my mission?”

“Oh, there is always a way, ser Grey,” replied Nyemeister loftily.

“A way,” warned Elan, “that will cost you your life.”

“Bluster!” scoffed the other, anger quenching his urbanity. “Young puppy snapping toothlessly at your betters, once you have been discredited, should you somehow escape the termination edict certain to be decreed, I mean to curb your insolence.”

Elan slashed the air, the unguarded tip of his rapier millimeters from the gladiator’s nose. “No if I curb your arrogance here and now.”

Nyemeister lithely bounded away.

A gravelly bass voice from directly behind Grey erupted. “Sheath the weapon!”

One of the assassins covered him with an energy pistol; the other pinioned his arms with professional skill. Elan refused to struggle as the automatic restraints clamped his arms to his sides. With a sinking feeling, he realized how careless he had been. “You will live long enough to regret this,” he told Nyemeister, flinching at how lame the idle threat had sounded.

“My onr regret,” said the gladiator, “is the time and energy wasted showing you civility. Bring him along, you two. No, slip the self-satisfied pup’s blade back in his scabbard. Once no longer restrained, should he become sufficiently emboldened to once again dare to pull steel on *me*, I mean to teach him what it means to face a truly accomplished smallswordsmen.”

* * *

Elan spent the flight back to the city wallowing in self-disgust. Recriminating over his tactless handling of Nyemeister, he fervently wished for some way to recapture the advantage briefly held back on the space terminal quay. He also felt genuine concern over Minor’s safety, a certain morbid curiosity about where he was being taken, and last but not least an awesome sense of disbelief at what might even then be happening to Director Lovelock. It was impossible to think that another visage might soon replace the Old One’s eternally fixed, august mask.

Despite his pinioned arms, he was able to twist his neck and glance at the chronometer on his wrist. In less than five hours the shuttle was scheduled to lift off. With or without he and Minor aboard, it would arch upward toward orbital rendezvous with the starcruiser. If by some miracle the director managed to weather the storm and retain his seat . . .

No, the eventuality struck him as unlikely in view of what the gladiator and his coterie of “friends” apparently knew. Damn Nyemeister! He *was* the worst sort of meddler and the worst

sort of fool. Yet if one looked past his facade and sophisticated tongue, there had to be more on his juvenile mind than simple outrage over the violation of sacrosanct Convention. Someone had obviously put Nyemeister up to the misadventure, egging him on. If that proved to be true, it had to be someone of considerable stature.

He was not surprised when the verticraft casually violated airspace over the reservation, hovered, and settled toward a mid-level roofpark of the Directorial Seat. Manhandled bodily from the vehicle by the stone-faced public assassins, he was marched past a checkpoint as if expected, the liveried guardsmen at the portal conscientiously looking the other way, and frog-marched along a corridor to the express lift compartment, where he, Nyemeister and the assassins rode upward in silence.

The lift compartment juddered minutely and stopped. Striding a lordly three paces in the van, Nyemeister led the way, and e Elan was brusquely ushered by the assassins into the atrium of a lavish tower suite. Even before the portal slid closed behind them, he experienced a jolt of surprise, a premonition that the crisis had resolved itself in a satisfactory manner. Seen from behind, the hulking geriatric chair floating near the glasswall made his spirits rise. Ser Weldon had most likely sniffed out the affair, taken matters in hand.

But the chair rotated and Elan caught his breath. The gnarled shell of neohumanity in the geriatric appliance regarding him with rheumy blue eyes was not the Old One. He recognized ser Corte Errold on sight. The withered ancient, none other than a senior Star Council Planner, was one of Lovelock's few surviving political adversaries.

Looking indecently perturbed but otherwise unharmed, Minor was seated at a long table covered with an odd collection of bric-a-brac of some kind, a second pair of public assassins flanking her on either side.

Nyemeister gestured. Elan stood waiting in stoic silence as the assassins removed the restraints binding his arms.

"We bid you welcome, gentle ser Grey." The aged Planner guided his geriatric chair in a half-circle. Hunching forward, he appraised Elan, his eyes hooded. "We must apologize for this gross inconvenience. You shan't keep you here long. Once certain controversial items have been dealt with — depositions designed to clear the muddied waters — you and sera Lovelock, having attested to the validity of the documents with your signatures, will be free to enjoy our boundless appreciation. You have our solemn pledge that you and sera Lovelock will be returned to the space terminal so that you may take ship for the outworlds precisely as planned."

"Your ramblings," said Elan, "suggest advanced senility."

Nyemeister blanched. His hand darted involuntarily to the rapier he had belted on his waist on during the flight. "Hold your tongue! Will you allow me to correct this puppy's manners, gentle ser Errold?"

"Why, ser Nyemeister," said Elan, "it was my distinct impression that you restrict your challenges to incompetents."

Ser Corte Errold's skeletal hand lifted, stifling the gladiator's response. His thin-fleshed features warped in a grotesque caricature of a smile. "Patience, as always, Pyron. In taking care of this delicate matter, we must make haste slowly, attend to the business at hand as it were. Now then, gentle ser Grey, desist from histrionics, we beg you. Protesting your innocence in the scan-

dalous affair is useless, no to mention being absolutely pointless. The facts pertaining to the illegally resurrected outworlder have been laid before us in a neat, orderly row. This outworlder, van Maar, was covertly resurrected per ser Weldon's instruction, and smuggled back to the dismal outworld from whence he came. Sworn depositions to that effect have been obtained from all concerned."

"*Almost* all concerned," corrected Elan.

"As you will, ser Grey. Allow us to amend our statement." Sounding gravely displeased, Errold insisted that all of the depositions had been obtained, and were complete except for not yet bearing the signatures of sera Lovelock and ser Grey."

"Never!" The word erupted from Minor.

"Never suggests an infinite stretch of time, sera Lovelock." Errold clicked his tongue. "I fear that very few could afford so long a wait."

Elan smiled at Minor. "Oh, I wouldn't rush to judgment if I were you, ser Errold. A moment ago you indicated to the smallswordsmen who challenges only incompetents that patience was a virtue. I believe myself to be an exceptionally patient individual."

Stung to the quick by Elan's repeated reference to challenging only incompetents, the gladiator came forward a step, his rapier halfway out of the scabbard.

Errold waved Nyemeister back with a curt gesture. Staring coldly at Elan, he said, "Unfortunately, our patience is wearing thin rather quickly, ser Grey. Your loyalty to Weldon is so misdirected, your faith in his high office so misplaced. Having outlived his usefulness twice over, the director is wholly undeserving of your deference, and pretense of allegiance to his person. Were one to analyze the matter with care, he has done little or nothing to command such loyalty. Inform us, if you will be so kind, what possible reason could exist for you to be determined to throw away your own precious life in order to perpetuate his tyranny?"

"Will your tyranny improve upon his tyranny, ser Errold? If so, how?"

A faint scowl. "Apparently," said Errold, nettled by the remark, "you have fitted the various pieces into the puzzle and concluded that we have ambitions of replacing ser Weldon in the Directorship."

"I'm waiting to hear you tell me I'm mistaken," said Elan.

The haggard facsimile of a smile replaced the scowl. "All things considered, ser Grey, a mistakes of such magnitude on your part is hardly worthy of debate. We duly credit Weldon for having made almost no blunders during his interminable tenure in office. To find him guilty of committing an unheard of misstep now, especially one of this consequence, affords a truly serendipitous opportunity to unseat him. Were we to be charitable and allow his monumental slip to pass unopposed, we assure you others among our confreres would be less generous. Lovelock is in the act of falling as we speak. Whomsoever the Planners and Congress of Man elect to fill his chair is anyone's guess."

Elan chortled. "You, ser Errold, are the worst sort of hypocrite."

"By the sanctity of Convention!" Nyemeister drew sword with a flourish. "Grey, you shall feel my bite for that impertinence. Pull steel!"

Elan stayed his hand and smiled at the gladiator. "Sorry, obnoxious ser Nyemeister, you have run out of luck. Your master will not let you perform."

Flushed and furious, Nyemeister cried, "Pull steel, I say!"

"Naughty, naughty!" Elan wagged a forefinger at the red-faced gladiator. "It would never do to defy Convention and kill an immune official. You had best stick to challenging incompetents. It would be unseemly for the marquee smallswordsmen of our era to be spitted and hung outside the arena to twist slowly in the wind, and rot."

It was more than Nyemeister could stand. Errold's imperative command was uttered barely in time for a pair of assassins to surge forward and seize the gladiator, one hanging on his sword arm, the other shoving him rudely away from Elan. Raging, he was dragged into the suite's dining alcove, where his protestations continued unabated.

"Clever, ser Grey," complimented Errold, "yet useless. Clear-headedness has never been one of our fiery friend's principal forte. Now then, shall we sit down like gentlefolk and calmly discuss our mutual problem. We really must achieve a resolution, you see." He waved Grey toward a seat at the long table.

Brushing his lips through Minor's hair, he slid into the chair next to her. "Have they harmed you, bothered you in any way?"

"No," she said tautly, her anger partially suppressed. "Not unless you count being seized and held here against my will. These chambers were Gailen's during his stay. I thought to pick up his belongings, take them along with us."

Clutching her wrist, he whispered, "You're giving Errold added ammunition."

She twisted free angrily. "No matter. He knows everything."

"Precisely, my dear," soothed ser Corte Errold.

"I knew how much Gailen would want his material," she said, glaring at the superannuated Planner. "There was also the stereograph of a black statue I wanted for myself. The assassins broke in, then this bastard showed up." She gestured rudely at Errold. "He sent Nyemeister and the other pair of assassins to collect you at the space terminal."

Elan glanced at the Planner. "Why really, ser Errold! Keeping hostages is in itself a breach of Convention. Planner or pleb, you could face an extremely severe penalty."

"A thesis that will hardly hold water, ser Grey. It is perfectly legitimate for one who discovers a crime being committed to hold material witnesses for prosecution."

"Not," denied Grey, "while the 'discoverer' is conspiring to overthrow the government."

"Harsh words." A chill crept into Errold's diction. "Our sincere advice would be for you to adopt a broader viewpoint regarding our intervention in proceedings tainted by a heinous crime. You, ser Grey, and especially you, sera Lovelock, are beautiful young people who have only begun to share the manifold bounties afforded by —"

"Oh, please! No speechmaking," pleaded Elan. "You're holding us here against our will, trying to force us to swear complicity in some vague, nonsensical crime. We refuse. What now?"

"Your thoughtless, arbitrary refusal forces a terribly difficult decision upon us."

"So it's to be death," said Minor calmly.

"An ugly, despicable term, sera Lovelock."

"The deed will be ugly and despicable," said Elan, "the term itself merely factual."

Ser Corte Errold sounded unhappy in saying, "Your signed statements attesting to the facts as you know them would actually be frosting on the cake. We are certain the word of the Giver of Life who violated Convention at Lovelock behest and resurrected the outworlder, added to the depositions furnished by the public assassins, will more than suffice until the revived subject can be returned from deep space."

"Then it's settled," said Minor.

"Unfortunately," said Errold with neutral inflection. "We do wish you would both reconsider. We despise the necessity of making such a drastic, easily avoidable decision."

Minor put her hand on Elan's arm. Her smile defiant, almost light-hearted, she said, "I have a parting gift for you, my darling — a beautiful lady, see here? She's the bare-busted snake goddess of ancient place. Isn't she lovely?" Minor lifted the facsimile statuette, handling it delicately, with great care. Whirled, she drove it into the face of the nearest assassin.

Elan bounded sideways out of the chair, caught the second assassin in the pit of the stomach with a hard-swinging elbow that emptied his diaphragm. Before the assassin could double over, he chopped four stiffened fingers to the hyoid bone at his throat. The man staggered backward, uttered a strangling sound and sat down open-mouthed, trying to breathe. Elan drew back his right boot and kicked the downed assassin neatly behind the left ear, drew his rapier and took stock.

Minor's victim was on one knee, clutching a broken nose gushing blood all over the front of his uniform. Corte Errold had guided his geriatric chair into the relative safety of the loggia, from where he watched in heavy-lidded silence, he watched Nyemeister and the second pair of assassins charged out of the suite's dining alcove. Confronting Elan, his rapier at salute, the gladiator smiled at Grey, pure of delight in his eyes. The assassins menaced Elan with drawn sidearms, making him uncomfortably aware of not one but two laser emission bells focused on his chest.

"This futility is now ended," said Errold from the loggia. "Sheath your weapon, ser Grey."

Minor called the senior Planner a gutter name.

"Come take it from me, ser Errold," invited Elan.

Glorying over the face of having been thrust into his natural element, Pyron Nyemeister preened himself and performed a low, sweeping bow in the direction of the senior Planner's geriatric chair. He straightened, his manner grandiloquent, and posed as if taking center stage. "I beg the privilege of honor, ser Errold. Curbing this mouthy poppinjay is *long* overdue."

"We deplore these gymnastics, Pyron," objected the Planner.

"Get behind me," whispered Elan, urging Minor backward with his free hand. "Keep an eye on the assassins. If they seem distracted by swordplay, scoot out of here and don't look back."

Minor nodded.

Nyemeister stepped forward, his patrician features glowing at the imminence of combat. After bowing to his antagonist, he began a Salute of Grievance well salted with flowery, rehearsed elocutionary verbiage. Elan allowed the flow of pompous phraseology for a few heart-

beats more, and then lunged in the midst of a highflown sentence and came within millimeters of spitting the premiere gladiator.

Nyemeister bounded adroitly aside, averting the thrust. His features contorted with fury at the gross affront to Convention, he cried, "Pedestrian!" and fell on Grey like an avalanche.

Fueled by desperation, Elan parried in high line, backing around the end of the long table, and narrowly avoided a lightning thrust in third, riposted while slightly off balance, and banged his hip on a corner of the table. Instinct told him he would be late in bringing up his rapier, so he threw himself aside, away from the table and felt the sting of Nyemeister's steel in the deltoid area of his swordarm.

The gladiator stepped back and came to salute, smiled and kissed the hilt of his rapier. He performed a second mocking bow. "Not yet, ser Grey," he said meaningfully. "You are well-schooled, almost a capable smallswordsmen. You provide excellent sport."

Elan sensed Minor's abrupt move behind him. A striped pot whizzed past his ear, forcing Nyemeister to weave gracefully out of its path.

"Really, sera Lovelock," chided the gladiator. "How uncouth of you!"

The assassins guarding Errold roared with laughter as Nyemeister dodged in succession another pot, a second statuette, and a small flask. Elan took advantage of the distraction to inspect his arm. The wound bled freely, but until stiffening it shouldn't impede his freedom of movement.

Minor ran out of ammunition. She she picked up the facsimile Roman gladius and held it in both hands with a view toward possible future use.

Nyemeister bowed yet again, but this time in Minor's direction. "One must admire your spirit, sera Lovelock, if not your aim. Shall we return to the business at hand, ser Grey?"

Elan stood poised, facing the gladiator *dégagé*, anticipating his advance. He coughed, coughed again and was taken by a fit of hacking and wheezing more strongly. Nyemeister attacked in a way that could not exactly be called clumsy, but was vastly different, lacking the finesse, the graceful moves previously demonstrated by a classic display of swordsmanship. Finding it difficult to parry the gladiator's all but awkward attack, Elan was amazed to find how much the insignificant wound had affected his own balance and timing. A harshness in his throat and lungs also made it difficult to breathe, and his rapier felt as if it weighed five times what it had only a moment ago.

Deeply worried without understanding why, he threw his entire being into the effort of defending himself, and was again overcome by a severe fit of coughing that caused him to stumble and nearly fell. Lungs burning, he saw the dim figure of Nyemeister waver before his eyes. Then he was able to discern only vague, milky shapes.

Sheer panic overwhelmed him with panic. Nyemeister could have him whenever he desired. Retreating in defenseless desperation, and hacking spasmodically, blindly, he stumbled away from where he thought a thrust might come and was astounded to feel the rapier slip from his grasp and thud to the suite's lush floor covering.

Coughing uncontrollably, he stared dumbly at the dimly seen, palpitating fingers of his right hand. He tried to turn toward Minor, but the carpet surged upward, smashing what little remained of his consciousness into a thousand incandescent shards of light.

XII

Show his eyes, and grieve his heart;

Come like shadows, so depart!

William Shakespeare's

Macbeth, circa 1600 CE

Holt Morrow spent the early morning hour lolling comfortably, resting his back against the meter-wide bole of one of the smaller trees, and contemplated the changing light, the flight patterns of birds skylarking above him in the branches. Summer had come to Dan's northern hemisphere, bringing with it long spells of mild, clement weather, the evenings cool, swept by fresh forest breezes.

Rising in his quarters before first light, he had seen no one after a quick, scanty breakfast of a warmed, buttered scone and mug of coffee, he had flown his verticraft westward half a hundred kilometers, grounding on the grassy shelf beside a stream that wound down from the high country to the north. The hike up to this dell on the brow of a hill had been both soothing and spectacular, taking him through a chain of tree-ringed meadows uphill that looked as if they had been laid out in less than haphazard fashion like a gigantic golf course.

From his hilltop vantage, he could look across the rich savanna to a lake sparkling against the rim of distant forest. Roberts always insisted on lone excursions during his investigation of the Danii, but Holt did not think that was a good idea, and persisted in shadowing his old friend in a way Maran would call sneaky. On this particular morning, he hoped he had guessed right in coming to the hilltop, a favorite trysting spot Roberts had used twice before. He expected Maran to land at any moment in one of the nearby meadows and climb the hill in his measured, economical gait, and tried to imagine how the Planners would construe Maran's unconventional method of contacting the Danii while at the same time pleasing himself.

The "skinny hummers," as Holt thought of them, apparently considered any locale in their beautiful world equivalent to any other. Unbeknownst to Roberts, he had waited out of Maran's sight for the hummers to appear here in the countryside as well as in Sharax proper, where impromptu meetings had taken place on the roofpark of the Lovelock Foundation Tower, in a terrace garden of the Directorial Seat's residence warren where he and Roberts made their homes, and once in a dell at the end of one of the city's numerous greenbelts, where the get-together had taken place in full view of terrified passersby. Mental concentration was all the motivation required to bring forth one or more Danii. Sure, they teleported; there was no alternative to giving them that. But teleported from *where*? That was only one of the sixty-four-billion-credit questions Maran was vainly attempting to answer.

To the best of Holt's knowledge, the single occasion when they were known to have appeared indoors was on the rainy night Pierce Grey had vanished. He thought about the Director often, picturing in his imagination every conceivable form of his fate for the director, none of which he was sure came within parsecs of the truth. Roberts had questioned the Danii time after

time, never failing to receive an identical transliterated reply each and every time. “Higher Ones,” had been the hummed response, “have need of him, O Roberts. Fear not, for he is in their gentle care.” And on this period, he knew Roberts again meant to pose the question a bit more strongly, and also ask again who the “Higher Ones” might be, and why purportedly gently-cared-for neohumans were returned in such bad states of repair.

Higher Ones! What spooky, blasted images the term evoked. Never one to be intrigued by mysticism or the occult other than as a matter of general curiosity, Morrow considered himself pragmatic and fairly well oriented. He recalled being invited to a meeting of the Pantheistic Brotherhood in his youth, but had found the context of the discipular’s sermon rambling and discursive. Pantheism preached an admirably democratic view of the world, the flesh and the devil. Anything and everything one wished to believe in could be read into Pantheism without need of a blink.

He was also superficially acquainted with the basic doctrines of the few surviving religious disciplines retained by one segment of neohumanity or another. But Terra’s mutant children had long ago taken flight and populated the nearest islands of the universe, and what was left he considered a decidedly mixed bag. Reincarnation, for example, struck him as unrealistic yet thought provoking. Death and subsequent transfiguration had certain earmarks which fell more or less within the known schema of the physical universe, and were in fact somewhat analogous to the laws of physics dealing with the conservation of energy and mass. Should a non-flesh-and-blood life essence exist — a soul, to use the ancient tag — mightn’t it also be conserved and re-used?

He chided himself for letting his thoughts spin in such a dizzy spiral. A man could get headaches from thinking long and hard about the whichness and why of imponderables. Long since become convinced that those things not demonstrable either theoretically or empirically were not worth dwelling upon, especially grandiose concepts like ultimate causality, or the universe and neohumankind’s place in it, and retained a null opinion about the possibility and plausibility of a postulated “prime mover.” Imponderables and indeterminables belonged to the passing fervor of schoolboy bull sessions, but were not topics worthy of skull sweat on the part of the mature individual he knew himself to be.

But there had been a single exception, one glimpse into the supposed metaphysical. Alone on the conning bridge of an imperial starship, standing watch as a midshipman during his memorable pristine cruise into deep space, he had looked awestruck into the starshot, everlasting night reproduced in the astrogation holotank and been assailed by a certainty that the universe and all it contained, including himself, had been created by a masterful mind and hand. But that magic moment had overtaken him in the very long ago, the very, very far away.

Hold pulled himself to his feet and strolled among the towering trees, reflecting on the mystery that encompassed Dan. Having hunted and pecked and sorted through the ramifications evolving from his own casual acquaintance with numberless ordinary, strange, and infrequently exotic galactic bedfellows with whom he had come in contact, he revolved the riddle of the Danii and their mysterious ways. It was a puzzle that *had* to be solved, it was also a puzzle about which he had speculated long and hard about the likelihood or unlikelihood of truly empyrean beings called “Higher Ones,” so much so that his thoughts had come full circle. Be they beneficent, ma-

lignat, or somewhere on the middle ground, the reality of Higher Ones continually referred to by the Danii in reverent terms had to be either established, or once and for all dismissed and forgotten.

Holt sensed change rather than movement in the nearest brake of trees. He realized his old friend must have arrived while he'd been daydreaming, and peeked around a tree trunk. Looking as regal and imperturbable as the black statue newly returned xenoarcheologist van Maar had put on display in the lobby of the Lovelock Foundation Tower, a lone Danus reared taller than Roberts beneath an archway of foliage.

* * *

"A cordial greeting, O Roberts." The hummed phrase was succinct, the intonation musically varied in pitch. "This poorly endowed creature known as Polct has heeded your summons and comes before you once again."

Maran Roberts closed his lips, planning his glottal stops. Not yet an adept, he thought better of attempting to use his limited vocabulary, stepped a pace closer to the Danus holding the energized transliterator, and said, "O Polct, as always one appreciates an opportunity to meet with you."

"A pleasure we share in equal measure, O Roberts. The conflicting emotions in your mind were sensed from afar." The glossy black, finely sculpted head slowly turned. "Should one's inquisitiveness be less than offensive, what hinders the other of your kind from coming forward to converse? Its emotional conflicts outweigh your own."

Plainly puzzled, Roberts said, "The other . . . ?"

"Verily, O Roberts. It abides behind the great arboreal specimen."

Maran stepped over and peered around the tree's huge bole. "I see no other."

"Just so," affirmed Polct. "It has traversed the arboreal specimen's circumference and its fiery garment is no longer visible. Is this a form of game, O Roberts?"

"Uh, no," denied Roberts. "Not a game." When Holt gave up and appeared, he shook his head and sighed. "The other is a friend who would protect me."

"Protect you from what danger, O Roberts? Comprehension is weak."

Holt glared at the Danus. "Skinny hummer fingered me."

Maran was not amused. "Why are you skulking about?"

"Aw, don't make an imperial case of it. Someone has to keep an eye on you."

"Well, aren't you the mother hen!" Addressing the Danus, Roberts said, "He known as Morrow is a boon friend and staunch companion, O Polct. His perturbation stems from concern over my welfare. Does comprehension sit with you now?"

"But weakly, O Roberts. We abide beneath a clear sky, partaking of sweet wind each in its unique fashion. From whence comes a cause for concern?"

"It is a general fear . . . a concern rather, O Polct," said Roberts, "which is difficult to express. Greatly concerned over the mysterious disappearance of many of our fellow creatures, we desperately crave to learn the reason behind these happenings, and if possible an explanation. My friend shares the concern that we too may join the lost ones."

“Such a concern is groundless, O Roberts. Nor is there a mystery. Higher Ones have need of their presence. Those you term ‘lost’ were taken into Their gentle care.”

There it was again, thought Roberts, the same maddening, changeless phraseology that had impacted his consciousness like a ritual incantation. Having traveled this road numerous times, it looked as if he had to once again try and follow it, hopefully learn where it led. “We are aware that Higher Ones have taken our fellow beings. Should there be no offense, O Polct, we seek to once again humbly inquire why those returned were lacking in mind, manner and self-discipline? Why do Higher Ones take them only to discard them later as useless husks?”

The Danus was silent for a number of heartbeats. “O Roberts, surely you jest. This poor creature is sorely overtaxed by the concept of examining the motives of Higher Ones. Might one indulge your patience, go hence and solicit the aid of a worthy mentor capable of satisfying your query?”

Flustered, Roberts said, “Our gratitude would be . . .” He fell silent, abruptly finding himself addressing a column of thin air.

Morrow frowned. “Spooky blasted hummer didn’t bother to wave bye-bye. Guess you must’ve scared him off, Maran. Come on, let’s head back to Sharax.”

Unable to suppress his excitement, Roberts licked his lips. “Holt, please stay over there and don’t interfere. I have a hunch we may at last learn something concrete.”

“Aw, good riddance. Why hang around? Time to trot far as I can see. I doubt if another hummer will show up.”

“Do as I say!” urged Roberts. “I’m serious. Do not interfere, and stop acting like a nervous nanny. Above all, don’t interrupt if and when any Danii do appear.”

“Getting snappish in your old age,” groused Morrow. He nevertheless moved off into the trees to sulk and grumble. Roberts shushed him.

A pair of Danii suddenly appeared, each indistinguishable from the other.

“O Roberts, Tanis of the elders has consented to relieve this poor creature’s monumental ignorance by dispelling the perturbations which rile your mind.”

“We are honored, O Tanis,” said Roberts. “Your kindness in aiding our faltering steps will be greatly appreciated.”

The elder’s vocal response was deeper in tone, its hummed “voice” more resonant than that of Polct. “Clearly, O Roberts, your mentality and personality outshine most of your fellow beings. A most felicitous greeting to you, and to your companion.”

Maran gasped and clutched his temples. He had somehow “heard” the elder in his mind as well as through the transliterator. A peculiar tingling sensation ran through his forebrain, as if new channels were being opened.

“Ah, you perceive our intrusion,” complimented the elder. “That is interesting, and quite surprising. One hopes you are not offended by our brashness in briefly coming into rapport, since more could affect you adversely. You seem worthy indeed, far more receptive than one might anticipate considering the thus far rudimentary examination of your kind. It is gratifying.”

“Th . . . thank you,” stumbled Maran, duly agitated. “Would it be presumptuous to put a question to the elder?”

“By all means ask what you must ask, O Roberts.”

Maran rallied his thoughts. “Our kind has painfully progressed from generic infancy to adolescence to a form of semi-maturity by a process one might call trial and error. Our kind may well strike the more sophisticated Danii as overconfident, even arrogant, and perhaps offensive to . . . Higher Ones.”

“Not necessarily offensive, O Roberts,” hummed the elder. “One’s sense of wonder is titillated by the sheer numbers of your species, by the unwieldy collection of items you never tire of producing, riding about in and then discarding, only to fabricate replacements. Higher Ones have marveled at one facet of your existence, the all but exclusive direction of your essence toward material items rather than introspection, which has stunted your growth in mental stature, an inevitable result.”

Roberts puzzled over the response; it was not what he had hoped to hear. “We are indeed a juvenile species, O Tanis.”

“Youthfulness is not a negative characteristic, O Roberts, although remaining in a juvenile state beyond some reasonable point may produce deleterious effects within the individual and collective psyche of any species.”

Maran’s brow creased as he analyzed the statement. No hint of condemnation was apparent in the elder’s words and manner, merely objectivity, a startling directness. Doggedly determined to take advantage of the opportunity, he set everything back to to square one and began anew. “For a very long period, O Tanis, a custom has flourished among our kind that condones the adjustment of grievances by personal combat. To some members of our species, it is a censurable custom.”

“Whenever healthy and natural,” observed the elder, “custom is a vital growth mechanism in every society. Yet the willful destruction of another entity for any reason can do nought but corrosively damage the psyche of the destroyer. An entirely negative custom of that nature doubtless reflects a passing phase in your species’ development.”

Roberts spent seconds digesting the statement. “The wisdom of your observation is apparent, O Tanis. Many have denigrated our custom in just such a way. Yet our immediate concern centers about those who have engaged victoriously in our custom, only to be mysteriously spirited from our midst and later returned physically and mentally incapacitated. If it is not offensive, we would like to humbly ask why this is so?”

The elder did not immediately respond. “No offense obtains, O Roberts. But one might well ask why the stars turn in their courses, why the universe surrounds us. Infinity is incomprehensible to finite beings.”

Maran’s pulse rate quickened. “Higher Ones, then, are finite entities, O Tanis?”

“How can one formulate an answer within the finite scope of one’s own faulty intellect?” hummed the elder, its response twice as cryptic as the query. “One assumes this concept is extremely difficult to assimilate.”

“Extremely difficult, O Tanis, perhaps exceeding our poor ability to assimile,” admitted Maran, tantalized by the partially revealed vista hinted at by the elder. Now doubly determined to abandon philosophy and bear down on the root question, he said, “Our kind are sorely troubled, O Tanis. The elders among us grow ever more impatient over happenings not understood, or per-

haps misunderstood, and seek a resolution to the mystery. It would serve no purpose to state the resulting danger to the Danii who are thought to be responsible for the, er . . . removal and replacement of certain members of our species.”

“We whom you refer to as Danii are considered responsible?” The elder’s air of surprise came through the language barrier. “Has not the existence of Higher Ones been communicated to the elders of your kind, O Roberts?”

“Repeatedly,” assured Maran. “Often have our elders been so informed. However, unable to verify our reports, which in their minds are of a doubtful nature, they may react by deciding such beings as Higher Ones constitute a threat to our kind.”

“A threat? In truth, O Roberts, although the communication device you employ adequately conveys the surface meaning of each statement, obtaining a firm grasp weakens drastically. How a threat?”

Roberts concentrated, marshaled his thoughts, and said, “I fear our kind are burdened with an overabundance of youthful arrogance, O Tanis. We have encountered no entities one might term truly superior, and have therefore grown excessively egocentric, more proud of our accomplishments than are warranted. Pride is the keystone of the deplorable custom in question. Pride is an emotion proactively nurtured and cultivated by our kind.

“Yet now,” pursued Maran, “are we told of Higher Ones who, as you intimated, are of not only unknown scope and power, but also said to implement the otherwise inexplicable disappearances and reappearances of certain members of our species. This revelation, learning that Higher Ones treat our kind as we treat children, is a staggering blow our prideful elders, and their ultimate reaction could result in a cataclysm.”

Moved a half-pace closer to Roberts, the elder Danus lifted one pipestem appendage as if to comfort him. “In truth, O Roberts, our conversation wends ever farther from the path of rigorous statement. One cannot conceive how the existence of Higher Ones could initiate such trauma as you describe. Best for all concerned would be to come into the presence of Higher Ones so that the fathomless concern so troubling to your kind may be addressed and assuaged.”

Roberts blanched. “Is that . . . ? Would it be possible?”

“Assuredly, O Roberts. In order to ease and pacify your mind, one deems it a wise course under the circumstances.”

His heart pounding, Maran made up his mind. It took blind courage to agree, but he knew that if he lacked that courage the remainder of his life would be spent in a torturous quandary, a hell of recrimination and self-disgust. “May I . . . return whenever I wish?”

“A privilege you may take for granted, O Roberts.”

Maran glanced at Morrow, looked away quickly. “Very well, if you think it prudent.”

Leaning against a tree, suspiciously watchful, Holt had been attentive only to random snatches of the ongoing discourse between Roberts and the Danus.

He blinked, and was suddenly alone.

Roberts!” he called softly, breathlessly. His mouth dry, he tore the Casches pistol from the holster beneath his kilt, cursing fluently, and frantically turned round and round in search of a nonexistent enemy.

Slumping to the turf in abject despair, he let energy weapon sag from his hand and thud on the turf. The curses gradually turned into racking sobs. Looking upward, his eyes glazed with a mixture of fury and remorse, he defiantly screamed, "Take me! Take me, too, you filthy rotten hummers."

"Take me!"

* * *

Elan awoke fighting off the friendly hands trying to comfort him. He coughed weakly, rubbed his chest and opened his eyes a slit.

"Easy," soothed Minor, "it's over. Relax, and rest. You'll soon feel better."

He coughed again, used both hands to massage his burning chest. A pair of medics in gray-green tunics stood behind Minor, watching him with grave expressions. Across the riparian chamber of the suite once occupied by Gailen van Maar, five or six public assassins tried to look alert and efficient while actually doing little or nothing.

"Nyemeister . . . ?" he said, in his own ears the utterance sounding more like a wordless croak than anything intelligible.

Minor smoothed the dark hair back from his forehead. "Don't fret about him, Elan. Not now. Just lay back and breathe deeply. I know exactly how you feel. It was the same with me when I first came around."

Elan sat up very slowly, struggling to support himself. "Chest . . . hurts. Don't feel" The pieces gradually began falling in place when he noticed four shrouded forms in a neat row along the loggia's far wall. "Nyemeister . . . ?"

A sober nod from Minor. "And Errold," she told him, "and a pair of assassins; the other two have already been taken away."

"Some kind of . . . what? Gas?" guessed Elan. "How did . . . that come about?"

"My distinguished ancestor rode to the rescue, naturally."

"Ser Weldon? How did he . . . learn about . . . ?"

"I haven't a glimmer," she told him. "You can ask him yourself. One of the medics said he should be here any time now."

Elan rubbed his eyes. "Him, *here*?"

"So the doctor said. Beginning to get first echelon VIP treatment, aren't we?"

Elan puffed his cheeks. "Sorry, I'm still feeling pretty shaky. Why weren't Nyemeister, Errold and the others resurrected?"

"You'll have to wait and ask the omniscient one. The medics won't tell me much of anything except being ordered to administer antidote to the two of us only. Tough to pity Nyemeister, or for that matter Errold? From what I heard and saw, Errold meant to do away with both of us."

"Likely as not," said Elan. "But just letting them . . ." He broke off, coughing. "It seems less than proper to . . . What I mean is, a few billion buckoes and twice as many fair maidens will mourn Pyron, but as for Errold . . ." He shrugged. "I don't know why his passing bothers me, but it does."

Minor touched his cheek. "Maybe you've turned into a big, sloppy bag of sentiment."

Elan did not feel well enough to be amused. Letting Minor help him unsteadily to his feet, he said, “Your ‘omniscient’ ancestor may have found out about something else, too.”

“About us, yes . . . and deep space.”

Elan nodded affirmatively. “And prospective togetherness.”

Her reply was taut and instantaneous. “If by some remote chance he doesn’t already know, I’ll tell him.”

“And if his wishes don’t coincide with ours?”

“I’ll come with you anyhow,” she said, her brown eyes flashing pale fire. “I’ll find a way, Elan. I can always give myself to the master of some starship . . .” Suddenly teary-eyed for no reason Elan could see, she came into his arms. He rocked her gently.

“I was so frightened,” she said in a weak voice.

“You, frightened . . . ? Not from where I stood were you frightened. You were magnificent, Minor. I’ll always cherish the way you smiled at me — so charming and feminine — just before breaking the assassin’s nose with that statue of a busty goddess.”

Minor giggled through her tears. “I surprised myself. We’ll have to tell Gailen how handy his topless beauty was in time of need.”

“We shall.”

“When we get to . . . whatever the miserable outworld is called.”

“Dan,” he supplied.

Minor dried her eyes. “Elan, I want to go. I want very much to go with you.”

“Soon we’ll be on our way. “He stroked her hair. “We’ll go together. We will always be together.”

The suite had been steadily emptying around them, the assassins gathering in knots, careful to keep their distance from the patrician couple, then drifting into the loggia in twos and threes. Their manner subdued, the medics finished supervising the removal of the portable resuscitation equipment and departed. When the Director of Terra arrived, Elan and Minor were alone.

The polychrome-metal geriatric chair floated through the portal unannounced, paused in the loggia long enough for the director to casually inspect the shrouded forms. Outwardly neither pleased nor displeased at the sight, he commanded the chair to glide forward into the riparian chamber.

“Good afternoon, my children. We see you have recovered from your ordeal. Please accept our sincere apologies for waiting so long to act. Holding back was mandatory due to the necessity of gathering sufficient evidence necessary to ensure conviction of the miscreant senior Planner now peacefully reposing in the loggia. Until ser Errold looked as if he might carry out his threat to do you harm, Elan, we were forced to stay our hand. We are certain you appreciate our position.”

Minor did not appreciate his position. Shocked, he said, “You watched, *held back* while Nyemeister was doing his best to *kill* Elan?”

Lovelock’s thin-fleshed countenance froze upon hearing the term he abhorred. “Dearly beloved descendant,” he said harshly, “*nothing* occurs in and around the Directorial Seat or within the reservation without our knowledge and consent. Plots designed to usurp our stewardship of

the imperium, not to mention miscellaneous conspiracies aimed at dislodging us from our rightful Star Council seat have matured at an average of six or eight per century. Do you imagine that we've retained our post by pampering ambitious, second-rate politicians like Corte Errold or those of his ilk?"

Hearing a dangerous rasp creep into the Old One's diction, Elan intervened. "With all due respect, ser Director, Minor and I, while grateful beyond words, feel that refusing to allow Errold and the gladiator to be resurrected was —"

"Resurrected!" The word cracked in the high-ceilinged chamber like a broken stick. "We confront those who show us enmity only *once*, ser Grey." The geriatric chair swept menacingly near. An emaciated arm stretched out. The Old One's feeble fingers plucked weakly at the torn ebon fabric of Elan's tunic, now stiff with dried blood. "You, my emissary, were pinked in the arm by arguably the finest smallswordsman of this or any other epoch. Indeed, even before crossing swords with your worthy opponent we found your conduct exemplary. Your salty retorts to Errold's pompous questions earned accolades within the Star Council."

"The Planners watched, overheard?" Minor seemed beguiled. "They witnessed our —?"

"Indeed, my naive, generations-removed great-great-great whatever you may be," declared Lovelock sternly. "Had you paused to consider the matter in depth, you would realize that this incomprehensible spacetime bubble in which we find ourselves is now, and shall forever be, incapable of governance by *any* single individual, not even ourself." The director waited for his words of wisdom to penetrate before adding, "We perceive that a modicum of light is beginning to dawn."

"I take it the Planners concurred," said Elan.

"The Planners observed the evidence, past and present, and voiced unanimous consent, and in concert ruled in favor of the demise of any and all directly or indirectly connected with Errold's futile ambitions, as well as one or two associates proven to be inimical to the status quo per se. We, as always, acted as a mere instrument of the Star Council."

Minor said, "Even so, if Nyemeister had managed to —"

"Had the superbly accomplished smallswordsman succeeded in delivering a mortal thrust," interrupted the Director, "Elan would have been attended by the finest team of specialists in the visited galaxy. If you will kindly recall a recent incident of that nature, my dear, resurrection has become something of a specialty with us. In the outworld xenologist's case, we, we brazenly violated Convention with indifference to the potential consequences. The Star Council was displeased to hear of the overtly unconscionable action, especially since it helped provoke the just concluded unpleasantness, yet in the end the Planners wholeheartedly endorsed our decision without reservation."

"The van Maar . . . problem was largely my fault," said Minor. "If I hadn't insisted on bringing him to the arena that evening, none of this would have happened."

"Your guilt feeling, my dear," the director surprised her by saying, "are not entirely valid. The outworlder's resurrection provided Errold, his cronys, sycophants and sympathizers with a convenient excuse, and nothing more. Had the outworlder never been dispatched to Terra, little or nothing would have changed. Ser Corte Errold would have invented another fuse to light, an-

other way to ignite it. In one form or other, what has happened was inevitable. The esteemed senior Planner had for some time been under close scrutiny.”

Minor glanced warily at Elan. “Then I suppose you also know all about us,” she said, hoping to partially deflect the coming storm. “Elan and I are leaving Terra together.”

Honest amusement cracked the director’s Olympian shell and he gargled good naturedly. “Know of it? You are flesh of our flesh, Girl, blood of our blood. We not only knew of it, but indeed brought it about. You and ser Grey, were purposely kept apart throughout the restless cycles of adolescence and the onset of maturity. Although in view of his superior lineage we admit that Elan’s rakish behavior continued far beyond our most radical estimates, casting a shadow of doubt upon the outcome, when you and he were at last thrown together the result was entirely predicable.”

Instantly furious upon being assured of how her life had been manipulated, Minor cried, “Just like that!”

“*Just* like that, my dearest one,” affirmed the director. “If you will excuse the pun, we hope you will permit us a minor triumph. We are duty-bound to take the long view, the only view of any true consequence. You have each deposited your ova and sperm in the cryothermic repository, fulfilling a duty with which Convention burdens every aristocrat. In the unhappy event that you should become victims of the vanishings apparently afflicting neohumans in the strange out-world, your bloodlines will be perpetuated. In our estimation, your prospective offspring will result in the melding of genome charts which sometime in the foreseeable, not too distant future could produce a truly optimum neohuman specimen. We once listened closely to sterling Genetics Board advice on the subject.”

Unable to hold back a grin, Elan said lightly, “Well, that settles that. When the Planners decide to . . . Minor, what is it? what’s wrong?” He watched with a quizzical expression as she dashed out of the suite in a huff. “Why was she so upset?” he asked the Old One, sounding as if he would like to follow her and learn the reason.

The director’s swayed his emaciated shoulders. “Attempting to analyze feminine logic, ser Grey, will never fail to disrupt your own thought processes. Forget fair Minor for the nonce. In not many hours you and she will board the shuttle and depart our perpetually overcrowded homeworld. Before you go, however, we must undertake a final briefing, discuss various aspects of your mission.”

“Due to the Errold affair, we missed liftoff, ser Director.”

“Actually not the case, Elan. Per our instructions, the shuttle awaits you, the starcruiser remains in a parking orbit.” Lovelock paused as if reconsidering what he was about to say. “Actually, is there need for further briefing? With what added motivation would we be able to inspire you? We could re-stress the vital importance of your prospective action-decisions as our surrogate. We could reiterate the solemn fact that much will depend upon your swift reaction to our orders, yet little is to be gained by belaboring such matters. Go to Dan with our utmost confidence. Take charge, and by all means keep us informed of your period-by-period progress. Above all, obey our commands to the letter.”

“Have more disappearances been reported?” asked Elan.

“Only one recently.” The Old One scowled. “Though having no connection to Code Du-ello, Ser Roberts, the former commander of explorers, vanished a few subjective periods ago while interrogating the so-called Danii. The suspicion that a postulated galactic super race may have been contacted out there can be neither confirmed nor denied. These ‘Higher Ones,’ should any such exist, whatever and wherever they may be, have been mentioned in practically every report we have received. After further thought, we felt the investigation you will lead may be simpler to effect with Roberts out of the picture. The final summaries furnished by he and ser Ladeen were most disturbing, in essence verging on the irrational.”

Elan looked doubtful. “I recall being introduced Roberts long ago, ser Director. He and my pater were close. It grieves me to hear of his misfortune. Have any others been returned?”

“To the best of our knowledge, no.”

“Little more is known than when we had our last conversation.”

“Nothing at all,” said Lovelock. “But that must change — *must* change, do you hear?” The Old One glanced at the chronometer readout on the armrest of his geriatric chair. “Time slips away at an ever-accelerating, unforgiving, pace. There are matters we must attend to. We shall take leave of one another now.”

Elan touched his forehead, the tunic over his heart, the empty scabbard bobbing at his hip, and performed a low bow of deference. “My mind, heart and sword are yours, ser Director.”

“Go, Elan. Let our fulsome endorsement of your prowess guide your steps. Remember who you are, why you are there, and above all with whose mouth you speak.”

“I will, ser Weldon.” Grey made a short leg and hurried through the loggia, hoping to catch up with Minor, halted at the portal and looked back. Slumped in the geriatric chair immobile, the director looked weighed down by the burden of his centuries.

The portal dilated. Elan stepped out feeling a certain remote sympathy for Lovelock.

* * *

The argument continued and eventually reached unanticipated proportions, Minor’s indignation over the prearranged match had peaked when ser Weldon announced that he had done nothing too terrible by playing matchmaker.

“He controlled every breath I drew, my entire life,” she raged.

“Lately mine as well,” said Grey.

“I won’t have it, Elan!”

Aboard the shuttle, preparing for liftoff, they became too excited to argue, stopped shouting at one other and made up. Strapped into side-by-side acceleration couches, they held hands and watched the countdown readout ticked away the final minutes. A muted warning klaxon honked in the video display on the forward bulkhead, inducing an adrenaline rush as departure became imminent. A steward came in, hurriedly checked their restraint harnesses, and battened the hatch behind him, leaving them to cope with launch as best they could.

The shuttle lit up with the sound of distant thunder conducted through the hull, tore a voracious hole in the waters of the Pacific and accelerated upward in a long, smooth groove taking it toward orbital rendezvous with the starcruiser.

There was little discomfort under ascent boost, and they were both accustomed to this preliminary phase of spaceflight. The video panel shifted from stern view of the dwindling space terminal's metal island to the Pacific coastline. And then, etched against velvety blackness, the ethereal blue glow of the planet's limb crowded into the sensor's field of view.

They chatted until reaction motor shutdown, spent six or eight miserable seconds in freefall until a pseudo-gravity field enveloped the ship. The video display blacked out, and opened with to a view of the still invisible starcruiser.

Eighteen minutes later, by the bulkhead chronometer readout, a bright star grew steadily brighter in the display, swelled into a two-dimensional star, a sliver, a toothpick, and eventually a shining pencil. Limned in earthlight, the starship's image soon more than filled the display — a fat, blunt-ended cylinder more than two kilometers in length.

Again they endured the momentary endless fall sensation of microgravity until gentle pressure nudged them deeper into the acceleration couches. After a second nudge, milder than the first, and a barely audible clumping sound conducted through the hull, the shuttle mated with the starship. Pseudo-gravity instantly returned, accompanied by a sighing chuff of air, a subtle signal that shuttle and starship now shared internal pressures.

The steward returned and helped them unstrap. Escorted through a companionway, they transshipped to the starship and were met inside the main airlock service compartment by the vessel's master, who bowed low, welcoming them aboard, his manner a bit stand-offish due to the delay in departure. Showing Minor and Elan VIP deference, he turned them over to the chief steward. Riding the lift to their deck, the steward conducted them along the companionway, and hurried on ahead and opened their suite.

After a brief inspection of the tastefully decorated compartments, Elan dismissed the steward and turned to Minor. "Well . . . ?"

"I suppose it will have to do," she said in a droll tone.

"We'll see a lot of it during the next sixty-odd periods. I still think cold sleep would have been a more practical way to —"

"Forget it, Elan. I'd much rather stay fuzzy and warm. Hold me!" She came into his arms. He kissed her. "I know you'll think me foolish if I suggest something?"

"A likelihood."

"I'd like to, uh . . . That is, I think we should be . . . married."

"You mean," she asked impishly, "a formal contract and everything? Connubial wedded bliss and so forth and so on for all eternity? Really, ser Grey! You do surprise me. That may be the most indecent proposal I have ever heard?"

"Don't get salty. It's what I had in mind, except, uh . . . more so."

"More . . . ? *Is* there more than a formal marriage contract?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I'm not sure I do."

Looking uncomfortable, Elan said, "You never had a chance to meet my pater although you lived near the Directorial Seat there Sinus Iridum. Now it looks like you never will. I know

how much Pierce would have liked you . . . loved you, Minor. I'm also certain you would have learned to like him."

"Tell me about him."

"It seems strange to talk about him now that he's gone. Saying Pierce and I never got along well is . . . I thought of him as an old-fashioned fuddy-duddy, dowdy in lots of ways, hard for me to please no matter what I did, or didn't do, no matter what I said, or didn't say. A stickler for Convention, he considered a gente's word his contract, and felt that certain values would never change. He and my mater met and decided they wanted to be together always, even for a lived a full millennium. They were married under the ancient ceremony. They *meant* it, Minor. Marriage, I mean."

Minor had listened carefully. "You're beating the bush to death, but I'm beginning to see where you're headed. Sure it's what you want for us?"

"I . . . yes, positive. Pierce would have been delighted."

"What made you decide?"

"Nyemeister, the . . . duel. While desperately trying to stay alive, I realized how much I wanted life, wanted . . . You."

Minor smiled wistfully. "Alright, I'm convinced. Once we're in transit, we'll march down to the captain of this sky yacht and browbeat him into performing the ancient ceremony."

"If," said Elan, "a copy can be dredged up out of the ship's database. It's not the most common ancient document in existence.

"Oh," she said airily, "we'll either locate it, or make up something suitable as we go along."

"You haven't really told me what *you* want, Minor."

"Don't quibble," ser Grey. "You can't talk me out of it now, abandon me at the altar so to speak."

He chuckled. "The marriage ceremony is . . . It's something pretty special."

"How do you know so much about it?"

"I read it after Pierce and my mater, Alexa, renewed their vows during the centenarian ceremony. There are quaint, archaic passages scholars have debated for centuries, including a striking phrase I never forgot: 'Till death do us part'."

Her head cocked, Minor looked into his eyes. "That has a certain ring to it."

"Come here."

"Umm-m-m . . ."

Their kiss was longer and deeper, more filled with emotion than either of them would have believed possible.

XIII

*Ceterum censeo delendam
esse Carthaginem.*

Cato the Censor's ubiquitous

concluding remark to the
Roman Senate, ca 147 BCE

The elder's directed thoughts were crisp. *Vigilance is now the watchword, O Polct. Sensing extreme trepidation among the subjects within our purview, one must act quickly to investigate the cause, and report.*

I shall be watchful, O Tanis. Polct ran through the levels of perceivable emotion he had cataloged. *Is their trepidation indeed expected to wax? It is difficult to conceive of stronger emotional perturbations than one presently senses. Whirlpools of raw fearfulness emanate from them in a prismatic, overwhelming deluge.*

They are ripe, conceded Tanis, it not overly ripe. Augmenting current levels of emotional strife, these adolescent creatures harbor dreads bequeathed by their remote ancestors and carried into the 'now' of their existence by racial memory — fear of darkness, of falling from a high place, of loud noises. Predominant is fear of the unknown and the extinction it symbolizes. Such terrors cannot do other than desolate the juvenile psyche. Higher Ones wish to capitalize upon these inborn faults.

How is it possible to dread passing beyond this phase of existence? inquired Polct. *A strange and morbid fear indeed.*

Aye, morbid, though not entirely strange, contradicted the elder. *Their individual and collective fears and philosophies are complemented and reinforced by youthful egocentricity. The inevitable event construed as creature death represents the obliteration of all-important self, and the state of nonbeing. Such phobias are common in generic infancy and adolescence, our own included. Even so, fear of the inevitable strikes us as rather silly.*

A new concept it is, admitted Polct. *Comprehension dawns but slowly, O Tanis. Not knowing themselves in any depth, such fearfulness cannot be overcome.*

Well reasoned, applauded the elder. *Other than anachrons — those born ahead or behind normal context, so to speak — individual attunement with reality, the integration of id, ego, psyche resulting in freedom from childish fears is mandatory for all species striving toward maturity.*

The subjects under our purview, then, may still be classified as juvenile?

Aye, as of this moment.

Yet they do show promise, thought Polct.

More than a modicum of promise. In certain recent samples, much more.

* * *

Racked by a meld of fear and uncertainty, the man slouched in thought. Holding the infant in the crook of her arm, the woman comforted the girl who could not stop crying. The man was also afraid, although he did his best to hide it. The woman likewise tried to shield the child from her own fear of the unknown.

Fear steeped Planet Dan like a baneful mist, permeating residence warrens, government offices, automated factories, agri-complexes, military reservations, shopping malls, greenbelts and esplanades. Colonial conversation invariably devolved into short-bitten denunciations of the ineffectiveness aptly demonstrated by official do-nothings who talked a good fight, but learned

very little. The electronic news media editorialized bravely, preaching calmness while making capital of each new sensation. Cranks, social degenerates and gossipers came into their own. Scare stories circulated like thistles in the wind, usually with more credence given to the most rather than least fantastic accounts.

The man found it impossible to sit still. Rising nervously, he verbally commanded the holovision tank to switch itself off. "Can't just sit here," he said. "We have to *do* something. A family with two children disappeared in Euphalia period before last."

"Who told you that?"

"Jamie."

"It's only . . . It's just another scare story," said the woman uncertainly. "You can hear anything you want. I think you listen to Jamie too much."

The man shook his head. "He wouldn't repeat a rumor. What it comes down to is . . . *All* of us could vanish."

"Don't say things like that in front of the child."

"Better to face up to it than face away, pretend it's not happening. Can't bury our heads in the sand."

"Well, what *can* be done? What can anyone do?"

"Good question." The man rubbed his jaw. "What worries me most is living way out here, away from the city. We're almost alone, isolated, and at a time like this . . . I think we might be better off to stay in Sharax for a while."

"Oh, could we? It has to be safer there."

The man frowned. "It'll be inconvenient. No telling how long the emergency edict will be in effect."

"Oh, please! Can we?"

The man shushed the little girl. He stewed for a time, made up his mind and popped a fist into his open palm. "Gather some clothes and necessities for yourself and the kids," he told her. "Start packing while I run over to the Norney place."

"Why?"

"To let 'em know we're leaving. Go, no; get busy. We can be on our way shortly after sundown."

"You could call, tell them."

"No. I want to have a short face-to-face talk with Bo."

"I'll have everything ready," she promised.

He tried again to shush the whimpering girl, telling her she had to help her mother get ready to leave. Donning a jacket passed to him by the autovalet, he dilated the portal.

Near sunset, it was blowing and eerie outdoors. Ragged clouds, the remnants of an earlier rainstorm, scudded above the copse of lofty trees bordering the Norney's prefabricated home a half-kilometer to the west. Tugging up the collar of his jacket against the chill wind, he halted in a swirl of dancing leaves and debated with himself. Deciding it would be simpler to walk over to the Norneys than stop by after getting his family into the verticraft for the flight into Sharax. Clutching the collar tightly about his throat, he set off toward the line of trees. Once away from

the lee of his home, the wind became a tangible force he had to lean against as he walked. Cloud masses rolled across the low sun, darkening the meadow.

For some reason the sensation of being followed overcame him, an irresistible urge to turn look back over his shoulder. Nothing was between him and his home, looming against the distant thrust of forest.

“Jumpy,” he muttered. “Who wouldn’t be?” He started out again, walking against the wind, and the all but certain knowledge that something was behind him once again flooded through him. He halted, succumbing to the strong urge, and looked back. House, forest and swiftly moving cloud shapes mocked him, the wind keened in his ears. Suspiciously eyeing the darkling perimeter of forest just ahead, he waited for the sun to reappear.

He turned abruptly and jogged back and unlocked the hangar door, opened the forward hatch of the six-place verticraft and rummaged in the underseat bin. Lifting out a holstered sidearm, he checked the charge of compressed gas, selected a six-round magazine and jammed it into the base of the weapon’s pistol grip, and worked the action to seat an explosive pellet in the chamber. Before strapping the holster around his waist, he slipped off the weapon’s safety. Slamming the hatch and hurried out of the hangar, leaving the segmented door open.

A good deal more confident armed, he set off toward the Norney home in earnest, walking fast. The wind seemed neither as strong, nor the sky filled with scudding clouds as ominous as it had earlier. He increased his pace, but the sun dropped behind the horizon shortly after he entered the thick stand of trees, and in the gloaming it was much darkening going through the thick patch of forest. Beginning to wish he had reconsidered informing the Norney household on foot, he nevertheless he forced himself to go on.

The identical, overpowering notion gripped him once again. Something *was* trailing him, stalking him. He gritted his teeth and trotted onward, but the subliminal, apprehensive feeling grew persistently stronger. He finally surrendered to his misgivings, halted and whirled, standing poised. He listened to the wind souging in the boughs overhead, to the soft, menacing rustle of wind-whipped foliage.

Something moved in the dimness, something tall and slender, a darker patch of darkness in the gathering dusk.

The man cried out hoarsely, backed away, stumbled and nearly fell. In one panicky movement he snatched the weapon from the holster, raised it and fired.

The *whum-m-m-m-p!* of the exploding pellet reverberated briefly in the wind. Breathing rapidly, partially blinded by the explosion’s flash, he clutched the bole of a tree until his vision began to recover, and edged forward a step at a time, weapon in hand. The figure of what looked like one of the Danii he had seen pictured was huddled on the humus underfoot. Despite the wind, the smell gave him an urge to retch.

Before his eyes, the dim figure metamorphosed, growing and flowing into something spiny and gross.

And then, abruptly, it was no longer there.

The man recoiled and tried to run, but a revolting, twisting sensation boiled up in his bowels. He screamed, writhing through a fall toward nothingness surrounded by a roaring darkness he could neither feel nor see.

Suddenly he was in another place, confronted by something utterly grotesque, something that lacked face.

A sonorous “voice” hammered in his mind. *Thou foolish one! What hast thou done?*

The man screamed again more loudly. His screaming went on for quite some time.

* * *

Joined in what the starcruiser’s master had groped for as the proper term before calling it “wedlock,” Elan and Minor had taken full advantage of sixty-three glorious subjective periods in transit to really get to know one another. Lounging about in langorous contentment, they had talked for hours, made love, explored the ship’s limited diversions, and talked again for hours.

When at last at a shuttle had descended and grounded in Dan, Elan had quickly learned that trying to keep pace with Holt Morrow’s energy and pragmatism was something of an ordeal. His young sibling, Leighton Grey, had naturally been delighted to reunite with the sole remaining member of his family. The youngster’s show of devotion had in fact mildly embarrassed Elan, although he did appreciate how terribly the boy missed his pater, and did everything he could to comfort him and ease his sorrow. Leighton had been simply awestruck when introduced to Minor.

Pierce Grey’s former suite, now the residence of interim Director Ennis Ladeen, adjoined the spacious residence high in the Directorial Seat of Elan and Minor. Young Leighton had been staying with Morrow, who confessed to having had his hands full trying to take care of the youngster, and had finally turned the boy over to a psychotherapist so that he could undergo a few grief counseling sessions.

During the past two periods, footsore and laden with first impressions of Planet Dan, Elan had left his bride in their sanctuary to sit in on roundtable discussions intended to bring him up to speed on the current planetary civil and military situation, but which soon turned into round-robin councils of war. Lengthy discussions had ensued, which Holt Morrow had capsulized in more than a nutshell. “There isn’t any damn situation, only a vacuum. We don’t know what the hell’s going on, and can’t find out because we’re deaf, dumb and blind. It’s as simple as that.”

Ladeen’s input, while a good deal less dramatic, had been no more reassuring. Ennis had stated simply that several hyperspace missives received from the Planners — “Read ser Lovelock,” he added — instructed him in no uncertain terms to sublimate his position as interim director and turn matters over to the authority vested in ser Elan Grey as the Star Council’s official surrogate.

It was not until a topic involving the use of Marine patrols came up that Ladeen mentioned a bit sheepishly the prior incarceration of Commodore Garrigues and the executive officer of Imperial Space Forces Starcruiser *Relentless*, the single-vessel “task force” still on-orbit.

“Oh, yes,” said Elan. “Ser Weldon mentioned the incident — something about sending the commodore a private communiqué that was never acted on. What’s to be done with him?”

“That will now have to be your decision, Elan.” Ladeen began to explain, but Holt interrupted and described what he himself had done to “short circuit” pair, and why.

“You mean they’re still being held?”

“Under house arrest here in the Seat,” said Morrow. With Pierce . . . gone, I knew damn well Garrigues would try to arbitrarily carry out his instructions. Couldn’t have that, could we?

Once we found out the Planners were sending someone here with the authority to take over, Ennis and I decided to wait and consult with the, uh . . . With you.”

Grey cogitated. “Better turn them both loose, I suppose. I’ll apologize formally, explain my authorization to the commodore and make certain he understands that every military and civilian order the Planners’ issue has to go through me, and no one else.”

“Elan,” said Holt, “I know sending you out here was Lovelock’s idea, not something you asked for. Even so, I’m afraid you’ve bitten off one helluva chunk bigger than you or anyone else can chew and swallow.

“That remains to be seen, Holt.”

“Uh-huh, if we’re given enough time to see it.”

Hours later, after his interview with surrogate Planner Elan Grey, Commodore Garrigues and his XO returned on-orbit. The commodore was, to put it mildly, in an extremely foul mood. Fuming, he told the executive officer, “Trading one Grey for another is the height of idiocy. We shall see about this. We certainly shall see about it.”

* * *

Elan emerged from the showermassage and found Minor huddled on the divan, sipping a drink. “You look sort of done in,” he said.

“Exhausted. Let’s make our excuses, dine here in the suite and get to bed early?”

He touched her bare heel, ran a speculative forefinger up the curve of her calf. “Sounds delightful.”

“Lecher! I meant to get a decent night’s sleep for a change.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Think hard!”

Elan grinned. “What are your first impressions of Dan?”

Minor wrinkled her nose. “Provincial, raw, not exactly what I’m used to. But I never cared much for that, either. It *is* beautiful, and so uncrowded and . . . well, fresh, if that’s the right word. But awfully scary, too.”

“And then some,” said Elan. It had taken hardly any time at all for the sourceless, nameless dread hanging over Dan to infect them both. “Everyone we’ve met is tense, on edge.”

“Can you blame them? Who wouldn’t be antsy?” Minor finished her drink. “Morrow mentioned something that disturbed me. He said little more is known now than when the disappearances began.”

“Holt is an original,” said Elan. “He says whatever comes to mind, no soft-soap, flowers or nice music. But that bit bothered me, too. It made me wonder if we’ll ever find any answers. We’re dealing with something really strange out here, believe me.”

“Oh, I believe you,” she said with feeling.

“But don’t let Morrow get under your skin, my darling. Holt may be subtle as a brick wall, but he’s a whole lot smarter.”

Minor rose and adjusted her filmy robe. “I liked him on sight. He’s *real*.”

Grey folded her in his arms, rocked her gently. “Better than you like me?”

She leaned back, standing on one foot, and regarded him soberly. “No, Elan,” she said. “Not that much.”

Their kiss was long, sensuous. It was Minor who tugged free of his caress, gently pushed him away. “No you don’t, lecher!”

He laughed when she scampered into the hallway. “Come back.”

She shook her head. “If you’re finished hogging the showermassage, it’s my turn.”

“You can shower any time.”

“Lecher!” She pulled a face and disappeared.

Elan took a black cigarette from the humidor on a coffeetable of rippling Danite slate and waved it alight. He strolled to the glasswall and surveyed the lights of Sharax, wondering what he’d done to deserve a woman like Minor.

Until now he had never known how exciting a woman could be — a wife. That might be an archaic term, but for whatever reason carried a marvelous connotation. More than simply physically exciting, Minor was exciting to be with anywhere, any time, under any conditions. He looked forward to waking beside her each morning, her eyes half-open like a sleepy kitten, and then glistening with animation after coffee. It was amazing! She looked like an adolescent when her deep brown eyes softened with affection, but transformed herself into the throes of maturity when they hardened in anger. In more than one way she evoked a distant similarity to her famous ancestor. Her insights, likes and dislikes were comparable, although he knew she would have vehemently denied the inference.

Ser Weldon and his mission had completely slipped from his mind during the first subjective weeks in transit, and then a transmittal had been received while in deep space. Judging from the tone of his message, the Old One was evidently fretting back in his holographic sanctum, impatient for Elan to arrive and “seize the nettle firmly,” as he had put it. Now that he had landed in Dan and gotten his feet wet, he had not a clue about what to do next.

Minor had judged Morrow correctly — a gemstone in the rough, but also a wise old pelican. Ennis Ladeen, while as sound an executive as any whelped by the imperium, had been relegated to the role of second fiddle when he himself had arrived. Ennis had arranged the “council of war,” suggesting that they sit down together and map out a direction that might lead to some form of solution to the Danite quandary. While that did sound good on paper, nothing realistic had come of it, nor could he imagine contributing anything to the discussion himself. Not yet, at any rate. It was all but impossible to believe in the fact of beings to whom telepathy and teleportation were commonplaces, which amounted to a gross understatement. Morrow, Ladeen and several other former explorers he had spoken with had steeled themselves to endure a period-by-period existence under the threat hanging over their heads. But explorers were true frontiersmen and women, and how could it be otherwise? Their collective outlook was that all was not lost had come the hard way.

Militarily, Dan was an absolute paradox. The newly freed commodore in command of a one-ship “task force” was a gente Morrow referred to as, “That blithering jackass, Garrigues.” The *Relentless*, would soon co-orbit Dan in company with the light-weapons ship *Gutherie*, and a second starcruiser was en route to join in the makeup of an actual task force. Either capital starcruiser, crewed by thousands of officers and sailors, could easily maintain interdiction against

further colonization and totally control the planet's surface. It was the total absence of military targets that immediately frustrated any and all thought of using force. In that respect, Dan was unique among hundreds of imperial colonies, where in many instances an indigenous alien species coexisted with neohumans. In this lovely world there were no native cities, towns or even villages, and the absence of targets was driving Commodore Garrigues to distraction by effectively nullifying each and every item of sophisticated weaponry in the imperial arsenal.

A voice from the portal interrupted Elan's reverie. "Hiya, Elan. Got a minute? Someone here with me is mighty anxious to see you."

Elan called, "Door's open, Holt."

* * *

Holt stepped aside when the portal slid into the wall, allowing Gailen van Maar to precede him into the suite's riparian chamber. "Hello, Elan." The xenologist was beaming.

Grey came forward. "Gailen! I've looked forward to seeing you." He clasped the other's arm. Van Maar was carrying a bulky package. "What have you there?"

"A welcoming present." Gailen set the package on the slate coffeetable. "I had an orthosimile made of an ancient statuette unearthed out at the dig. Minor took a fancy to a stereograph of it while I was visiting the homeworld. I promised to have an sculpt made for her." He glanced about the chamber expectantly.

"Thoughtful of you, Gailen. She'll be out in a minute." Sensing that a wake-up libation seemed in order. "Say, would you like coffee, or should I mix us a drink?"

"I could choke down a snort," said Holt.

Elan went to the sideboard and took down glasses. He dropped in ice while talking over his shoulder. "How's the excavation coming along Gailen? You must have the whole city exposed by now."

"Uh, no; not exactly. It's a long, slow, painstaking job. We're almost finished with the first stratum."

"The first . . . ?" Elan showed sudden interest. "I take it there are more."

"More cities? Absolutely. To date, four other previously inhabited sites have been discovered. Two probably classify as cities, but none of the other are anywhere near the size of the one we're working at."

"Actually, I meant more strata. You say four additional habitation sites?"

"Rotten hummers lived all over the lump," said Holt. "Tell him about the power reactor one of the teams found down south, Gailen."

Van Maar accepted his drink. "One of our best analysts, Mikujima, is working site three in the southern hemisphere. About ten periods ago, his team opened the sealed vault of what might have been a fusion chamber of radical design. A nuclear physics team is down there now, studying it."

"You forgot to mention the snapper," prodded Morrow.

Gailen nodded. "The fuel, catalyst, or what have you, had degraded into an isotope of lead. The physicists claim time on the order of a million or more subjective cycles had to have passed for that to happen. The minimum time."

Elan's eyes narrowed. "That long?"

"What he said was at least that long," amended Holt. "The lead scientist down there talks about trying to refuel the rig once they figure it out how to do it, and maybe crank out power. What neither Gailen or any of his fellow diggers understand is why the long-gone hummers just walked away and abandoned the sites."

"You believe they were simply abandoned?" asked Elan.

"It's a common inference for everything discovered to date," informed van Maar. "The most prominent characteristic of each previously inhabited sites is that no evidence exists of warfare, natural catastrophe, fire, flood, plague, whatever. No rationale for abandonment has as come to light, and probably never will. What's really frustrating," he added, "is that our chief linguist has been unable to even begin deciphering the xenoapocrypha in —"

"Boil me alive!" exclaimed Holt. "They don't teach kids one-syllable words any more. He means hummer writing, Elan."

"Ancient Danite literature?"

"Apparently. At Site Two, discoveries have included an odd sort of microfilm partially turned into powder, and at another site sheet-metal scrolls and crumbled-to-dust paper books. As yet no one has found anything resembling a key, a Rosetta Stone, to decipher the material. And three or possibly four distinct species of Danii apparently once inhabited the planet, an inference that tends to be substantiated by vast dissimilarities in the scraps of written data. There is zero commonality between the separate alphabets, pictographs and scripts.

Holt's brow creased. Looking wary, he said, "That's a new wrinkle you hadn't mentioned till now, Gailen. I'd give a goodly sum to learn what the Danite old-timers had to say. There's a seller's market for answers in this crazy lump, and we can use every scrap of help we get."

"Gailen!" Minor peeked in from the hall and then dashed into the xenologist's arms almost before he could get to his feet.

"How *wonderful* to see you again!" Hugging van Maar, looking beyond him in mid-hug, she said, "What's that?" and pointed to the package resting on the slate coffetable.

Holt snickered. "Gently, lass; don't hurt him."

Gailen made as if to simultaneously disentangle himself and answer her question, and succeeded only in biting his tongue. "It's the, uh . . . I've been trying to break free and get into Sharax ever since I found out you and Elan had, uh . . . I brought you a present."

"For me?" Minor tore at the wrapping until a plastic box emerged, breaking a fingernail. "The black statue! You remembered."

"Hope it's big enough," he said. "The machine out at the dig isn't the best. It wouldn't sculpt a larger orthosimile."

"It's gorgeous!"

"Rotten hummers!" Holt scowled. "Wish I'd never laid eyes on the sneaky devils."

"How can you say that?" demanded Minor. "I think they're beautiful."

"You might think less of them, lass, if you'd watched your best friend get himself snatched right in front of your eyes. Period before last, a woman was brought in who said her mate walked over to the next house and never came back. The neighbor told the assassins he saw

a pellet gun flash off in the woods, but couldn't find anything there when he went and looked around."

"How many others have been taken?" asked Elan. "During the last standard week or two, I mean?"

"Zip," said Holt, "except for Roberts, and if he was a victim the gente I just mentioned. Since Pierce put out that no-dueling bull, whatever's going on beneath the surface either quit cold, or slacked off on its own. Don't doubt for a second it'd start up again if the ban was to be rescinded. Thinking of lifting it, Elan?"

"You credit me with too much, Holt. I deserve a chance to get fully acquainted with the situation before making any decisions. Besides, Ennis is still the interim director."

"Don't try and hooraw me, Elan," admonished Morrow. "Ennis is a real good man, and he does his job. But it's no secret that the Old One's behind your sudden appearance."

"Anything but a secret."

A brusque nod. "He's the voice of the Planners, and means to have his way with things, that's certain. He has to be mighty upset over whatever is hanging around this lump, stirring up trouble."

"Can you blame him?" said Minor. "The Star Council wants answers. Elan is here get them."

"A brave and loyal statement, lass. But a shaky theory." Holt measured Grey, his expression sober. "I truly hope he does the deed. Catch is, plenty of good men and true, including his pater, have tried and come up empty, or missing."

"There's been some progress," suggested Elan. "According to Ennis, we're beginning to know the Danii, know their language, their culture."

Morrow uttered a caustic grunt. "We're beginning to 'know' exactly as much as the skinny hummers want us to know. Period, end of story."

"But Gailen was discussing their writings a moment ago. If and when we learn to decipher them, it should be possible to infer their societal outlook, their philosophy, their teachings. We may be able to —"

"Or what those characteristics might have been," interjected Holt, "a million or more subjective cycles or more in the past." He took a long pull at his drink, set the glass down next to the black statuette and eyed the regal figures of the Danii with an air of intense skepticism. "I wonder if any of you understand how the blind men saw an elephant."

"A what . . . ?"

"Elephant. They've been extinct for centuries, but there are pictures, and the fable is older than the Holocaust. Six sightless scholars touch an elephant here and there and come up with a half-dozen different descriptions. One runs his hand over the animal's shoulder and tells the others it's barrel-shaped; another feels the trunk and says the creature is long and snake-like, et cetera. None of 'em can get a handle on the whole beast."

"And your point?"

"Missed that, did you?" Holt chewed his underlip. "Pierce saw the Danii as benevolent leftovers of an ancient society whose period in the sun ended an eternity ago. Roberts looked

past the hummers and figured these 'Higher Ones' the Danii keep yapping about were what we really had to deal with. That blithering idiot Garrigues sees the natives in the same way he sees everything he doesn't understand, as savage monsters we should stop worrying about and exterminate."

"And you, Holt? How do you see them?" asked Elan.

Morrow shrugged. "Sometimes one way, sometimes another."

"That's no answer."

"Best answer I can come up with," insisted Holt. "I'm not smart enough to unravel this craziness, nor am I ashamed to admit it."

Elan pursed his lips, looking perplexed. "The, er . . . Higher Ones . . . Ser Weldon ordered all data relating to Dan inputted to the new multigrator complex for analysis."

"Wouldn't you know it they'd do a data dump in some fancy computer. Figured as much; the scientific geniuses never tire of dreaming up smarter, fancier machines."

"Actually," said Grey, "it's called the multiphased universal integration complex. Anyhow, the collective output hinted that we may have contacted some strain of superior species, a super race capable of much, much more than we are able to understand. Do you believe that possible?"

"Sure, why not?" said Holt. "So is just about anything else you care to postulate."

Elan frowned. "I see your point, but —"

"Let me remind you of something," said Morrow. "That's not the way Roberts had it pegged. He got so familiar with the skinny hummers that he could palaver with 'em without using a transliterator. Came damn close, he did, to becoming a blasted hummer himself. Right up to the very last confab, he believed there was something supranormal about the 'Higher Ones'."

"That," said Elan, "sounds like pure fantasy."

Minor and van Maar had listened passively to the discussion. It was Minor who said tentatively, "Gods . . .?"

"Uh-uh, not necessarily." Holt smacked his lips. "Supranormal doesn't have to mean supernatural. But you're right, Elan; it does sound awfully screwy. Yet that was what Maran was beginning to believe, and I guess I fell in with his way of thinking."

"You? Come now, Holt," scoffed Elan.

"Don't 'come now' me, Sonny!" His feathers ruffled, Morrow's voice dropped into a lower register in saying, "I won't try and tell you it was my notion, only that what Maran believed was reasonable, possible, and even remotely likely. But tell me something if you're able, Elan. Where's the difference between your super race the fancy computer supposedly dreamed up, and Maran's 'godlike' Higher Ones?"

Elan hesitated. "The distinction's a nor easy to define, Holt. But no actual evidence of what you refer to as 'supranormal' beings has made itself felt in this —"

"Bah!" exclaimed Holt. He sauntered to the suite's glasswall and gestured dramatically at the night sky over Sharax. "Shouldn't bother to even argue that one. Look up there and tell me what you see."

"You tell us, Holt."

“Fair enough, I’ll do just that. Here we are, sitting on our duffs beaucoup parsecs from Old Terra, sipping booze and speculating about how damned learned we are. Catch is, we’ve come a single, short, unsteady step into the great dark out there that goes on and on for all practical purposes forever. What the hell do we know about who and what might, or might not be out there?”

One by one, Holt studied the troubled features of his associates. “Listen, friends. It’s never too soon to face up to the facts. Every manjack and hummer in this bee-yoo-ti-ful lump of mud is friendly, *everyone* — except maybe the local ‘gods’.”

* * *

“Nothing yet?”

“I fear not, ser Weldon.” The official hemmed and hawed. “If you wish to query Dan again in the morning, I will be happy to, er . . .”

The director gave in to a rare feeling of uncertainty. “That will not be necessary.”

“Possibly ser Grey has met with some form of. . . accident.”

Annoyed by the other’s circumlocution, Lovelock said archly, “Leave us!”

The executive performed a hurried bow of deference, scuttled across the terrace and disappeared inside a miniature, half-timbered chalet, leaving ser Weldon, irascible and moody under the weight of his centuries, to the solitude of a sunwashed Alpine afternoon.

He tapped a switch plaque, and the dais descended from sight. He guided the geriatric chair to the balustrade and gazed at the idyllic scene without actually seeing the long shoulder of the mountain stretching down to a picturesque village where cowbells tinkled faintly beside a small lake blue as the sky reflected in it.

Across the Alpine valley’s sharp, glacial cleft, Mont Blanc reared its angular summit into crystalline air high above the tumbled massif of the Alps. The illusion was pastoral, restful, but for some reason the director was more aware that it was a propagated holographic image than at other times.

He was also exhausted. A glance at the chronometer integral to the chair’s armrest told him it was after oh-three-thirty in the wee hours. The neverending list of scheduled appointments with supplicants, emissaries, favor-seekers had been long completed, but still rest was denied him, rest he so deserved and needed. He knew that if he returned to his private chambers and endured the painful rigors of being handled and put to bed, sleep would not come. Sleep had deserted him.

Was age at last beginning to exact its final, inevitable toll? He faced the hated question squarely, employing the same detached objectivity he would have exercised dealing with any of the myriad, complex problems that ceaselessly fell in his lap. Physically, he believed himself capable of sustaining existence for any number of cycles. Why not? Hadn’t he long since inured himself to the period-by-period treatment accorded a prized stock animal. Organ transplants, bone and tissue stem cell regenerations, while not exactly commonplace events, he had come to regard as routine bumps in the road.

No, the problem was psychic weakness, a mental and emotional malaise that crept over him more and more frequently of late, exacerbated by the enduring mystery surrounding this Planet Dan, an enigma he found doubly depressing because no hint of a cure had thus far made

itself known. Reposing in the geriatric chair, his chin characteristically propped by one skeletal hand, he contemplated the pastoral serenity of the Alps, seeing neither the inviting mountain panorama, nor feeling at all serene.

Something moved behind his chair, something that cast a tall, purple shadow over the balustrade.

“When we wish to be disturbed,” he said irritably, “we shall inform . . .” In the act of rotating the chair, he broke off in mid-sentence, transfixed by twin apparitions standing before him tall and somber, their backs to the low artificial sun.

“Who . . . are you?” he demanded, choking back a violent surge of fear.

The dark, slender figures regarded him with liquid, alien eyes.

“H-how did you get in here?” he faltered, vastly disconcerted by the silent appraisal. “How did you get past . . . ?” The director gasped. He blinked repeatedly, his knuckles whitened as he clutched the armrests of the geriatric chair that had been his prison for almost a century.

Then something probed his consciousness, something like a gentle, searching finger. “Stop!” Lovelock found the sensation utterly revolting.

We bid you greetings, O elder of this, your natural place of existence.

Lovelock’s reaction to the “voice” crackling in his mind was as if it burned. Placing both gnarled, withered hands over his temples he cried, “Stop it! What are you doing?” He fumbled to cover a glowing switch plaque to summon attendants. The amber switch glowed steadily, inactive. He punched it again more forcefully.

Be not perturbed, O elder. No harm will come of our visit. Your innate capacity for mental communication was sensed from afar. Communication will be facile if you simply relax.

Writhing in the confines of his geriatric chair, Lovelock wondered if he was dreaming. “Who are you?”

Know us as Joste and Tanis of the place known to your kind as Dan.

“Dan!”

Verily, O elder. We come before you carrying a message of some urgency.

The director listened to the pounding in his chest with analytical self-concern. He had not been subjected to anything in the nature of a physical threat for many cycles. Recovering a sliver of composure, determined to play for time, he said, “Dan is more than two hundred parsecs distant. Should you indeed be who you say you are, how did you come here?”

Our journey was undertaken at the behest of Higher Ones, O elder. They wish us to discover what can be learned your species and its natural place of existence.

“Higher . . . Ones.” Quickly toting the reports he had received, Lovelock concluded that should such beings employ the indigenes as factotums, the pair before him had to be Danii. Taller than neohumans, they were regal in bearing, with slender, sculpted physiques that for some reason created an impression of exoskeletal insects. Their most striking features were their ovoid, unfathomable eyes.

He had no way of determining which visitor had invaded his consciousness, and settled on the leftmost because of a halting gesture made while the unreasonable “voice” was beating in

his mind's ear. "What we actually wished to learn," he said, "was your method of travel in coming here. The Terran System is closed to all vessels lacking formal entry clearance."

Comprehension weakens, O elder. Interpreting your thought patterns as you form speech symbols taxes my poor abilities. Had your meaning to do with our agency of transport?

"It did indeed." Now a good deal more calm, ser Weldon began to appreciate the opportunity presented by the unheralded visitation. "We hoped to discover how your vessel slipped past the imperial defenses in general, and in particular how you managed to penetrate this guarded chamber."

Vessel? Ah, comprehension dawns, O elder. Our kind has outgrown the need to be served by mechanisms.

"Then how . . . ?" Lovelock blanched. "Are you implying that you came here from Dan by the use of mental power *alone*?"

A reasonable though basically inaccurate way to state our method of transit.

"Fantastic! We are either asleep in the midst of a nightmare, or shortly due to be locked up in a padded room."

A more complete explanation of our transit requires levels of complexity in which you have perhaps not been schooled. One hopes you will excuse the uncouth breach of manners, but your kind have reached neither the necessary stage of mental discipline, nor the vital capacity to assimilate the mathematics of similarity.

"Similarity . . . ?"

Just so, O elder. Transit between loci in a place of existence demands only semi-similar visualization — accuracy to perhaps eight or ten decimals. More lengthy journeys require a period of intense meditation and the employment of hyper-similarity equations to an accuracy of fifty or more decimals.

"We shall . . . not," the Old One said breathlessly, "pretend to understand. Suffice it to say that since you did come here by whatever means, it would be inhospitable not to bid you welcome. Will you seat yourselves, take refreshment?"

Your gracious invitation overwhelms one, O elder. Yet neither are appropriate to our needs. If this unaccustomed mental activity is overly tiring, you may rest whenever the need arises.

"No, no; that will not be necessary." Lovelock's enthusiasm waxed. "We have been taken with a severe headache, but . . . You mentioned urgency in regard to your mission."

An urgent necessity does exist, O elder, to resolve a matter of great concern to Higher Ones. A short while ago, as you reckon time's passage of time, a youngling of our kind — an apprentice guardian in full flower of early maturity — was destroyed by a member of your species. Higher Ones have grieved over the desolating loss.

"Terrible! We grieve with . . . Higher Ones over so unfortunate and regrettable. We shall issue immediate orders that extreme care be taken to ensure that such a tragedy will never again take place."

Action of that nature will be of inestimable value, O elder. Higher Ones may be persuaded to overlook the heinous transgression in light of the youth of your species, and your obvious good intentions. The event was assuredly an accident.

“We cannot imagine how it could possibly be otherwise. No, there is no doubt in my mind that it was accidental.” The Director made a mental note to query Elan Grey at once for details. “While we are on the subject, we should like to suggest that you Danii offer reciprocal assurance that neohumans will be accorded equivalent care and protection? Many of our citizens have been mysteriously snatched away ever since our kind first came to Dan.”

We whom you refer to as Danii? Unfortunately, we are powerless to grant such assurance, O elder. But harbor no misgivings for the safety of those of your kind. Higher Ones have taken them, and they abide in Their gentle care.

“Comforting,” remarked the Old One. “Yet why have certain neohumans been returned in a practically mindless state?”

Take no offense, O elder, but your query cannot be answered. The motives of Higher Ones are unknown and unknowable.

Ser Weldon frowned. “We strongly object to that, of course. We are not vegetables, but living, breathing, intelligent beings. These . . . Higher Ones; exactly who are they? Where do they dwell? What are they to you Danii?”

Although the Danii remained motionless silhouetted against the low, virtual sun, Lovelock received a distinct impression that the question startled them.

You presume far too much, O elder. You would be wise not to overreach yourself.

Lovelock shifted uneasily in the geriatric chair. The “voice” inside his head had spoken with different timbre. He intuited that the other, heretofore silent Danus, Joste, had been heard from, its mental “voice” laden with overtones of anger. “After all, it is only just to expect answers,” he said, wondering if that were true. “We have given our assurance, and therefore you must —”

Certain questions cannot be answered.

“By the Danii?”

By any save Higher Ones.

Lovelock gestured impatiently. Enough of the one called Joste and its riddles. The other, Tanis, if he had correctly gauged who was who, seemed to speak in his mind much more politely. He tried to direct the ensuing question in that direction. “How is one to ask these Higher Ones anything if their whereabouts remain unknown.”

Higher Ones are readily accessible, O elder. They stand ever prepared to assuage our anxieties, To guide our faltering steps. We will be happy to conduct you into their presence should you so desire.

Staggered by the suggestion, ser Weldon’s lips compressed in a thin line. “That might . . . prove interesting,” he said slowly. “However, we fear at present time is simply not available. We cannot break free for a long journey just now.”

The transit, as you reckon time, would require only milliseconds, O elder.

Lovelock gripped the armrests of his chair as if to stabilize himself. “You mean . . . Ah, yes; we see.”

This creature is unfit to be conducted into the presence of Higher Ones.

Lovelock knew the remark had come from Joste, and this time the peal of anger in the derogatory statement was unmistakable. Before he could think of a way to draw the other Danus back into mental conversation, Joste continued in the same acidulous vein.

Even as we sought to communicate, O elder, your subconscious was delved into and what was found there is most unpleasant — a sinkhole of phobias, repressions and monstrous crimes. Why do you so fear passing from this phase of existence? Higher Ones would disapprove of your artificially protracted stay in the present plenum.

Shocked speechless, ser Lovelock recoiled in the geriatric chair.

Your kind, continued the mental “voice,” evolved during a warming trend in the latter stages of an interglacial epoch in your natural place of existence. Your remote ancestors were savage and cruel, an entirely natural evolutionary consequence. Had they been otherwise, you yourself would not be here.

Yet the later, intrinsic direction of your kind was toward rationality, toward uplifting one’s fellow entities toward higher plateaus, toward growing together toward new heights. It is apparent that Higher Ones have passed among you on occasion. Why have you failed to heed their teachings?

Lovelock was not only speechless, but stunned.

What novices such as the poor creatures now before you can visualize is truly appalling. You have risen from this —

The Alpine vista faded, The director sucked in a deep breath of panic as a nebulous scene slowly congealed and replaced it. Long grass rippled in a stiff breeze. From somewhere close by came the burble of a swiftly running stream. A squat, powerful figure parted the grass and peered out, its wary pig eyes surmounted by tufted brow ridges. Shambling on all fours, it stood semi-erect, hairy and filthy, almost but no quite a human being.

— to this —

The roar of a huge crowd beat down in waves on sand covering the floor of the arena gave off thermal haze where dozens of sweating swordsmen wearing peculiar, shovel-shaped helmets vied in a deadly dance to avoid the passes of their graceful opponents, *retiarii* equipped with fishermens’ nets and long-handled tridents. A weighted net was cast, entangling a sword-wielding gladiator about the knees and felling him. Before he could begin to rise, the trident was at his throat, and a sandaled foot pinned his swordarm. The *retiarius* waited for some unseen signal, then brought his weight down solidly on the trident.

The crowd noise grew to unbearable proportions.

— to this —

The arena vanished. Trembling uncontrollably, Lovelock’s vision gradually adjusted to the sudden darkness. Dimly visible against the starshot velvet of space, the limb of Terra shouldered into view. Most of North America slumbered in cloudless night, with the terminator running across the mid-Atlantic signifying an eastern seaboard dawn still hours in the future. The

night was abruptly shattered as multiple brilliants winked into being across the unlighted continent.

Ser Weldon's throat constricted upon perceiving the reality of the vision portraying something legendary, something almost none had survived — the Holocaust.

The decimated planet faded, and was gone, once again replaced by the peaceful vista of the Alps. The director of the troubled planet found himself white and shaken, his emotions roiling.

What has been exposed is deeply saddening, O elder. The parting thought from Tanis was totally lacking in sympathy.

Lovelock's lips worked, but no sound came forth.

We shall be gone from this cesspit. These pitiful creatures have not only raped and looted their natural place of existence, but have desecrated themselves in so doing. There is little to be gained from examining spoiled clay. We bid you farewell, O elder.

His eyes glazed, trembling in every limb, ser Weldon Lovelock was too enwrapped in his own emotional maelstrom to notice his visitors disappear.

Joste and Tanis materialized simultaneously with a sleek gray egg of force two astronomical units beyond much of Sol's gravitational influence.

Precipitate action-decision, thought Juste, should occur almost immediately.

Aye, replied Tanis. Gratitude is owed for stealing away to aid in this venture, O Joste. Your timing and manner were letter-perfect. The elder was greatly moved in the seat of his emotions as well as the seat of his intellect.

Gratitude is unnecessary, O Tanis. A somewhat difficult assignment withal, yet potentially rewarding. Was the elder sufficiently angered?

The reply tinged with dark humor, Tanis thought, *Aye, if only for the moment. We left behind a pitiful, frightened creature. An interesting species all in all. One senses toughness, an obdurate fiber within the elder that is, and will be, enduring and unquenchable. It should make for facile predictability.*

Force . . ?

Beyond doubt, force. What else might be possible?

Then all is well. One wearies of these endeavors.

Indeed. We should depart. Will you address them, O Tanis?

Aye. Tanis wrung its mind free of the distracting residue of the interview. A concentrated cone of psychic energy formed within his second forebrain and he projected a strenuous plea. *O our peers, we humbly beseech your aid in journeying hence.*

Art thy labors then concluded?

They are ended for the nonce, O our peers.

Then it is well. Thou shalt come with alacrity.

The gray egg of force vanished. Circum-solar space again reverted to featureless, radiation-shot vacuum.

* * *

The director deferred all appointments during the succeeding two periods. Isolating himself in his featureless sanctum, he barred sycophants, lobbyists, lifelong friends and all other petitioners, insulting the physicians who came to inquire after his well-being.

Toward evening of the second period ser Weldon ordered all holodiscs of the Alpine scene destroyed.

Had it been a dream, a nightmare as he had suspicioned? He was no longer sure the visitation had been real. While vivid, outwardly convincing and authentic, not a single shred of evidence tending to substantiate the outré visitation — nothing, zero, not one iota, other than the blinding headache only now waning. He had played back the recorded holographic sequences, and been shocked to learn only *his* words were to be heard, and only his actions depicted, forcing him to reconstruct in his mind the crisp thoughts that had filled the gaps between his own statements and questions.

Thoroughly enraged, he had ordered the erasure of every one of the holodiscs.

Was it some tremendous, monumental bluff? It was this likelihood that gave him serious pause. Pondering the possibility hour after hour, he had taken neither food nor drink, knowing he couldn't hope to rest until the question had been resolved to his total satisfaction.

The third period of withdrawal brought representatives to the Director's antechamber from various select committees within the Star Council and Congress of Man. Without furnishing any sort of explanation, he sloughed off or drove away individuals requesting answers for his fellow Planners. After all, what explanation would have been believed?

What had been the *true* purpose of the purported Danii who arrived and departed like shadows, wraiths tangible only to he himself, and invisible to the all-seeing triple lenses of redundant holographic recorders operating continuously within the sanctum. Had it been their desire to overtax him with their absurd display of illusory tricks? The longer he contemplated this question, the more he became convinced that the entire macabre incident had been a magnificent hoax to which he, and through him, all neohumanity might gullibly fall victim. The concept frightened ser Weldon as he had never been frightened at any time during his hyperextended existence.

What had they actually wanted of him? How did they expect him to react? Did they imagine for one instant that he would pull back from Planet Dan in panic? No, that hardly seemed likely. Or did it . . . ?

He was forced to admit their performance had been good theater,. Modern technology made it possible to offer any number of ways in which their unheralded, unsung visit could have been accomplished. Although accomplishing the feat struck him as unlikely, a very high degree of resolve, meticulous planning and care could have seen a small vehicle slip through the circumambient defensive force shield interdicting strategic portions of solar space. A sufficient amount of credit stuffed into the right, wrong pockets could also have gotten them into the sanctum.

But, telepathy . . . ?

Yes, he would have to grant the Danii telepathic powers. The "voices" speaking in his mind had been inarguably real, and he was thoroughly convinced that so long as his fragile organism survived he would remain in sane command and control of his own thought processes.

On the morning of the fourth period of solitude ser Weldon Lovelock sat immobile in the geriatric chair, foundering in an uncharacteristic morass of indecision, a condition angering him immensely. Indecision irritated him at the best of times. Now it infuriated him beyond measure.

He spent the rest of the period thinking of Imperium Terrestriana, the globular bubble within the galaxy almost five hundred parsecs in diameter filled to the bursting point with burgeoning, long-lived neohumanity. The words of the wise ones who had schooled him in sustaining and furthering the empire flooded into his mind, for he had built well during the century and more since the scepter had passed into his hands. They were words of pride, words of moral fiber and sustenance, words to be wrought in imperishable metal throughout the ages:

Ecce homo Triumphalis . . !

He thought of the great ones he'd known personally, recalled their triumphs, strengths and occasional failures. He mentally toted the elements of the Imperial Space Forces capable of delivering unthinkable teratonnes of destruction anywhere within the galaxy's nearer reaches. He thought with no little rancor of the tiny, insignificant mote a super-computer had witlessly chosen to call Dan. He thought of the planet's mysterious indigenes who had impertinently and insultingly questioned the majesty and might of Terra and her children.

On the morning of the fifth period a great calm descended over the director. His mind once again at ease, he activated the cyborg and ordered breakfast in glowing tones. Upon finishing the skimpy repast, even before the autoattendant had removed the cutlery and dishes, he dictated a transmittal addressed to ser Elan Grey ordering his surrogate to put an end to the ongoing romantic charade in Dan once and for all time to come.

XIV

*Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
The proper study of mankind is Man.*

Alexander Pope, antebellum British poet
of the so-called Rational Era, circa 1714 CE

Communications Chief Petty Officer Garvey Sance loved sleeping under microgravity. Drifting untethered about his cubicle aboard *Relentless*, he dreamed of a girl he had once known, a lass with shining auburn hair and a way of smiling that couldn't help but please a man. Sance invariably slept better in freefall than groundside under weight. He was doing very well at it until Weapons Systems CPO Sugimoto commanded the hatch open, bulleted into the cubicle and snapped on the light. His shout woke Sance rudely.

"Up and at 'em, Garvey! Rise 'n shine chop-chop!"

Sance yawned and mumbled, "'Smatter, Sugi? You lost? Got t'get my sleep out."

"A transmittal just sizzled in — white hot, so the Pirate tells me. Better hop it! He's been awful touchy ever since the ground-pounders let him and the XO out of the brig. He's yelling for you loud 'n clearly pissed-off. Be smart to get over to the crypto cubicle on the double."

Sance yawned again, cursed and scratched his bare abdomen. "A redhot, huh? Just what I needed. I bet the Pirate fixed it so's he could wake me up. He loves to to that, y'know? Where's he?"

"In the "A" deck wardroom abaft the crypto booth. Best hear what I'm saying, shipmate. He and the XO aren't exactly putting on a show of patience."

Sance reached out lazily, shoved off against the bulkhead and drifted across the compartment, where he casually checked his momentum and selected a clean, neatly folded jumpsuit. "Do me a favor, Sugi?"

"Name it."

"Have a messman bring coffee to the crypto booth. I sure as hell can't decipher anything without coffee."

"Consider it done."

Sance slicked down what was left of his reddish-gray hair, dabbed a meager amount of water around his eyes, dried his face, and groaned. Leaving his quarters, he hooked a belt ring to the aft-going freefall safety line per regulations and pulled himself along the companionway.

The "A" deck wardroom crawled with officers. Garvey presented himself and saluted Commodore Garrigues, wished he had spent more time on his appearance. He received a curt, "Decode this. Be quick about it."

"Aye, aye, sir." Sance carried the sealed packet across the conning deck. In the cryptography booth, he locked the hatch behind him per security regulations, belted himself in place and opened the packet's tear strip. He had to open the hatch again. Chief Sugimoto, as good as his word, had dispatched a messman who handed in a squeezetube of hot black coffee. Garvey mumbled his thanks, locked himself in again and went to work.

After decoding the first paragraph, between times sucking down coffee, a film of perspiration broke out on his forehead. He forgot about the coffee and finished decoding.

Grimly and nervously, his hands palpitating slightly, he had difficulty stuffing the hyper-secret decoded flimsy into an opaque envelope and sealing it. "Be hell t'pay over this!" he muttered, and used a tissue to mop the perspiration from his brow and swab under his chin. Hurrying to the wardroom, he delivered the envelope to Garrigues, not forgetting to salute.

The commodore dismissed him with a brusque, "Carry on, Chief. I want you standing by around the clock, understood?"

"Aye, aye, Commodore." But his interrupted sack time had diminished drastically in importance. Sance did not return to his cubicle. Instead, he drifted outboard to the starship's communications center on the conning deck abaft the bridge, where a lone, bored rating was standing watch.

"Go catch a smoke, Harmon," he told the sailor. "Got to make a private call."

"Sure thing, Chief, if you've got secrets."

"Don't get nosey. Want to call my girl, is all."

The sailor snickered. "Back in ten minutes."

Sance waited impatiently until the sailor was out of sight, and punched the code of Morrow's suite in Sharax. He was so nervous that he screwed up the first attempt, had to cancel and

start over. The vidicom buzzed four times at the other end before Holt's grizzled features condensed in the tank.

"It's me, Holt."

"Garvey, ole crock! Where you been keeping yourself? You promised to come down and have a drink with —"

"No time for chatter," interrupted Sance. "Listen, Holt, and listen good. A hypersecret sizzler just popped in from the Old Man. Bad, bad news!

Morrow's pleased expression sloughed away. "I hear you, Garvey. But you're on an unguarded channel, talking in the clear, so —"

"No choice; got to take the chance. The redhot tells the brain trust down there a third task force and it's converging on Dan. Ten brigades of Imperial Marines're due to arrive dirtside right soon, along with a complement of heavy weapons — armor, energy stuff, the works."

"*Ten brigades!*"

"Yeah, along with incoming task force are enough cold-sleep transports to evacuate a part half the population, or more. Looks like the blowoff's coming 'cause those ships aren't that far off. Once they thaw out the marines, the fireworks'll start."

Morrow looked drawn, even scared. He said nothing for several seconds. "Doesn't sound good," he managed at last. "What primary objectives?"

"The redhot didn't say zip about objectives. But there's something else in there I plain don't savvy. It says the Pirate's to take orders only from ser Grey. I thought your friend got himself lifted a while back."

"He did. That'd be the director's pup, Elan Grey, not his pater. The Old Man sent Grey out here to . . . Hey, reverse thrust, Garvey. You're not calling from *orbit*."

"Yep, aboard *Relentless*."

Holt swore. "Sign off now, now, now! There's damn small doubt the transmission's being monitored."

"Not this one," Sance told him. "Figure to scrub the record soon's we're finished. But you're right, Holt. I better get off, quit while I'm ahead before someone catches me."

"Thanks, Garvey. The ball's in my court," assured Holt. "We'll get together next time you come groundside."

"Luck, shipmate."

"Uh-huh, sounds like we'll need *all* the luck we can get."

* * *

Holt was dressed and out the portal in minutes. Using the privacy of the lift compartment to check the energy potential in his Casches pistol, he seated the charge firmly, screwed home the arming pin and slid the ugly weapon back into the scabby thigh holster beneath his kilt.

The lift doors slid apart. Seething with pent nervous energy, he emerged in the hallway across from Grey's suite and inquired of the sensor, "Got a minute, Elan?"

There was no response, but the portal slid silently into the wall. Hustling through the atrium, he found the riparian chamber deserted.

"Out here," called Minor from the terrace.

It was lovely outdoors, the sky cloudless. A soft summer sunrise bathed the Directorial Seat in rust-colored morning light, painting the splashes of color dotting dewy green flowering shrubs in the terrace garden. Seated at a crystal table littered with breakfast debris, Elan look up and nodded a silent greeting. Minor, clad in the flowing white chiton she's slept in, was seated across from Grey, an uncertain light in her eyes.

Preoccupied with Sance's panic call, Holt said abruptly, "So it's true."

Elan refused to meet his gaze. "What is . . . ?"

"No flim-flam, Elan. Trying to con a genuine confidence man's a null program."

"Sit down," invited Grey in a monotone. "I'm glad you're here."

"Sort of glad, myself. Want to tell me about it straightaway?"

Elan pushed back his chair, rose and went to the balustrade. Minor joined him there. Together they gazed down the concourse toward the distant Lovelock Foundation tower. Without turning his head, Grey said, "Transmittal's there on the table, Holt. Read it."

Morrow scooped up the flimsy sheet and went through it hastily. No trace of emotion clouded his craggy features when he finished, wadded the transmittal into a tight ball and dropped it in a half-filled demitasse. "Mean to go through with it, do you?"

"Go through . . ." Elan turned around, looking surprised. "Have I a choice?"

"There's always a choice. How long you had that message?"

"An hour, maybe a bit less . . ." Grey's eyes narrowed. "How did you learn of it? You *did* know about it."

"Got my own spies," said Holt in a gentler tone of voice. "Sit down, Elan. We have to talk things out before the pressure builds up to where none of us can think straight." With a crook'd finger he summoned Minor. "You too, lass."

Silent and apprehensive, she sank into a chair.

Morrow withdrew a packet of black cigarettes from the slash pocket of his tunic, extracted one and waved it alight. He drew pungent smoke deep into his lungs, slowly exhaled. "Let's start by arguing the premise that Lovelock's decision is a colossal error in judgment."

Grey's nodded affirmatively. "It originated the Planners, not —"

"You don't expect me to buy that fairy tale. We both know who runs the show."

Elan blinked, conceding the point.

"Morals, ethics, all that high-sounding balderdash aside," said Holt, "what the Old One ordered you to do is wrong strategically, wrong tactically, dead wrong where *practicality* is concerned, and in other ways. Lovelock is psychotically single-minded; whatever he can't understand he *knows* must be destroyed, and the happenings hereabouts are sure as hell inexplicable. What I have to do is convince you to fight for time, Elan. The clock's tick-tocking, and *it* is the enemy, not the Planners or other self-important policy wonks parsecs away in the homeworld."

"Holt, I know you mean well, but I —"

"Not sure you do," declared Holt firmly. "Way I see it, Roberts and Pierce have to be the keys. Neither got himself lifted in the same way as the buckoes who whiffed right after besting someone. Wherever the hell Pierce and Maran are now, it's up to us to give them a decent chance to come an understanding with the skinny hummers and, uh . . . Higher Ones, should such exist."

But if you should knuckle under and let ten brigades of Imperial Marines stomp around dirtside keep order during the evacuation, an hour after this lump's been scraped clean of however many denizens the ships ferrying them to Carthia can carry, Dan will be razed from polar ice to polar ice. Yet even that wild and crazy notion is less scary than the alternative."

"What alternative?" asked Minor.

Holt smacked his lips. "Elan, if you decide to issue a 'weapons free' instruction to Garrigues and the other starcruiser commands per Lovelock's orders, I strongly suspect *we* might be the ones to get wiped out, not the Danii."

"Holt, that is so farfetched that I can't begin to —"

"Farfetched!" exclaimed Morrow, slamming the flat of his hand on the table. "Uh-uh, no way is it farfetched. Think, Elan! We're up to our necks — over our heads would be more like it — mired in the deepest, darkest, enigma that ever was or maybe ever will be. We've been goosing ghosts ever since not-so-long-ago when I first put down a footprint in this pretty lump. What if the 'opposition,' assuming that term's appropriate, no matter whether made up of the hummers, Higher Ones, a coalition or whatever, is bigger, tougher, smarter and stronger than all the major bases, starcruisers and weapons in the imperial arsenal? Guess wrong, and we've got loser written all over us. You *have* to make up your mind to stall Lovelock. There's no other way to handle this, dammit! I grant you it won't be easy, but you have to at least try. We've got to sweat this thing out a while longer. *Got* to!"

Downcast, Elan said earnestly, "Face the facts, conjecture is useless. Pierce and Roberts are . . . gone. If by some miracle they do return — are returned — chances are they will be like the others. helpless and ruined, empty shells."

"I don't believe that for one second."

"Why not? Where's the difference,?" demanded Elan.

"The difference is that I know Roberts inside and out, top to bottom and side to side. Maran's too stable, too balanced and sure of his own sanity to let himself be driven around the bend by anything, or anyone. In large measure so is Pierce, for that matter. All I'm begging for you to do is put off the Old One as long as possible. Give Roberts and Pierce enough rope, and they're liable to solve this puzzle, settle this craziness once and for all, and maybe learn something valuable to boot."

"I really wish I could believe you, Holt."

"You'd sure as hell better try!"

Elan flushed. "Don't you think I'm trying?"

Subsiding, Morrow said, "Sure, sure. 'Course you are." Squashing out the cigarette in frustration, he immediately waved another alight.

"Holt," said Minor, self-conscious about interjecting anything into the conversation, "there's something you may not know about."

"What would that be, lass?"

"Tell him about the other transmittal, Elan."

As if reluctant to do so, Grey asked for one of Morrow's cigarettes and waved it alight. "Coded Your Eyes Only, a privileged communiqué marked with ser Weldon's personal seal came shortly after the formal instruction. I destroyed it after Minor and I read it."

"And . . . ?"

"It was . . . strange. So much so that I . . . Ser Weldon said he'd had . . . visitors."

"He said what?"

"He announced that a pair of Danii had appeared from nowhere in his sanctum, inside the Directorial Seat. He wrote that they had complained about the death of a Danus, and wanted me to investigate. Catch is, he forgot to mention how, what and where to investigate."

"His transmittal said hummers were in *Terra*?"

"Roughly a subjective week before he dispatched the communiqué."

"A week, *one* week . . . ? No way would that be possible!"

"I was aware of that." Elan lifted his hands helplessly. "Minor and I were discussing it when you came. We think . . . Well, considering his age, the pressure he's been under for so long . . . He could have imagined the whole senseless thing. No one else saw them, heard them or knew about the visit, just ser Weldon. Multiple audiovisual recorders run continuously in his sanctum; he admitted that they showed absolutely nothing other than he himself, talking to and reacting to unseen events in an otherwise deserted sanctum."

Holt said angrily, "No, that scenario won't wash, Elan. He'll never be guilty of picking shadows off the wall, not now, not ever. If he says the hummers were there, they *were*, count on it . . ." He broke off, looking sorry he had not kept the opinion to himself. "Okay, we can't dismiss the possibility that the Old One's wandered into cuckoo land. If he has, so much the better. It's all the more reason to stand pat and sweat out this mess."

"How do we manage that?" asked Grey. "What can I do? What can *anyone* do?"

"You can use the rationale," advised Morrow without hesitation, "hatched by Maran and Ennis. They put their heads together and cashed in on the king-sized stall I started by putting the commodore and his XO on ice. It's a rationale we have more reason to carry through now than then. Sit on the directive as long as possible — I'm certain Ladeen will back you one thousand percent — and with the situation here totally unique we'll have a shot at getting Pierce or Maran back. You're the official surrogate of the Planners, and Ennis is the official interim director. Join forces, and the pair of you can have your say around these parts for a while."

"I only wish it were that simple, Holt."

"Come right down to it, face those facts you're so proud of, and it *is* that simple."

"Think about what you're asking us to do, should Ennis agree. What can a stall accomplish? Lovelock won't sit on his hands, believe me. He'll countermand whatever we do, or fail to do, depose me and Ennis, and have his wishes carried out over our bones."

"*Time*, Elan," insisted Morrow. "Even a brief stall will buy us a stretch of hours or periods — a subjective week, maybe even two. Order Garrigues and the incoming herd of Imperial Marines to hold fast on-orbit for a week or more, and we might come up roses."

A solemn negative headshake. "It would be futile, Holt. The task force is inbound from two sectors as we speak, and Garrigues has been designated the supreme commander. He was copied on the transmittal, remember?"

"No matter!" Morrow swore luridly, contemptuously. "An entire bleeding imperial task force! Tell me, if you can, what the hell can Lovelock order it to be used against after the evacuation? Name me a single indigenous nuclear objective in this whole crazy lump of mud. Go on, Elan. Spell it out!"

A barely perceptible frown creased Elan's forehead. "There are none."

"Not one, unless of course you count *our* cities, villages, homes, reservoirs, bridges, et cetera, et al. Did you include Sharax and Euphalia in the overall tote?"

"Holt, what are you saying?" demanded Minor.

"Stating a basic, straightforward truth, lass."

"That hypothesis," began Elan, "is the most outrageous —"

"What the hell do you want me to do, draw diagrams?" Deeply incensed, Morrow said, "Dump whatever this, that or the other hypothesis routine you're mindful of, Elan. Get rid of them and look the facts you're so in love with straight in the eye. You're not a naive jonny in any way. Look at the layout we're facing, the bleeding. *All* of it.

"We've been totally stonkered here in Dan," pursued Morrow. "Haven't gotten our butts halfway off square one. Now the Old Man tells us, not in so many words, I admit, that the Danii are to be exterminated as a menace to imperial growth, health, wealth and well-being. Before you can shake a stick, ten brigades of Imperial Marines are to be shuttled groundside, and once here there'll be no stopping the evacuation. Now I ask you as a trusted, honored friend, the son of someone I hold in esteem above most others, can we exterminate the Danii with ground-pounders? The notion's purely ridiculous; it'd be like trying to catch water in a sieve.

"Then in your next breath," raged Holt, "you blithely accept the 'fact' that a task force is in transit — a gaggle of ISF starcruisers and heavy weapons ships with enough on-board nukes to crack open this crazy lump of mud like a ripe orange."

Elan paled. "You don't really think —"

"Think, hell no I don't think, I *know*!" bellowed Holt. "The marines will set up martial law and keep order while evacuating many but not every single one of the poor, well-meaning lads, lasses and kiddies who came here looking for something better than they had back home, and along with them will be a smattering of sword waving, blue-blooded lice the Planners shoved down our throats. Then will come the blowoff, just as my private spy predicted. *Sha-boom!*"

I suppose it might . . . be like that," faltered Elan. "But until we're sure —"

"And how do you figure to stop it once you're sure?" Morrow groaned. "By the time we're sure, it'll be all over," he insisted. "The Old Man's a poker genius like none other, and *knows* wiping this pretty lump clean is a win-win holding aces, no bluff required. Once he realized for certain that the hand dealt out here in Dan is a loser, he decided to toss in his cards. WhyQ Because he knows damn well he can get back on the game's winning side by playing blotto with Dan."

Elan rose and began slowly pacing the terrace, head lowered, deep in thought. Holt and Minor watched him in silence. Morrow reached for yet another black cigarette and waved it alight.

"I almost believe you, Holt," said Grey.

"Good to hear. Almost is better than not at all."

"I'd like to do as you suggest, but —"

"Don't like the sound of that. Better think some more."

"I . . . I'm on the hook."

"We are *all* on the hook," insisted Morrow. "Every manjack in this lump is on the hook."

"I realize that, but I'm caught between the proverbial rock and a hard spot."

Holt studied the other narrowly. "Elan," he said in a more modulated tone of voice, "you surprised me showing up out here like you did. I had you pegged as a spoiled brat, the most selfish, ill-mannered pup in the kennel. But you're Pierce's pup, of his blood, and I guess blood will tell. You remind me of him now."

Grey's pacing continued. "Kind of you to say so."

"Kindness had not one goddamn thing to do with it," said Morrow. "You and I and all the rest of us are tangled in the nastiest kind of whipsaw there ever was. It's called conscience versus responsibility. A damned shame is what it is."

With a precise, economical motion, Morrow reached under his kilt and drew the Casches pistol.

Elan sensed the threat even before Minor gasped, and cried, "Holt, what are you doing?"

"What has to be done, lass." Morrow's voice could hardly be heard. "I don't like it any more than you do. 'Fraid it's your turn to vanish, Elan."

"No!" cried Minor.

"Get inside the suite, lass. Be quick!"

Minor knocked over a chair dashing into Elan's arms. Over her shoulder, Grey stared with disbelief into the emission bell of the Casches pistol. "You can't mean it, Holt."

"Too much is on the line for a lack of intent," said Morrow. "I've watched you making up your mind these last few minutes. Sorry, but the Old Man chose better than he knew. You own a built-in responsibility quotient no amount of argument is about to sway. Like I said, I'm really sorry that integrity can't be allowed to rule the roost in the here and now. I can't let you carry out the decision I know you've made, so it falls on me to buy us the extra time we've been talking about. Better tell the lass to stand aside now. I don't want her to get hurt."

Elan flinched at the flat, unseeing glaze in Morrow's eyes and tried to disentangle himself from Minor. But she clung to him fiercely, sobbing hysterically. "Give me a minute," he pleaded.

"Just one. Unless you want the lass fried, clip her and push her out of the —"

A strangling sound escaped from Morrow's throat. He fell to his knees, arms working as if struggling with something invisible.

His fist had closed on nothingness. The Casches pistol was no longer in his hand

The older man, kneeling, and the much younger man holding the sobbing woman in his arms suddenly lacked the power of speech or movement. The threesome, frozen en tableau, had

no way to react to the voice speaking in their minds with sonorous resonance and measureless patience in a cadence that was like the solemn tolling of a great bell.

Thy frightfulness goeth on apace. Wilt thou never learn to appreciate the abysmal, self-destructive nature of eradicating living intelligences as if they were inanimate? Thou hast suffered examination and been found wanting. Thou'rt mischievous, paradoxical creatures, despoilers of thine own kind yet endowed with certain gifts, but singularly immature and unreasoning if the 'now' of thy development is weighed in the balance.

Knowest thou this, know once and for all time to come that introspection is the single righteous path, the path of sanity trod by any species gifted with the attribute of superior reasoning ability. Knowing not thyself, be forewarned that knowing no others means thou shalt eventually perish.

Thou hast erred egregiously, and shall therefore be gone from this peaceful place of existence ere it revolves many more times.

We sorrow for thee.

* * *

Minutes passed in a stillness ruptured only by the morning breeze rustling leaves in the terrace garden. Morrow had collapsed face-down, rolled sideways and was sitting on the tiles, legs spraddled outward, eyes closed, expressionless. Regaining the ability to move of their own volition, Elan and Minor had sagged into chairs at the breakfast table. No one said anything for quite some time.

"The . . . Danii," ventured Minor, "want to get be of us."

Holt roused from lethargy, slowly clambered to his feet and brushed himself off. "Wrong, lass. The hummers had no part in that ultimatum."

Elan said, "Ser Weldon mentioned the possibility of encountering a super-race."

"So did the hummers," said Morrow. "Not once, a number of times. Higher Ones was the transliterated term Maran liked. We haven't a clue about whether they're members of some-super race, or . . ."

"Or what?"

"Never mind. Spelling it out would make it sound like nonsense. Whoever and whatever they are, sounds like they're pretty damned generous. We're fortunate the population's still relatively small."

"What do you mean?"

"If you heard what I . . . well, heard, we have only a few spins of this dizzy lump to clear out completely. It'll never happen. Ordering over two and a quarter-million people to gather imperishables, necessities, maybe a few belongings and evacuate in a few periods is . . . It won't be tough, it just can't be done, period."

A male voice spoke from portal. "Ser Grey, have you a minute if it's convenient?"

Elan cleared his throat, invited them to enter.

Commodore Garrigues preceded interim Director Ennis Ladeen into the suite. Spotting the group outside, he eyed Morrow warily when he appeared on the terrace. Ladeen nodded a

greeting and without preamble inquired what arrangements Elan intended to make in preparation for the arrival of the Imperial Marines, and secondarily the subsequent evacuation.

Grey did not seem to be listening. It was Morrow who filled them in on what had taken place. "Arrangements may not be needed, Ennis. We've been politely asked to leave the premises. We're being evicted."

"You're spouting nonsense!" said Garrigues.

"Maybe I am, Commodore. I'm no longer sure whether I'm afoot or on horseback, but that's what we were told. We have to clear out in a few spins of this pretty lump."

"Ridiculous!" said Garrigues.

Ladeen coughed apologetically, as if embarrassed. "Holt, what is this?"

"I'm giving you the straight skinny, Ennis."

"It's true," said Elan.

"It's unreasonable," said Ladeen, "to expect even a partial evacuation that quickly. Having battalions of Imperial Marines stationed here and there underfoot will only compound an already untenable situation."

"Don't I know it," said Holt impatiently. "But that's what it said — a voice talking right inside our heads. If you don't believe me, ask Grey and the lass."

Elan nodded. "We couldn't move, or speak, Ennis. I was holding Minor close when it happened . . . when the voice began. It still scares me."

"I was petrified," said Minor."

"I'll second both of those accounts," said Holt.

"Ser Grey, would you mind," said Garrigues, "explaining what it is you're all talking about. I still don't understand the circumstances. You say the three of you were out here on the terrace, quietly discussing what is in store, when this voice —"

"There was a shade more to it than that," interrupted Holt. Ignoring Grey's warning glance, he said, "It's okay; they have to be told. I was fixing to incinerate Grey when the weapon went *whoo-o-off!* right out of my hand."

Ladeen's eyes narrowed. "You meant to *kill* ser Grey?"

"That's about the size of it," admitted Morrow. "Under the circumstances, I would've done the same to you, Roberts or any of my children. I expect Elan is beginning to realize why I thought it needed doing."

Elan stared at Holt, a peculiar light in his eyes. "I didn't at the time," he said, "but after what happened . . . Discussing telepathy and experiencing it are decidedly different. From what little I've learned about the Danii it's impossible to imagine them capable of —"

"Whups, reverse thrust," declared Holt. "As I told the lass a moment ago, that performance had no smell of the Danii about it. I'm certain of that."

After a short, weighted silence, Elan said, "Higher Ones . . .?"

"Best guess, yeah. Now it really begins getting scary. They've watched and listened until they got sick and tired of our stupidity. Now they're fixing to dump us on the scrap heap. Better if we face up to it."

Minor shuddered. "The only thing I'll face up to is *leaving* this awful place."

Commodore Garrigues grimaced uncomfortably. "Good gentles, I fear you've lost me. These Higher Ones you mention, exactly who are they?"

"Only wish we knew," said Holt, and turned to Grey. "Our marching orders call for get shut of this lump ASAP, but working every available shuttle around the clock, with or without Imperial Marines herding everyone aboard, won't make a sizeable dent in carting away the number of citizens at hand, not even if we persuade them to do nothing but pick up their feet and climb aboard."

Elan did not respond.

Ennis Ladeen looked stricken. "Announcing an evacuation now, with the mood of the populace as it is, would create the sort of panic that . . . It would be chaos."

"Check," said Morrow. "Panic we can do without. Catch is, what *can* we do?"

No one spoke. The silence dragged for seconds until Elan said, "All we can do is wait. I refuse to believe the ultimatum was rendered seriously. It's unrealistic to ask us to evacuate the entire planet in several periods. Yet if we fail to meet the deadline . . ." He let the thought dangle.

Morrow checked his wrist chronometer. "An hour of it's already gone."

Garrigues spoke up, his manner confused. "Ser Grey, I believe it best for you to communicate with the Planners on this issue. This latest, er . . . situation simply must be explained with care."

"I plan to draft a transmittal shortly, Commodore."

"When you do," advised Morrow, "it'd be smart to soft pedal the details of what the Commodore called 'the 'situation.' After what came down here this morning, we don't actually know much more than we did last night. I was you, Elan, I'd let the Old Man down easy, especially after hearing about the, uh, you-know-who visitors he said he had were in Terra."

"A point worth well considering, Holt."

Minor leaned her head on Elan's shoulder.

A torrent of frustrated profanity erupted from Morrow. "Meantime," he said, "all we can do is swap sob stories and wait for the bogeyman." Withdrawing a black cigarette, he waved it alight with a defiant gesture. "Alright, you bastards, do your worst! But by the sacred Convention let's get this show on the road whether it leads to perdition or paradise."

* * *

Ser Weldon Lovelock's virtual sanctum depicted the high north rim of the Grand Canyon lightly drifted with snow. The cyborg broke off a recital of economic statistics in order to notify the director, per a standing instruction, that a communiqué from Dan had registered electronically. The Director told his man-machine executive assistant not to bother with a printout. "Read it to us," was his crisp instruction.

Listening dispassionately to the brief message, Lovelock frowned darkly. "Once more, please, slowly."

Thoroughly infuriated, ser Weldon pondered for time before dictating a reply. "For Your Eyes Only dispatch to E. Gray," he said archly. "Hyperspace transmittal, codeword 'axminster,' copy no other individuals or agencies.

“Salutations, et cetera. Ser Grey, whether these so-called ‘Higher Ones’ are telepathically endowed members of some postulated super-race, or semi-literate barbarian peasants, no alien society cannot be permitted to invoke its will and purpose upon Imperium Terrestriana. We shall not be told what is and what is not allowable, and most definitely, not what can and cannot be done. Noe are our actions to be second-guessed when it comes to if, how and when the objectives assigned to our imperial task force are to be accomplished. It is absolutely unthinkable for any society, high, low or intermediate, to dare serving an eviction notice on a recently established imperial planetary matrix. The arbitrary though tenuous deadline imposed by these beings, whoever they may be, and wherever they may dwell, is to be utterly ignored. Evacuation of the planet in orderly fashion, in addition to priorly ordered military actions, shall carried out verbatim, as stated. Sign it simply, the Planners.”

“At once, ser Weldon.”

The director took out his towering rage on the executive assistant by punching a switch to deactivated the cyborg. He stewed about what he has done, thought better of the unconsidered action and reactivated the man-machine mostly due to the fact that lacking such reactivation the transmittal would have lain dormant, frozen as digital bits and bytes in the cyborg’s electronic memory for an indefinite time.

Lovelock reflected at length on the imminent crisis in Planet Dan. What hubris for an invisible alien culture to threaten the citizens of an imperial colony! The longer he thought about the distasteful affront to the power, prestige and majesty of Imperium Terrestriana the angrier he became. Perhaps once the evacuation had been successfully completed and the planet razed of the indigenes who loved to indulge in hide-and-seek teleportation games, these “Higher Ones” would think twice about again interfering in imperial affairs.

* * *

Commodore Garrigues was in his glory. At center stage on the conning bridge of the *Relentless*, the joint task forces’ designated flagship, he was was using the ultra-secure military network to engage in a conference call with the officers commanding each imperial starcruiser and civilian ship orbiting Dan.

“But, Commodore,” objected one of the captains, “the evacuation announcement went out hours ago. Parading regiments of Marines through the streets will accomplish nothing except waste time, and the command center in Sharax insists that moving swiftly is essential.”

Never one to have a command second-guessed by any subordinate, Garrigues said irritably, “It is obvious that my explication failed to register, Captain. What the Marines will engage in is a show of force, nothing more. If that rationale is the basis for your objection, it is surprising. Afterward, the parading forces will join the others and immediately assist in herding the populace aboard the shuttles in each locale before panic can ensue and result in chaos. We want the citizens reassured, not feeling threatened in any way. I have therefore ordered a formal parade in the two major population centers of either hemisphere, Sharax and Euphalia, as well as lesser demonstrations of military order and discipline in smaller communities, and throughout portions of the countryside.”

Their expressions null, their images of various starships masters illuminated an array of split-screen holotanks on the bridge. No fleet admiral had accompanied the hastily assembled task force, automatically making Garrigues the ranking officer.

“At your orders, sir,” said the captain who had questioned the decision to parade Imperial Marines.

* * *

The vidicom terminal loosed a series of imperative beeps. In his study, Elan opened the channel indicated by a blinking light. “Yes?”

“Ser Grey, a coded FYEO hyperspace transmittal was received minutes ago aboard *Relentless*. It arrived under the Planners’ seal. We are unable to decode here on-orbit.”

“Patch it through as is. I have the means to decode personally.”

“Aye, ser Grey.”

An unbroken string of alphanumeric symbols intermixed with gibberish strewed itself across the vidicom screen.

“Need privacy?” asked Morrow.

“No, stay; if anyone can be trusted, it’s you, Holt.” Consulting a small plastic card he took from his pouch, Elan made sure of the subjective date. He was very careful to accurately punch in the decoding sequence.

Holt read the message over Grey’s shoulder. “Sonuvabitch!” he said, and swore vehemently. “The Old Man doesn’t listen good.”

Elan erased the message. “I’m not sure it even matters now.”

“Pride!” Morrow gave the exclamation the inflection of a curse. “Not now, not ever, will he or any other Planner admit there just might, maybe be something lurking out here in the great dark that’s bigger and brighter and stronger than their miserable, so-called *empire*.”

“We were given ‘several’ periods to evacuate,” said Elan. “Two are already gone. We’ll have to do the best we can with what’s left.”

“Yeah, and hope to hell it gets the job done.”

* * *

Aboard *Relentless*, Commodore Garrigues was again in teleconference, lecturing weapons systems officers aboard the other vessels, assuring them and reassuring himself as well, that all was in readiness to loose the decimating fires soon to be visited on the lovely blue planet peacefully displayed in the conning deck’s largest holovision tank.

Ordinarily, CPO Garvey Sance would have slit his wrists before daring to interrupt the conference, but since the XO had firmly ordered him to do so, he said, “Your pardon, Commodore. A few minutes ago we lost communication with two regiments on the farside.”

Irrked over the intrusion by a non-commissioned officer, “Garrigues said, “Instruct communications to establish another link, Chief. Never burst in here like this again.”

“Comm center’s tried over and over, ser Commodore. Marine HQ was talking to the command center groundside and got cut off in mid-sentence. CC reports all private and public calls from the farside have gone dark.”

Not knowing what to make of the news, the commodore's reaction was typical. He repeated his order to Sance more sharply, instructing the CPO to have communications re-establish contact at once.

* * *

"I hear only a few ragged cheers down there," remarked Morrow. "Sounds more like whistling in the dark than a celebration."

"How could anyone feel festive," wondered Minor.

Elan did not comment.

Grouped along the terrace balustrade, they watched the contingent of Marines parading through Sharax. Strains of a distant military band wafted upward. Crowds were thin along the concourse, the elevated esplanades and adjoining greenbelts. People were apparently less than jubilant over the show of imperial might intended to signify their coming salvation.

The young metropolis stood brilliant in the late morning sunlight, its skyline etched against a cloudless sky. A breeze stirring regimental pennons borne by a color guard leading the files of Imperial Marines marching in lock-step along the broad main concourse rippled the huge imperial banner atop the Directorial Seat.

His arm around Minor's shoulder, Elan sensed rather than heard her sharply indrawn breath.

"Look!" she cried. Tearing free, she screamed.

An invisible scythe moving at the pace of a walking man was carving its way toward the Directorial Seat along the concourse.

His jaw clenched, Holt muttered, "This show's over." He swore bitterly.

Minor buried her face in Elan's chest.

Behind the moving scythe, the concourse was deserted.

The sights and sounds from below abruptly underwent a radical change. The band music grew discordant and gradually died as the bandsmen scattered. The few cheers diminished and died and were instantly transformed into wails of terror. Tiny figures churned and fought and clawed to escape the soundless, inexorable tsunami coming toward them.

Holding Minor tightly in wide-eyed disbelief, he stared helplessly at the impossible scene below.

Stampeding figures popped into oblivion as the wave of nothingness overtook them. People overran one another, maiming and trampling those in their path in a futile effort to escape, to survive.

The invisible wave was almost abreast of the Directorial Seat when Elan finally found his voice. "Goodbye, darling!" He kissed Minor hard.

Holt drew his rapier, clasped Elan's arm in a brief farewell gesture. As terror boiled up around him, he faced the unknown with a cry of defiance, his sword at salute.

An instant later he was alone on the terrace.

* * *

“What the . . . !” Incredulous and frantic, he looked all around. Grey and Minor were nowhere to be seen. The funereal banner of Imperium Terrestriana still fluttered above him in the breeze, but the few shrieks from below rapidly dwindled into silence.

Sharax lay bright and empty, its esplanades and structures still bathed in late-morning light. The only movement came from papers and similar debris stirring on the greenbelts and along the deserted concourse.

Feeling terribly alone and abandoned, Holt cried, “Me! Why me . . . ?”

The regal figure of a Danus stepped out from concealment behind shrubbery on the far side of the terrace and stood waiting, motionless as a basalt statue, facing Holt.

The rapier slipped from Morrow’s hand and thudded to the terrace pavement with a metallic sound.

Semi-paralyzed with shock, only his instincts seemed to be working. He and the Danus stared at one another for a brief eternity. Holt reached down numbly, seized his rapier and brought it up, en garde.

A patient ‘voice’ insinuated itself into his mind. *A private word, then must we part, O friendly one known as Morrow. For parting is ever a sadness.*

His heart drumming paradiddles in his chest, Holt licked his lips and came forward one tentative step. “Don’t call me ‘friendly,’ you scheming hummer. You’ve cleaned house, wiped out more than two million of us. Why stop at me?”

The resonant mental ‘voice’ was soothing in timbre. *Be assured, O Morrow, your fellow beings are unharmed. Nor will harm come to them.*

“I plain don’t believe a word of that.”

Belief will eventually sit with you, O Morrow. Verily, the truth cannot be gainsaid or subjected to argument.

Holt took a second halting step toward the Danus, his manner threatening. “Where are they?” he demanded, edging to within a sword thrust of the Danus. “Come on, spill it, O unfriendly one. I mean to have some answers.”

The tenor of the elder’s thoughts remained warm, mellow. *One senses your lethal purpose, O Morrow. Use the gleaming weapon if you must. Doing so may calm your spirit.*

“I mean to do just that.”

As for answers, those you have earned a right to become cognizant of shall be supplied. Know also, however, that should even the poor creature before you be able to supply all answers, doing so would be detrimental to you, to your kind. You yourselves must seek the vital answers on your own, O Morrow.

Holt squinted, intently studying the Danus’ ovoid, liquid eyes. He caught his breath, drew back in alarm. “I . . . can see through you,” he faltered. “You’re not . . . here.”

Here before you, O Morrow, yet far away. It is an ambivalence scarcely comprehensible to your kind. Dan, as you choose to refer to this planet, has been used thusly on a number of past occasions. It is a complex well-suited to hosting youthful, intelligent life forms of your genera, principally organisms evolving to the point of incorporating oxygenation via warm, aqueous

blood. We, whom you refer to as Danii are not native to this place of existence. Only in these minor matters have you been deceived.

“Dan isn’t . . . It’s not real?”

A second ambivalence. O Morrow. In your lexicon, it is real as well as unreal, a bright dream of sham and shadow, yet a world of substance withal.

“I don’t understand.”

The remnants of habitations discovered by your experts are relics, the leftovers of previous tenants filled with their writings, sculptures and what have you, the essence of their growth pangs as it were. In one-quarter of a galactic epicycle, or less, this city rising so fair around us will be one with the other ruins.

Holt sagged into a chair, his mind reeling. “Nothing ever quite added up — streams running overfull, too many languages in the ruins, seas less saline than normal. But, that black statue . . . ?”

Ah, an extremely intelligent species resembling your own more than superficially was responsible for that excellent work of art. Your descendants may well encounter theirs in some future era.

Now attend me, O Morrow, for our brief time together must by necessity conclude. Your species, emerging from generic infancy as it has, will shortly come in contact with the myriad civilizations inhabiting this, our common galaxy. In such encounters is there great and lasting danger. Adolescence is a hypercritical period in the growth cycle of all sapient societies. Should your immediate course fail to be plotted with meticulous forethought and care, your kind may face predictable extinction.

Holt was pale. “Let me get this straight. All the hooraw here in Dan was a comeuppance, an object lesson?”

The elder’s thoughts turned jovial. *As one might expect, O Morrow, you instantly seize upon the crux of the matter at hand. Higher Ones feel a deep, intrinsic responsibility toward all sentient beings, and each youthful species must have its chance.*

“Before the wolves close in,” guessed Holt.

Precisely. But know also that it is not the policy of Higher Ones to interfere beyond a certain reasonable point. You have witnessed an ample demonstration of their stern caveat. Their parting message may be stated succinctly: They will not stoop to interfere again.

Holt stared at the Danus in open-mouthed wonderment. “I’ll be dipped in . . . ! So we’re on our own.” He breathed deeply, shook his head as if to clear it. “Believe it or not, to me that sounds like good news. But what do we do about the wolves?”

The wolves, and far worse, do exist, O Morrow. They will constitute a problem for your descendants, but you will forge weapons, never fear, although most certainly not the murderous devices in common use among you. When next you see the entity known as Roberts, your species will be introduced to a new faith, and he will be its prophet. It will not preach devotion to gods false or true, but to the deepest possible appreciation and knowledge of self, for all intelligences must thoroughly know themselves before progressing to anything resembling a true knowledge of others.

Morrow grinned upon hearing the Danus’ mention of a living, breathing Roberts.

You must and shall go forward, treading softly but firmly, growing ever more technically and mentally sophisticated, ever more emotionally integrated, or perish. One senses a sterling race rising from the obvious seedlings. That, however, is of no consequence to us in the here and now.

A temporal node has been reached, O Morrow. That which our poor intellects perceive as space and time can be neither dismissed, nor diverted nor treated lightly, hence parting is now upon us. Will you object strenuously if a simple favor is requested?

“Uh, guess not, no.”

Your gleaming weapon, might one hold it briefly?

Holt numbly performed a reverse *moulinet*, presented his rapier to translucent figure. “It may sound kind of sentimental, but would you like to, uh, hang on to it?”

To keep it as mine own? One is overwhelmed by your generosity, O Morrow. It is naught but a spike of naked metal, yet beautiful in its fashion. If parting with it does not cause too much pain, a rich memento of our all too brief encounter shall be treasured.

“I’ve hauled that blade halfway ‘round the galaxy, but . . . Go on, it’s yours.”

Our sincere gratitude. And so, farewell, O Morrow. Thrive in the manner you have always thrived, to full richness!

Holt flinched as a twisting, falling sensation overtook him, blotting Dan from sight. A vast rushing sound accompanied his endless fall through dim shades of light and shadow and into a tunnel of all-encompassing darkness.

XV

*No one goes there now,
For what is left to fetch away.*

William Morris, antebellum
British poet, circa 1860 CE

He was cold. Groggy and half-awake, he assumed a rare power failure had allowed the gel in his hydraulic mattress to chill. He rolled over, and grunted when something hard dug into his hip and shoulder.

Elan Grey opened his eyes and stirred. He sat up slowly, stiffly, and learned that he had been stretched out on cold, barren rock. Lying not far away, the crumpled figure of Minor was covered by a black cape. He reached out to touch her shoulder.

“Best let her sleep,” cautioned someone out of sight.

Elan turned his head. “Holt . . . ?”

Morrow’s grin looked forced, synthetic. “Welcome aboard, Sonny, wherever the hell ‘here’ may be.”

“Where . . . are we?”

“Your guess is good as mine, maybe better. Pretty damn lucky to be anywhere if you want my take on the subject.”

Elan stretched, yawned and vigorously rubbed his shoulders to warm himself. Clambering unsteadily to his feet, he glanced all around the bare granite knoll. “What the . . . !”

“Kind of brings your brain to a screeching halt, doesn’t it? Trot over there past the rim-rock and peek down into the valley if you want to see a real spectacle. Come on, I’ll show you.”

His joints creaked, and Elan lifted his knees high to loosen up. Trailing Morrow, he picked his way around the recumbent forms of Ennis Ladeen, a half-dozen Imperial Marines, and eight or ten strangers, all of whom were sprawled in awkward attitudes. The rocky knob in all directions looked as if it had been haphazardly scattered with rag dolls.

A blood-red sun was either rising or setting over craggy blue mountains in the far distance. Filling the treeless, waterless plain below, countless thousands of neohuman figures were strewn helter skelter. Here and there, a few dazed wanderers sifted through the jumble searching for loved ones.

Elan’s unblinking stare persisted. “This is crazy! I don’t understand, Holt.”

A shrug. “Who does? Seems like all of us — two millions, plus — were picked up and dumped here out of the way like so much trash.”

“Here . . . ? But, where is ‘here’?”

“Take a deep breath and think about it,” urged Holt. “See if you come up with the same conclusion I did.”

Elan stared down into the valley. His amazement was gradually wearing off, and he began to think more clearly. He tried to remember if the desolate landscape resembled anything he had seen before. “It looks a little bit like the high desert country we flew over a few standard weeks ago,” he said uncertainly, “but there isn’t a single tree or stream. Not even brush of any kind.”

“Uh-huh. Came around myself a while agoa, and figured to build a fire when it got light enough to scare up some wood. Not a chance. Nothing’s combustible here far as the eye can see. What’s more, even if there was fuel, it’d be tough to ignite a fire. The air’s awfully thin.”

Elan kept searching the long valley from one end to the other, and beyond to a distant plain. “We’re not in Dan, are we, Holt?”

“Nope, don’t think so,” said Morrow, a note of reverence in his diction. “Walk around, do anything strenuous, and you’ll find yourself short of breath. As I see it, there isn’t much oxygen in the air mix. Enough, but just barely.”

“The system’s precis I read while Minor and I were in transit,” said Elan, “listed the fourth planet — don’t recall the name — as having semi-completed Stage One ecosystems and atmosphere enhancement.”

“Check,” said Holt. “That’s what I fell back on when sizing matters up. The computer tabbed this lump Carthia.

Wordlessly, Holt led Elan went back to where Minor was sleeping. They sat down near her, each engrossed in his own thoughts. Eventually Elan said, “What happened, Holt?”

“Happened . . . ?” Morrow shrugged. “School’s out,” he said. “The curtain’s rung down, the sets dismantled and the script filed away till next time.”

“What do you mean by all that?”

“Means that only the cast, crew and stagehands got to go home,” mused Holt. “The audience has been sent packing to bed without its supper.”

Grey glanced sharply at the other. “What are you *talking* about?”

“Easy,” said Morrow. “Don’t get nervous, Elan. I haven’t slipped my cams, not yet anyhow. Truth be told, I’m not real sure what I’m talking about except that it’s the straight skinny. All I can tell you is that we’re part and parcel of the biggest, longest, hairiest shaggy dog yarn ever told. I’m still trying hard to digest it.”

“Told by whom?”

“One of the skinny hummers collared me. For whatever reason, I was kept behind when you and everyone else went bye-bye.”

“You’re still talking in riddles, Holt.”

“Guilty as charged, I suppose. What you haven’t yet heard is the message buried in the riddle. Short if not especially sweet it is, but in my opinion dead on the money when it comes to making a point. We’ve been told in so many words— thoughts, I should say — to shape up, or ship out; fish or cut bait; get in step with the rest of the galaxy, or sooner or later it’s to be hip-pety-hop to the graveyard and die, die, die.”

Elan regarded the grizzled former explorer narrowly. In the act of questioning him further, Holt preempted him, holding up a cautioning hand. “Hang on,” he urged. “We have to wait till Roberts, Pierce and the others find us. Roberts is the key, or so I was told. He’ll know as much or more about what’s come down than anyone else.”

“Holt, you might remember that Roberts and Pierce were taken. Waiting for them makes little sense.”

“Neither does anything else about the wild and woolly happenings. All I’m sure of,” said Holt, “is that when all these folks wake up we’ll have one humongous mess on our hands. They’ll be hungry and thirsty, but there’s nothing to eat or drink around here that . . .”

Morrow stiffened, leaped to his feet and cried, “Listen!”

A faint, barely audible voice floated in the thin air. Turning round and round, Elan tried to locate the source. “I think it’s coming from over —”

“Shush-h-h,” said Morrow. “Getting louder.”

“Holt, it’s calling your name.”

Morrow grinned. “Glory be!” He whooped at sight of an airbus thrashing up the long valley, yelled, “Over here!” Tearing the black cape from Minor’s stirring form, he raised it overhead, swirled it back and forth in a frantic arc. “It’s *Roberts*! I’d know his voice anywhere,” he bellowed, waving the cape in an arc.

The airbus slowed to a hover, rotated on its vertical axis and turned toward their knoll.

What with neohuman forms strewn all over the rocky landscape, the pilot had difficulty locating an open area expansive enough to ground the twin-ducted vehicle. Holt was already hustling toward the grounded airbus, zig-zagging and dancing to avoid the outstretched arms

and legs. Elan started to follow after him, stopped when he thought of Minor and hurried back to her. She was sitting up, hugging herself against the chill. "Elan, where in the world are we?"

"Exactly wherever they decided to put us down, but it's the same world. No time to explain," he said, taking her hands and helping her to her feet. "Come along!"

"Elan, I . . . Why are you so frantic?"

"Later," he said. Half-dragging the woman, made a sorry attempt to follow Morrow's path, avoiding sprawled individuals and groups, dodging around those who were awake as he led Minor, panting, toward the summit of the granite knoll. The aft hatch of the airbus slid open. He saw Morrow buffet a slender figure clad in Blacks with friendly blows. Standing beside the open hatch, was . . .

He halted, and Minor crashed into him, all but knocking him down. The figure looked familiar even at a distance — slightly stooped, his dark hair streaked with gray. The youngster beside him was . . .

His chest heaving from exertion in the thin air, Elan stayed rooted to the spot until he was certain. "Pierce!" he bellowed. "Leighton!"

The taller figure waved.

Elan surged upward, tugging Minor behind him, shouting incoherently.

* * *

Hunched and immobile in the geriatric appliance, ser Weldon Lovelock devoted only a portion of his attention to the desultory debate taking place before a joint session of the Congress of Man and Star Council.

Preoccupied with more important events taking place elsewhere, within the innermost recesses of his intuitive, highly perceptive mind a seed of apprehension had swelled to monumental proportions. The anticipated transmittal acknowledging the combined task force strike upon Planet Dan was subjective periods overdue, and his legendary aplomb was wearing thin.

It was a point of honor for ser Weldon to never excuse himself from attending a joint session of the imperial governing bodies, nor ever recuse himself from counseling his fellow Planners when a judicial decision was brought before the Star Council or Congress of Man. He believed in making his person and office highly visible, his activities outwardly transparent for all to see, as quintessential functions of the rigorous, self-enforced discipline rigorously adhered to during more than a century spent wielding the imperial scepter.

Personal attendance in the Great Hall was impractical, however; reciprocal holographic links made convincing the illusion of actual being presence. Covert glances constantly played over his image, nor did the inquiring gaze of his peers escape his notice. Ser Gladwyn Noes, a prominent senior Planner, had droned on at length in response to the Endorian Plenipotentiary's never-to-be-discouraged plea for autonomy within not merely the obstinate exotic's homeworld, but within Endoria's entire sphere of influence that encompassed several stellar systems. Few members of either governing body were giving the speaker as much as token concentration.

When a communications printout flashed into facsimile reproduction within the small vidicom panel integral to the geriatric chair, the Planners and Congressmen sensed a change in Lovelock's manner. A faint buzz of speculative comment rustled through the vast, domed chamber. Cued by an eruption of hushed conversation on the floor, the speaker turned toward the Old

One's image. He managed to utter another halting sentence before breaking breaking off and waiting expectantly at the podium.

Lovelock skimmed the missive, then slowly lifted his head. Dark eyes hollow, he scanned the gathering for seconds before addressing the chairperson. "We beg the Chair's indulgence. To interrupt the distinguished ser Noes would be unthinkable under ordinary circumstances, yet we do have something here worthy of immediate attention."

"Will ser Noes yield the floor?" inquired the Chair.

"Gladly will I defer to ser Lovelock," declaimed the speaker, his manner ingratiating.

"The Chair recognizes the Director of Terra."

"Thank you, ser Noes." Lovelock cleared his throat. "We beg your indulgence, good gentles, in order to read a transmittal from Planet . . . That is to say, from the Danite system originated a gente well-known to us, ser Pierce Grey, formerly the Director of Luna, and most recently . . ."

Lovelock paused, sitting motionless, waiting for a concerted groundswell of murmured protest to slowly die away.

"The transmittal begins as follows: 'Greetings, Gentle Planners. With awe and remorse, I herein undertake to report that the planet known as Dan has vanished from among the bodies of this stellar system'."

This time loud, discordant exclamations of welled up from the floor of the Great Hall. After a reasonable interlude, he held aloft a fragile hand and the protestations began to abate. "So far as is known," he read grimly, "few if any neohumans were harmed by the apparent instantaneous transfer of two million-plus citizens, in addition to thousands of military personnel, to Carthia, the system's fourth planet. How this truly extraordinary feat was accomplished is, and will in all likelihood remain, a total mystery'."

Stony silence reigned in the Great Hall. Collectively dumbstruck, the assembled government of Imperium Terrestriana did not seem able to voice a comment.

"The masters of eleven vessels in parking orbits about Dan when the incredible event took place," pursued Lovelock, his amplified voice laden with stentorian overtones, "inexplicably found their vessels in stable orbits about Carthia. Even more astounding in an entirely different way is that the celestial mechanics of six — formerly seven — major components of this system were had undergone subtle readjustments their respective orbits about the primary. All portable, nonperishable foodstuffs, power generation equipment, ground and airborne vehicles, lesser items of infrastructure, and the like, have reappeared here in Planet Carthia.

"Gentle Planners, we have no choice but to presume, should you permit such outlandish presumption, that we are in no way masters of the situation. We 'survivors,' if that term is appropriate, feel deepest humility in the face of vastly unknown and unknowable forces. We have been as children, groping out here in the great dark, and our outstretched fingers have briefly closed upon . . . *what*?"

Ser Weldon's narrow shoulders sagged. His voice weakened and eventually broke, but he read doggedly to the end. Raising weary, deeply sunken eyes, he stared fixedly at the empty, mocking words sculpted around and enormous replica of a Congressional Medallion mounted high above the rostrum.

“*Ecce homo Triumphalis . . !*” he quoted, muttering the imperishable words oblivious to the fact that he faced an open communicator and the Latin phrase whispered through the Great Hall, a ghostly echo of former grandeur.

Ser Weldon Lovelock suddenly looked his age.

EPILOGUE

Hulking and spiny, it crouched upon a timeless plain where existed neither light nor darkness, neither heat nor cold, clutching a scarred and pitted rapier in the armored claw of its fifth mandible.

The conglomerate mentality neohumans had quintessential as Higher Ones posed a question. *Have thy labors with the youngling species then ended, O Tanis?*

Concluded, O my peers.

Has thou integrated all facets of the confrontation and prepared for thy examination?

Tanis searched the seven major segments of his conscious and subconscious, steeling itself against the onslaught. *This poor creature stands prepared, O my peers.*

That is well. Reject thy natural barriers one by one.

The first sensitive tendrils surrounding and invading its consciousness soon turned into a trickle, a torrent, a flood. It felt its ego compressed into smaller and smaller parameters until its essence watched, as a bystander might, while the hyperconscious mentality sifted and assimilated the data stored against this moment. A swift unreeling of impressions began.

Tanis caught only bare essentials — the lighthearted “aliveness” of he known as Morrow, fragments of one conversation or another with the wise one known as Roberts, the gem-hard personality and singlemindedness of Earth’s intractable elder, countless excerpts from the neohuman literature, music and the arts it had sampled.

The process went on for an indeterminate, kaleidoscopic period that might have been long, or short. When it was over, the guardian returned unto itself.

A mature thesis, complimented the conglomerate mentality. Thy journey neareth its ending, O Tanis. Thou shalt soon dwell in our company.

One strives to be deserving, O my peers.

Thou art most deserving, approved the Higher Ones. We perceive that thou dost regard thy recent charges in a vein similar to our pristine estimation of thine own kind — as potential guardians in their own right. Have the worthy ones among them heed thy instruction?

Certain entities among them assuredly assimilated the rendered counsel, O my peers. Those few are contrite, though not the many

Aye, contrite for the nonce it is assumed. Yet humility passeth, as pass it must, when true growth begins to be achieved. The endless variety of species doth titillate one’s sense of wonder. These so-called neohumans, pallid, short-lived and physically weak, how shall they fare during coming struggles? Hast thou a sight, O Tanis?

In my view, they shall endure, O my peers. While humbled in the now, they are neither demeaned nor weakened in spirit.

We shall hope it is so. Their era of easy dominance neareth conclusion. In less than nine-hundredths of a galactic epicycle, their predictable expansion throughout what they term the galactic Sagittarius radius shall bring them into contact with the Llanasan Hegemony.

Were one to wager, thought Tanis, my inclination would be to cast my lot with neohumans.

Let it be so recorded. It shall be pleasurable to check thy prediction in the ripeness of time. Art thou prepared for future duties, O Tanis? An interesting species hath arisen . . .

Sated with a warm sense of accomplishment and well-being, the guardian attuned itself per instruction and sought sympathetic rapport with the restless race of groping creatures destined to shortly fall under its charge.