

It was evident the conference chamber on Cosmopolis had been designed with an eye to its intended use. The room itself was circular. In the center stood a broad round table, the top hewn and polished from a single cross-cut segment of one of the coarse dark redwoods of Morency. The rings of the great tree's thousand-year growth were visible beneath the lacquered surface and suggested the immutability of time itself and the passing inconsequence of any petty wrangling that might go on around it. The colors of the room were muted, mostly wood grains and soft browns. No jutting features, no irregularities were allowed to disturb the eye or aggravate the disposition. In quietly offering itself as neutral ground, away from the pressures and publicity of more official encounters, Cosmopolis had promoted the resolution of more than one dispute previously negotiated elsewhere without success.

At a few minutes past 1900 hours, five persons seated themselves around the conference table. In an arc along one semi-circle sat Pallas Dhin-Asper flanked by the Umber Minister for Interworld Affairs and Mr. Tibor Holocek of Carpathia. The latter had been introduced only by name, as though part of the Umber delegation. At the mid-point of the opposite arc sat General Nathan Salmi of Balkin, beside him a nameless aide. Two others of somewhat intimidating appearance had remained in the corridor, taking up positions to either side of the entrance.

Inside, Pallas was taut; outside it conveyed a haughty determination. Salmi wore a formal suit of state, blue and black with pale red emblems at the shoulders. Pallas looked at the impassive face. It gave no clue to his disposition.

He had aged surprisingly little in the past eight years, she observed. His hair was slightly thinner, the facial grooves cut a bit deeper. He still carried his stocky frame well. About his eyes there was an even greater aura of strength, and recalling Emmett she put it down to the exercise of eight more years of absolute power. Their task was not going to be easy.

She watched him at intervals, periodically dropping her eyes

to the table, but the Balkin ruler scarcely glanced her way, folding his hands before his chin and giving Dion, who sat off to her right, his full attention. In his quiet voice the Umber minister began a review of the issue.

Almost a century ago, Balkin had moved beyond its traditional sphere of influence and seized Io, the outer planet of Umber's star, a barren spot but rich in valuable minerals. At the time, Umber had been an underdeveloped world (though Pallas preferred to think of it as one that lived outside the mainstream by choice) and no Umbrian had ever set foot on the outer planet...

She saw that Salmi had lowered his eyes. What was he thinking? There was no sign of the expansive good nature shown over the visicom sixteen hours before.

Dion was pointing out that the growing export of the Hrabas stallion had expanded Umber's contacts with other worlds, and this had given rise to new aspirations: among these, the right to full control over its own planetary system. The presence of Balkin on its doorstep could no longer be tolerated, nor the removal of resources that should belong to Umber itself...

Of course, Salmi had heard it all before but she knew protocol required that the issue be restated and the general seemed in no hurry. She herself was getting edgy.

Now Dion was setting out a new proposal: to allow certain Balkin commercial interests to remain on Io for ten years, with control over a diminishing percentage of the mining operations...

She noticed Salmi's eyes narrowing. Still he did not look her way. The Umber minister concluded his brief by enlarging on certain details of the new proposal...

She was keeping still only with the greatest of effort. How she longed to be releasing her tension in a mad ride over the plain! And there were too many memories of Salmi and Balkin coming back to her across the years—

She heard Dion say: "Now I will request that Gatrín Pallas speak on behalf of the Matrín."

Her body gave an involuntary twitch. She clamped down and restored her outward composure, checking an impulse to stand; it would be a deferential gesture. Hands folded, elbows on the table, she began: "General Salmi—"

But now Salmi was looking at her and his gaze struck her like a shock of hot water. No longer impassive, his face became pliant, responsive. Here, he seemed to be saying, was a man who was strong but accessible, a man who could be forceful but generous. His eyes projected a seductive vitality.

She heard herself saying: "There are relationships between worlds and relationships between people." Salmi's smile broadened

as if to say he could not agree more. "My mother and yourself have had contacts over many years and she has always maintained her admiration for you separate from the differences that have arisen between Umber and Balkin..."

She was unnerved and knew it. What was he trying to convey by this sudden attention, this complex of temperament? That he wanted to be taken at his own value—as a man, not as a Hierarchy or an enemy? Perhaps he was prepared to be conciliatory after all.

"I would also remind you of my own visit to Balkin several years ago"—she would not mention her age—"when the assistance I received"—she saw Sonja's mischievous face, the gate into the courtyard—"proved very useful to my education"—the erotic statue, standing amid the streaming water of the fountain—"and the hospitality you extended to me"—Salmi emerging wet and naked from the pool, approaching—"brought our two families into more intimate contact." Part of her mind told her she had meant to say 'immediate contact.'

How much was reaching her face? She pushed on. "The Matrix would like me to suggest that your cooperation in this dispute could lead to an even wider range of exchange between our two houses." Now her mother's words seemed to contain layers of implication she had not foreseen. "She asks what reasonable gesture we can make in return for your good grace in ceding Io to us."

She stopped, and the effort to maintain composure made her appear haughtier than ever. Her color was high; she felt her eyes were burning.

But Salmi seemed to be thriving on it. He stood up and stepped behind the chair, his hands resting on the back. He had opened the top two buttons of his uniform, perhaps for air, but it created a subtle shift in focus. For all his cultivated charm, Salmi exuded an earthy quality that hovered just below the surface, like a ready flush under the skin. Features that appeared almost coarse on the face of the autocrat became sensual on the hedonist; the vehemence of one wielding absolute command turned to passion in the voluptuary. She realized that she could believe Sonja's stories now. Maybe she had even believed them then.

"Your proposal, my dear Dion, is not without merit. But I wonder if it might not be best as part of a larger picture."

The fountain, the pool. Would he dare approach her like that now, when she was a woman and not a girl? When she was Gátrín of Umber?

"I too want to see your world realize its full potential. I want to see its people experience all that the Concourse has to offer."

An electric sensation suddenly coursed through her body, a vertigo akin to the intoxicating ride before the rites, across the dark

rolling grasslands of her planet. But the loathing and the excitement were a confusing mixture.

Salmi smiled magnanimously. “—To become an adult, as it were. But I don’t think you can do it alone. There is a better way: an alliance between our two worlds would be of advantage to us both—”

Pallas stiffened.

“Umber could learn to share in the management of the mines. Balkin craftsmen could be sent to help you establish new industry. You could enjoy a broader cultural experience.”

Pallas stared at him. She could think only: he wants to possess Umber like he would possess a woman.

“That would be the relationship between worlds. As for the relationship—”

But Pallas was standing, eyes striking sparks. “General Salmi, you have failed to understand the Umber mentality. We do not want to be led to ‘adulthood,’ as you call it, by a bridle. Nor do we wish to be ridden—by Balkin or anyone else.”

She glanced toward Holocek. The Carpathian ambassador had been planned as a trump, to be saved as a last resort. There had been no certainty the card would need playing and definitely not until all avenues of discussion had been exhausted.

“An alliance with you would never be one between equals. But we have been learning that it is difficult to gain what is rightfully ours by our own strength alone.”

Dion, startled, realized what was coming and tried to signal his objection. But Pallas was beyond restraint.

“I will ask Mr. Tibor Holocek of Carpathia to speak on our behalf.”

In all the negotiations between Umber and Balkin thus far, no threat of force had ever been suggested. Apart from an occasional outbreak of inter-clan rivalry, war had not existed on Umber for over a century and she possessed no military space forces. But with the visit to Umber by the Carpathian ambassador three months before, all had changed.

Carpathia was a world some three light-years from Umber, lying, like her neighbor, just beyond the Balkin sphere of influence. Its democratic government had sought for many years to check Balkin’s expansionism through a series of alliances, and the dispute between Umber and Balkin had been seen as a fresh opportunity.

Ambassador Holocek’s proposal had occasioned the most clamorous debate in the history of the Umber assembly. Should Umber establish a military corps, to be trained and equipped by Carpathia, and use it to seize Io from the Balkin garrison? If Balkin were to retaliate, Carpathia promised to throw its full military might

into Umber's defense. Some felt Io was not worth the risk of such consequences, others claimed it was the logical step that would take Umber into the mainstream of Concourse politics. The two sides finally accepted the Matrin's compromise: she would make one last attempt to negotiate, a personal appeal to Salmi himself. If it failed, the option of military force would be used.

Now when Holocek rose to speak, the General's face began a progress through several shades of red, for he recognized at once that the entire tenor of the negotiations had changed. The Matrin knew that introducing Holocek at all would tip their hand on the use of force, but it was hoped the threat itself would be sufficient to change Salmi's mind.

Holocek remained unflinching before the General's mounting anger. He spoke briefly, avoiding specifics, though there was a perceptible gleam of pleasure in the heavy-lidded eyes. "My government views Umber's right to Io as indisputable. Carpathia is willing to support her in her claim—with military assistance if necessary."

Salmi could scarcely check his fury, and Pallas thought: he still cannot bear to be thwarted. The General pointed a finger at the ambassador, barked, "Your government is assuming a dangerous position!" Then he turned to Pallas and though he managed to contain himself, all trace of the former generous spirit had evaporated. "Gatrin Pallas, you and your mother are initiating a game which is over your heads. If you push things too far you may find yourselves part of the stakes instead of one of the players!"

Curtly he signaled the aide to precede him to the door. He growled, "I will get in touch with you if I have any further proposals to make," and stalked out of the chamber.

Dion wordlessly gathered his papers. Pallas slumped into the chair, lines of discouragement pulling at the corners of her mouth. Had her headlong rashness foiled the whole affair? But when she thought of Salmi's blatant attempt to manipulate her, his presumptuous offer of alliance, anger and indignation flared again, only to be stifled by a wave of lassitude. The encounter had proven even more of a drain than expected.

Behind her Dion and Holocek were exchanging a final word as the ambassador prepared to depart. Pallas stared at the table, only half seeing, her eye tracing the path of one of the tree's great rings. She began to brood. There was only one option left, one she had not even broached to the Matrin. Only she would have been in a position to draw on this last desperate measure—and to do it without implication.

Holocek interrupted by making his farewells. When he had gone Dion sat down beside her, and while he would have deferred recriminations on his own it was Pallas herself who said, "I guess I

ruined things. But I could not stay calm in the face of such an outrage.”

Dion wondered why Pallas felt so vehemently about actions which to him had appeared no more than standard statecraft. He had half expected such a proposal from Salmi and was ready with counter arguments. But there was no telling what went on in the minds of the Matrin’s daughters—and especially this one.

Dion offered a new suggestion. “Perhaps we should try to approach Captain Cardis, Gattrin. I have been told that once or twice he has mediated in disputes like this when requested. He may be able to exercise some influence over Salmi.”

“What makes you think Captain Cardis would take our side?”

“Because it is right. And because he has an interest in Umber. Did you not know he has been negotiating with the Matrin for over a year to make Umber a terminus world in the Stellar Intersect game?”

Pallas showed surprise. “She has never mentioned it. Is she willing?”

“She has been hesitating. We could hardly set up a satellite for the game if we are going to be engaged in a war for our own system. But it would be a new mark of distinction for Umber, and when Captain Cardis proposed the use of his ship for this meeting she gave a provisional agreement to the terminus.”

“Captain Cardis proposed it? Then he must be aware of the dispute already.”

“Let’s give Salmi a day to make the next move. Ambassador Holocek came as a shock to him. Hopefully he will decide that the stakes are too low after all and withdraw from the game.”

Pallas agreed and together they left the conference chamber.

In a discreet position above the door, imbedded in one of the designs of the wood, a microreceiver went dead. But being soundless and virtually invisible no one would have known one way or the other.

Destan woke groggy from a long and unsettled sleep. When he had marshaled his wits he composed a brief letter of introduction to the Captain of Cosmopolis and brought it to the Communications Center. The clerk assured him it would be telexed to the Captain's pod within the hour.

As he anticipated, Destan located the young Grand Master from Amarant in the Alpha pod gaming complex. Here, five large chambers surrounded a lounge where players congregated to find opponents, issue challenges, relax and discuss the merits and strategies of their favorite pastimes. One of the rooms was devoted to Intersect: twelve oak tables bore the ubiquitous cube and a row of Intersect chambers lined the outer wall. When Destan arrived he found the Amarantine earnestly contending with an elderly gentleman who seemed much perplexed at the degree of skill in an opponent so young. Destan noted that Wessel was quite calm before the cube, in contrast to the restive high-strung mannerisms he displayed at other times. When after six games the grumbling oldster retired with an unbroken string of defeats, Destan sat down in his place.

"Have you found a suitable opponent yet?" he asked.

"Unfortunately not. Most players are frightened off when they learn of my rank, so I no longer identify myself. But then they are very surprised when I win so easily."

"The Captain has not offered you a match, then?"

Wessel had once more become effervescent. "No, but I received a personal greeting and an invitation to his reception before the next Stellar Game. I'm sure he is too busy to indulge me with a private contest, even if I am a Grand Master this time."

"You have been here before?"

"Two years ago with my father. That was when I first watched the Stellar Game being played."

Destan looked down at the cube. Since Jaynes had decided it wasn't necessary to teach him the game, perhaps now was the time to learn what the fuss was all about.

"As you are currently faced with a dearth of opponents, why not show me how to play? One does not often have the opportunity to be instructed in a new skill by a master at it." Wessel acquiesced with enthusiasm.

The apparatus before them was modeled on the ancient version: a cube of plastic entirely transparent, about 20 centimeters to a side. Each corner had a bevel so that the cube, in any position, could be placed upon four support struts that swept up from a base plate standing upon the table. When the cube rested on the struts, its bottom face cleared the base by several centimeters.

Each face of the cube bore five rows of five holes, all equally spaced. Into any hole on the top face a large-headed terminus peg with a pressure clip mechanism could be inserted; the peg would remain in place even if the cube were then positioned upside down. Of the 48 pegs, half were red and half green, one color used by each player.

Wessel said: "Even though this version may seem somewhat crude, it is still used a thousand years after the game was invented. There are those who refuse to play with anything else."

"Such is the force of tradition," remarked Destan.

Wessel outlined the object of the game: a player attempted to position six terminus pegs of his color, one on each face of the cube, so that each peg stood directly opposite the one on the other side. When all three pairs of termini were joined through the cube—by three theoretical lines—those three lines had to pass through a single intersection point.

"Then there are 125 possible intersection points inside the cube," Destan observed.

"Yes. And, of course, the same number of possible winning patterns for the termini."

"And you get the pegs underneath—"

"By rotating the cube. You see, when a player takes his turn, he can rotate the cube sideways in any of the four directions, a distance of one face; or he can leave it in its previous position. Then he places one peg on the top face. This means that on any turn you can always reach five of the cube's six sides."

Wessel began to insert pegs, illustrating what he had outlined so far. Destan remembered the cube on Jaynes' broadcast clip: suspended in an anti-gravity field and rotated by signals from the players' consoles. By comparison, this cube looked almost naïve.

Then he grimaced when he thought of what Philip Cardis had created out of this little piece of naivete.

"You realize, of course," Wessel was saying, "that you can have more than six pegs on the cube at once. You are also placing pegs to force your opponent to remove his."

He illustrated. "This is called a surface intersect and requires only four termini. You have to form two lines, each line joining two termini and running across the face of the cube so that they cross at the opponent's terminus—then he must remove it. And each line, by the way, can bend over one edge." He altered two of the pegs' positions.

In his first game, Destan was beaten in seventeen moves.

"Now let's move on to the chamber version." Wessel motioned Destan to follow and they crossed to one of the six doors set in the outer wall. The chamber they entered was lit by a dim glow from all directions and when Wessel closed the door Destan was shocked to find that they seemed to be standing in space, for the floor of the chamber was some distance below their feet. The boy led him across the transparent mid-floor to its center where stood a narrow double-faced console. The sensation was one of being at the core of a large cube. Rows of faint points of light, five by five, flickered on each wall extending above and below them, so too on the ceiling three meters overhead and the lower floor three meters beneath their feet.

"Now we play from inside the cube."

The Grand Master instructed Destan in the operation of the console, how to color the light at each terminus point. How to indicate a surface intersect, how to activate the tight shafts of light when forming the winning beams.

"I'm afraid to ask whether the chamber is rotated. I didn't bring my magnetic boots."

"Don't worry. We simply record the face on which each move is made and that limits the next play to any face except the one opposite."

Again Destan lost, this time in twenty moves. With his winning play Wessel activated three beams to form an intersect about two meters above their heads.

Emerging into the light Destan said, "I must admit I can see why Intersect enjoys its popularity. It is fascinating to play from inside the game."

"On many worlds it is a mark of status to have an Intersect chamber in one's residence. My father, of course, has one, as do many others of both lower and higher status than he on Amarant."

And was it not, Destan reflected, a mark of status among the Concourse worlds to be involved in the Stellar Intersect game? So far—how many was it?—some 500 enjoyed that distinction.

Destan gestured back to the chamber. "But it is quite a step from that...to Captain Cardis' Stellar Game. Where did he get such a fantastic idea, and more to the point, why? He persuades 500 worlds of the Concourse to set up and operate satellites which will

transmit some kind of beam across scores of light-years of space, so that he and the rest of humanity can play a cosmic game of Intersect. It's incredible! And unfathomable."

"Why unfathomable? To play a game on such a scale is an exhilarating concept."

They returned to the lounge, the middle-aged Historian and the boy Intersect master. There they sat in soft chairs and watched the many-costumed figures strolling in and out. Destan realized that here was someone who was intimately involved in the Stellar Game, who, more than any indifferent academic, might be expected to have access to whatever knowledge was available. He decided to begin at the beginning.

"It strikes me that the Stellar Game is hardly a natural adaptation from the Intersect cube where everything falls into six clearly defined planes. After all, the worlds of the Concourse are not so conveniently delineated."

Wessel warmed to the subject instantly. His sharp, darting eyes danced over Destan's face like an animated woodpecker.

"Clearly not. That is why Captain Cardis introduced the sextan point. This is a theoretical position lying at dead center of the Concourse. Think of a plane running through the sextan point exactly parallel to the galactic horizontal: this divides the Concourse into two sectors called north and south." Wessel's fine long-fingered hands cut and shaped space in front of him. "Now shift the plane through 90° into a vertical position and line it up with galactic center: this gives us another division into two sectors called east and west. Finally, make another 90° shift of the plane—still leaving it vertical—so that it *faces* galactic center, and we get sectors antex and postex."

Destan nodded as he considered a moment. "So...if I perceive things correctly, it would seem that any terminus world can lie in any of three sectors."

"Right so far—since the sectors overlap. Such divisions will determine the permissible sequence of plays, like rotating the cube." Wessel grinned mischievously. "But there's an additional factor. You see, even though the sextan point starts out at the center, its position can shift along the perpendicular line of each of the three planes; this is an alternative move to realigning the plane angle. All of this means that any given terminus world can fall into any of the *six* sectors and form the terminus for a beam that can extend in almost any direction from itself...although the further out the world is located the more this becomes merely theoretical."

Destan put up his hands as if to stem the tide. "You have severely compromised my ambitions of becoming an Intersect Grand Master, Mr. Wessel. But tell me this. When I looked at the

cube I calculated 125 possible intersection points. How many are there in the Stellar Game?"

Wessel took a delaying breath, like a teacher caught out on a sticky point by an observant pupil. "Well...as to that, no one is quite sure."

Destan's eyebrows went up.

"You see, the confirmation of an intersect point is to try it. And there have been only 97 games so far. Naturally, the game was originally designed to provide a certain number of points, but with more terminus worlds added all the time we have new calculations to make. And even galactic shift over the past eight years has had some effect."

"It sounds like playing the game could be a touch-and-go affair."

"At the beginning, when there were fewer termini, yes, it was. Several games have ended in a draw. But remember that things are very flexible in the Stellar Game. The beams can cross at any angle; and the surface intersect move was changed to a more fluid configuration of positions. Even the intersect point you can't think of in the same way."

Destan shoved out his legs and folded both hands over his navel. "The intersect point. That, of course, is the thing that always puzzled me. It seems impossible with all that space out there to get three beams to cross at one point."

"That is because you have a misconception about the beams. They are not like the ones in the chamber. They do not have a constant diameter, or it would indeed be impossible.

"What Captain Cardis has done is adapt the closed communication system to the game. The terminus satellite is in orbit around its planet. When it receives an instruction to transmit, it sends out a closed carrier beam, continuously generated, in the direction of the terminus world it is told to link up with. But here the beam has a much wider angle than in the communication system: it's half a degree, so that it forms a definite cone. If the second satellite falls anywhere within the cone, the connection is made. Now of course, the greater the distance between the two satellites the broader the cone becomes, so that the diameter of the beam where the intersect is to take place may cover a considerable space; and when you add it to the diameter of the two other beams and consider that all they have to do is touch—at any angle—you can see that the scope for some measure of contact covers an astronomical distance. I've heard of it being as much as a fifth of a parsec."

Destan wore a look of mild astonishment.

"Now you will wonder: the carrier beams may cross, but how do we know when they do?"

"I was about to ask."

"Well, we now use the message beam—the "particle beam" as it's called—of the same system. In communication, of course, the particle beam follows immediately on the carrier beam from the same transmitter. But in the game, once the carrier beam from the first satellite reaches the second, the particle beam is sent along the carrier in the return direction, from the second satellite back to the first. It still travels within the boundary of the carrier, but it has an additional property which causes it to be attracted to other particle beams. Any part of any carrier beam—which as you know is a channel of warped space—will act as a conductor: so if the carrier beams connecting two pairs of satellites contact anywhere, the particle beams will be drawn to each other at that point. When they contact there is a discharge which produces a recoil signal. The signal, like everything else, travels at the ultimate hyper-speed and is picked up on a receiver in the Intersect Gallery. At the first signal we know two beams have crossed; if we get a second signal, that's the third beam contacting the first two. The whole thing may take several minutes, depending on the distances involved and the position of the ship at the time."

He concluded in a what-could-be-simpler tone: "And there you have it."

For a few moments Destan sat in silence. Then he murmured, "It is a fantastic creation." In his rough explanation Chairman Jaynes had gotten the idea basically correct, but somehow Wessel's version, more coherent and precise, made it seem all the more incredible.

"What happens to the particle beams after they contact?"

The boy gave a shrug. "I suppose they break up. But the second satellites continue to generate them until the third beam joins in and the intersect is verified."

"Which means that the discharge continues as well?"

"Yes, although the recoil signal is strongest only at the initial moment of contact. It breaks up into static after that."

Because of his former studies in physics, one point stood out for Destan that Jaynes had not focused on. "This discharge: what is the nature of it? What are the properties of the particle beams that produce it?"

Wessel looked a little chagrined. "Unfortunately, I don't know. One merely picks up a generalized understanding of what goes on. One doesn't need to know all of the science in order to play the game."

"Do you know of any publication, by Captain Cardis or anyone else, that explains all these workings of the satellites and the beams?"

"I don't believe there is one."

Destan nodded thoughtfully. "What I am curious about is the danger this discharge might pose at the intersect point itself, in space."

"I don't know. But I suppose there would be some danger. In the Gallery there is a monitoring computer which declares whether a proposed intersect is probable, but it disallows any attempt at an intersect which might take place close to a star system. I think this has happened only once."

"I see." Destan pondered a moment. Of course, the discharge between the particle beams was necessary to make the game playable. Probably there was no reason to question it further than that. And since no one had complained or apparently even investigated the phenomenon over the last eight years, it could not have caused any problems to human habitation or interstellar travel. Of course, there was a lot of space out there.

"And the players direct all this from the Intersect Gallery?"

"They declare their moves using their own calculations and referring to a large cube in the middle of the floor which shows all the terminus worlds."

"But who actually controls the terminus satellites?"

"The satellite technicians on each world. The Captain serves as gamemaster. He makes an open broadcast to the Concourse throughout the game: he relays all the moves, plus instructions to the satellites to transmit the beams when an intersect is attempted. The major networks on most of the worlds carry his broadcast so that everyone can follow the game."

Destan found the whole thing mind-boggling. Five hundred satellites expectantly humming—or whatever the Intersect satellites did; as many technicians standing ready to push buttons or pull switches; whole populaces attending their televue sets. How much technology and how many minds focused on what could only be seen as the most bizarre activity the race had ever engaged in? No wonder the academics ignored it as a form of insanity.

"Why do you think the Stellar Game is so popular? To me the actual play seems very esoteric."

The boy threw his hands in the air. "Ah, but you miss the point! It is not simply the play itself, although that is challenging enough for the players. It is the thrill of conquering all that space in a game. To harness such distances! And there is the special exhilaration at the thought that the whole Concourse is cooperating in some grand endeavor."

Destan was overwhelmed by a sense of revelation. Had the Chairman ever thought of it that way? The appeal of the Stellar Intersect game: a substitute for human cooperation, an expression

of the pioneering spirit that had all but died out, an antidote to the fractious divisions between the worlds of man.

Perhaps the Council should have been making games instead of speeches. Philip Cardis had long since stolen their thunder.

Someone poked his head out of the Intersect room and called for an opponent. Wessel signaled his acceptance. As he got to his feet the boy said to Destan, "You should try to attend the next game in the Intersect Gallery. If you wish, when I attend the Captain's reception I can request an extra pass for you."

"No, please don't trouble him. As a matter of fact, I have hopes of attending the reception myself."

When Wessel had gone Destan sat for a while, musing. Like everyone else, the boy assumed that Cardis had simply adapted principles of the closed communication system to his Stellar Game. Perhaps so, but it was an unusual adaptation, one which would have done credit to an inventive Physicist. It suggested that Cardis had had some advanced scientific training. Could there be an avenue of investigation here—perhaps a search of the archives of certain Concourse Universities?

But this created another riddle. How did Cardis' presumed scientific background square with his current concentration on quite a different field: the history and society of the Concourse?

Then Destan chided himself: he of all people should be able to accept the idea of such an about-face. It paralleled the course of his own life.

Following the abortive meeting with Nathan Salmi, Pallas remained tense and moody for the rest of her day. As soon as she returned from the conference room, Vera demanded a full account and Pallas took the opportunity to vent some of her frustration. Later the two women went to a nearby exercise room on the cabin deck. Curiosity turned to delight when they discovered the tumble chamber, soon mastering its demands for rapid coordination and stamina. Here at least was the illusion of speed and Pallas reveled in the sweat that soaked her exercise suit.

As the next sleep period approached, Vera retired early, while Dion was still out in the ship pursuing his own diversions. None of them had expected General Salmi to make his next move so soon.

The call chime sounded on the visicom. Pallas punched Receive, expecting to see Dion's face. Instead, Nathan Salmi looked out at her. He appeared subdued.

"Gatrin, I regret the course our meeting took today, but perhaps my proposal did seem too threatening. As you say, it might not appear to be a balanced union.

"However, there were other aspects to my position which I was not given the opportunity to present and I would like to discuss these with you. If you are willing to come to my suite now, I give you my utmost assurances for your safety. I would also appreciate it if you did not bring your minister, whom I find rather irritating and ineffectual. I think we would both prefer this to be a discussion between equals."

Pallas looked at the image on the screen, her blank expression masking an agitated debate. This was surely a ploy of some sort. But here was the opportunity she had hoped for, one that might not come again, and the setting would be right.

She made her decision. "Give me your suite number and I will be there in one hour...alone. I will expect you to be the same."

Whatever he felt at her response, Salmi betrayed no emotion of his own. He gave her the directions and Pallas broke the connection.

Now that the moment had arrived she made her preparations with utter calm. First she donned a subtly provocative outfit, highlighting her temples and cheekbones with wild muskirt oil. Then from her trunk she took a small white box, opened it reverently and removed a ring. The ornament had been designed by her great-great-grandmother and Pallas had taken it from the vault without the Matrin's knowledge.

A gleaming russet in a high crest formed the setting of the ring. Pallas swung back the stone to expose a tiny chamber filled with porous material. Again from the trunk she took a small vial, carefully poured a dram of fluid into the chamber and closed the top.

She went over to the basin. Sliding the ring onto her right index finger, she glanced at the tiny hole in the underloop, which was connected to the upper chamber by a fine interior channel. A small unobtrusive stud projected from the bottom of the setting. With her palm over the basin, she gave it a simple, quick press with the inside of her thumb. A drop of fluid fell: colorless, odorless, tasteless.

No matter what he proposed, no matter how the encounter proceeded, he must surely prepare them drinks. Already, at idle moments on the journey, before sleeping, perhaps even in her dreams, she had practiced several different artifices to bring her hand in contact with his glass.

She considered a moment. What if something went wrong and things got out of hand? She looked back to the trunk: perhaps the little dagger as well. But it would be difficult to conceal and then of course there would be no avoiding implication.

She had urged Emmett to abandon his own attempt at assassination and had considered warning Salmi at the conference before events there drove it from her mind. But there was no denying that Salmi's death could lead to a power struggle on Balkin, perhaps an extended period of chaos. Gaining Io might then be much easier, with little or no risk of war.

But it had to be done without incriminating Umber or herself; the death must look natural. The ring now contained several drops of a special poison which, ingested, had an immediate narcotic effect resembling a fainting spell. Within twenty minutes blood clotting resulted in death. Rapid breakdown of the poison would eliminate all trace of the fatal agent.

She left the dagger in its pouch in the trunk.

Salmi himself responded to her knock. There was no sign of his aide. With a neutral greeting he led her into a richly appointed parlor and invited her to sit. She could see he was being courteous and unthreatening, maintaining a careful distance. A light blouse

covered his torso, not quite matching the trousers with their more formal cut. His broad chest filled the blouse completely, and though he had not resorted to unfastening any of the clasps, a hint of dark thick hair penetrated the material.

The General sat on the edge of a chair some distance from her own and looked squarely into her face. "I know you are wary of me, Gatrín Pallas. But think of me as you did when you were on Balkin eight years ago"—he cannot know how ironic his words are, she thought—"before all this antagonism and threats of war developed between our two worlds. I have thought of you as you were during that visit. Quite often, over the years. What I can see in you now is what I could detect even at that time."

His eyes had taken on a glow, like vents releasing heat from a thermal well. She was aware that her own body heat seemed to be increasing—

"The women of Umber are quite distinctive, Gatrín Pallas. It starts to show at a young age. There is a quality to them unlike any other women of the Concourse."

Pallas managed a faint smile.

"You are like your horses, steely and difficult to tame. That is why no one else tries to raise the stallion on other worlds."

What was Salmi driving at? She could see that on some level he was keeping himself in check, but still he exuded something palpable and it was unsettling her insides. She could feel her heart starting to pound. From tension—the anticipation of her act? She almost believed he could hear it.

"I made a proposal of alliance today, but you did not give me the chance to finish it. You accused me of wanting to put Umber under my thumb. That's not so. I truly want to help your world. But I want to do it personally. I want to do it—through you."

Her head was whirling. What a front of sincerity! How secure he feels in his own power! And he is indeed one of the most powerful of Concourse rulers, master on his own world and an influence over half a dozen others. Now he wants to master *me*.

A flush spread over her. But I have my own power. He is too blind for all he says about Umber women. He would never think that I could be the one to master *him*!

Suddenly her body flooded with reactions. Her skin thrilled, the warmth between her legs became feverish. With a shock she realized that she desired him! A gut-wrenching desire to straddle his great body, to seize his hair, to feel a gorging penetration—

But Salmi was indeed blind, or else interpreted her agitation as nervousness. He stood up and turned away toward the serving bar by the wall, and the moment when Pallas would have lost control of herself passed. Her face drained, her body went limp.

"Let me give you something to drink. I have many fine wines here."

"Yes. Please. Whatever you recommend."

During those few moments her control returned. She accepted the glass without comment and forced herself to drink calmly. Salmi retreated to his former distance but remained standing, and now his manner became expansive. "I will get to the point, Gatrín Pallas. I propose an alliance between our worlds. And I propose a marriage between yourself and me. Umber could have all that it wants: Io, aid for its development, scientific training, whatever. And you—you could have anything you want. Including the ruler of Balkin."

Powerful, Magnanimous. Virile. Now Salmi was deliberately sending out his vibrations.

Pallas stared up at him, her head a jumble, but she knew she must stand and face him at an equal level. With as much self-possession as she could muster, she got up, still holding the drink.

Before she could speak Salmi continued: "You will live on Balkin, of course. In my capital. As you may know, I have a present wife, but that contract was for reasons of state—a formality. I had to father heirs. Naturally, I cannot completely abandon her, but the laws and customs of Balkin make provision for such things as I am proposing to you—"

This was too much. Since her arrival on the ship she had been subjected to too many pressures, too much emotion. This man had affronted her and her world and then her body had craved him: something she had never suspected possible. Now the implications of the General's last words penetrated. The blood flowed to her face, her eyes opened wide.

She screamed: "You want me to become part of your harem!"

Pallas flung the entire drink.

The glass deflected off Salmi's shoulder and splattered him with wine. He was stunned. For the first time in his life he found himself trembling before another man's fury—and it was a woman.

A feral growl rose in her throat as Pallas swung to a low table beside the chair and seized the glowing fluorescent globe. She smashed it on the floor near Salmi's feet; shards scattered over the rug. Then she wheeled and strode to the door. By the time she reached the hallway Salmi had recovered and his own fury exploded. He bawled after her, "I'll have you yet, you Umber bitch! If I have to drag you to Balkin across the Concourse!"

Pallas ran the maze of corridors, ran the surface of the moving slideways, all the way to her own suite. She had not imagined herself capable of this depth of rage. But the rage, she knew, was partly against herself. That any part of her could have desired *him*—of all men!

"I should have killed him! He will rape everything in his path. His own world, his allies, UMBER itself." A vision came of Salmi tracking her to the crest of the Great UMBER Scarp, naked, throwing her to the stony ground, forcing apart her legs, his huge member splitting her open...

She reached her cabin and stumbled inside. Mercifully, Vera was still asleep and there was no sign of Dion. When she collapsed on the bed she suddenly remembered the ring and carefully took it off. Could she have kept control of herself long enough to use it? She knew the answer was no.

For a long time she lay in the dark as her muscles slowly relaxed and the tension in her body gradually eased. Thoughts careened inside her skull. We will never get Io without a fight now. He will never forgive my spurning him. The dagger: I can take it and return to his cabin. I can kill him with an embrace.

She went through it in her mind but her body would not obey.

In the lounge of the Cosmopolis casino complex the visitor could peruse a finely bound copy of "Games of the Concourse" by E. J. Bigglesworth. The book sat atop one of the rich walnut side tables and as the well-worn page attested, the casual reader most often turned to the third chapter...

Combo: has there ever been a game quite like it? Humans have gambled at cards for eons, but never have the elements of cooperation and betrayal, subterfuge and treachery—indeed the sheer art of machination—been so combined!

The game has popular but specialized appeal. There is the challenge of plotting the possible exchanges of twenty cards among four players, judging only by the ones you yourself are engaged in. There is the absence of all but a single chance element, occurring at the beginning of each hand, which you then put—with discretion!—to your own use. There is the need to present a dissembling exterior that puts the ancient poker to shame. And there is that unique thrill of initiating a successful cooperation in secret with one of your opponents, then making a killing by betraying him—all the time guarding to see that it doesn't happen to you.

Combo has been called infamous. It has been cited in divorce courts, business de-mergers, even the occasional homicide case. Some gamblers refuse to countenance its invidious aspects. Still others have made the game their own specialty, drawn by its challenge to mind and judgment and its unusual inter-player currents. It has been the subject of more sociological comment than any other game after Intersect.

The game requires four players, no more, no less, preferably with an unlimited supply of money. Each player starts out with the same hand of five cards: King, Queen, Peasant, Throne, Crown, but all of a particular suit—Hearts, Diamonds, Clubs, or Spades. The four Assassin cards are distributed separately, at random, their suits hidden...

Glenn Berenson had spent most of the previous day in the casino. Though he had thought much about Pallas Dhin-Asper, his training kept his attention on the activity at hand. It had been another light day there but he had gone through several games of poker, red baron, and even a game of combo. He had seen no sign of Rima or Tamas.

By contrast, the casino today was crowded with patrons who seemed well heeled and anxious to spend. The adjoining roulette room was a hubbub of players and some of it spilled over into the lounge where Glenn sat. But on this day he was losing, for he could not keep his attention on the cards. Like metal to a magnet his head was drawn repeatedly to the outer doors, first one, then the other.

All morning she did not put in an appearance. At one point he folded a weak hand, got up and paced about the room like a caged sybot. Then, as he retreated to the foyer in complete frustration with himself, he noticed a familiar figure dismount from the slide-way, cross the walkway and approach the opening. It was Miles Destan.

"Mr. Berenson—and in the casino. I see my first estimation was correct. Something about you told me your occupation."

Glenn looked surprised. "Do I wear it so openly?"

"Perhaps not. But then, you expressed an urge to take on something of a gamble when I first met you." Destan looked past him into the lounge. "I don't see our lady from Umber. Or has the game not gotten under way?" He took care to let the humor show in his eyes.

Dismissing an impulse to feel annoyed, Glenn accepted Destan's friendly tone and the opportunity to talk. It would help to release some of his tension. "Yes, but we're hardly past the first deal. She's an engaging woman. In fact, she has gotten me quite distracted; not the best thing for a man of my profession. If I keep playing today, I will lose more than I won yesterday."

"Do you never have a losing day when you're not distracted?"

Glenn's mouth eased into a smile. "That depends on the competition, of course. But to lose because your mind is elsewhere: that's something no gambler can afford to do."

"How does one get into your line of work, Mr. Berenson?"

"Please call me Glenn."

"Glenn. And I'm Miles. Many people think of it as a glamorous way of life."

"Actually, I landed in a fix once and got myself out of it by a reckless game of Duel. I've never looked back. But as for the glamour, there's always more of that to those looking on. Most of us experience an equal mix of exhilaration and sweat."

"And what does the Gatrin think of your occupation?"

"I haven't told her. On the other hand, I did mention I would be in the casino today if she wanted to look me up, so she may have made her own deductions." The two men entered the lounge.

Destan asked idly, "I wonder what she's here for. Did she say?"

"Business and pleasure. I met her again the day we arrived, when she was taking a little pleasure in the Float. Yesterday was business. Beyond that I know nothing about it."

At that moment Glenn's eyes narrowed as he perceived Rima and Tamas on the other side of the room. His glance remained on them as he asked, "Would you care for a game of any sort, Miles?"

"No, I've never been a gambler, Glenn. Just an unadventurous academic who can't afford to risk his meager income."

"Well, if you have nothing more pressing to do, come and watch some gamblers in action. I may be able to regain enough concentration to show you how rapacious the breed can be." He made his way to the spot where Rima and Tamas had stopped to watch a game in progress. Destan followed.

Rima looked up and her face brightened. "Glenn—Mr. Berenson! How nice to see you again." She introduced him to Tamas. "Are you here to play?"

"Yes, perhaps you'd like to join me in a game of red baron? You should enjoy playing with me: I don't win too often, as you may remember."

She gave a gay laugh. "Come, then. Three-handed red baron it is."

The three seated themselves and the rounds began. The deck consisted of 96 cards. Those drawn by each player were placed face up in various patterns and Destan soon found he could follow the game's principle. When a red face card appeared on the draw pack, the card below it was "hit," but first the player who had drawn the red baron could protect a certain number of his cards by turning them down. When the hit card was revealed, any cards of that rank still showing were lost to a discard pile; any protected cards of the same rank doubled in value. As more of the sixteen red barons appeared, as more cards entered play and were set aside in melds, the predictability of the hit cards increased. Before the hit card was revealed, the player who drew the red baron could raise the stake to a predetermined limit. At the end of the round, highest value in melds took the pot.

As the rounds proceeded Glenn began to suspect that the other two were using signals to aid each other's memories. But his own mind, whether from tension or a thirst for revenge, operated with astonishing clarity. Like stars to a deep-space telescope, the

entire pack seemed laid out before him: cards played and cards yet to be played. His pile of winnings steadily grew.

Rima began to lose her sparkle and Tamas, obviously discomfited, occasionally looked sidelong at her, clearly wondering why she had gotten them into this.

At the mid-point of the tenth round Glenn feigned subtle signs of confusion, as if he had lost track of the cards played thus far. The gesture did not go unnoticed. From then on, at each opportunity, his opponents raised the stake to the limit, and soon the tokens in the center of the table were strewn thickly. There were two cards left. Glenn turned over the last red baron. This time it was he who raised to the limit, surprising Rima and Tamas who at this point could not afford to fold.

A moment's reflection would tell him the identity of the hit card so that he could protect his final pattern, the one he needed to win the pot. But now Tamas glanced up, looking past Glenn's shoulder, and immediately his glance sharpened by a hair. Glenn saw it and instantly recognized the look: a reaction to the only thing that could even momentarily distract a male gambler from his concentration on the game—a beautiful woman. Simultaneously, Glenn felt a tingle starting at the base of his spine and rising up his back. Should he turn around? He knew he had to protect his Aces or his Tens. Could it be her? Would the Gatrín of Umber really come to the casino to find him? His hand paused over the Tens, then moved on hesitantly. What would she think if she saw him losing everything the minute she walked in? He struggled to recall the last discard Rima had been forced to make. Should he look at Destan's face? Was his head turned sideways?

Tamas was staring at him with a testy expression.

The memory came back and Glenn turned down his Aces. Tamas, with an explosive grunt, grabbed at the hit card. It was an Ace.

Rima gave a cry of sheer frustration and threw her cards onto the pile of tokens. Tamas' face turned purple. In a silent fury he got up and strode off, followed by a hollow-looking Rima. Glenn gathered in everything on the table.

He glanced at Destan, but Destan was looking upward, to a point just behind Glenn's chair. Glenn turned around. He would have sold his mother, could he remember her, for that face now looking down at him, the mouth smiling and forming the words, "Hello, Mr. Berenson."

Once more his training served him well. Had he been less adept at concealing emotion, he might have babbled on the spot. Instead he smiled broadly at Pallas, and when he rose and took her hand in greeting she showed no disinclination. And she was alone.

"Come, you were calling me Glenn when I saw you last. Let's not take a step backward."

He turned to Destan: "Pallas, this is Miles Destan. I really don't know much more than that, except that he says he's not a gambler." He looked down at the table and the pile of tokens. "However, that's more than I can say for myself. As you can see, I've had a run of luck. Sit down, while I get rid of the ugly stuff." He took a cloth bag from his pocket and proceeded to stuff it to the brim. Pallas lowered herself into the chair vacated by Rima.

To Destan she looked a little drawn, certainly more than when he had first seen her on the shuttle. "Glenn told me a little about you," he said, which was turning it around. "My work has brought me to many worlds, but somehow I have overlooked your Umber. I understand it is a beautiful and unsullied planet. Of course, I've heard of the Hrabas stallion."

Her smile is striking, thought Destan, but there is some pre-occupation there as well.

Glenn said, "Now that your day of business is over, can you sample the other attractions of Cosmopolis? I have to do something with these things." He hefted the bag in his hand.

"I'd like that very much."

"Speaking of business," Destan interjected, not being able to approach the subject more subtly nor wanting them to go off too soon, "I am hoping to see Captain Cardis, perhaps tomorrow." Pallas, though showing some interest, said nothing. "Have you seen him yourself yet? I should think he'd be anxious to receive a visitor of your station."

"My business is not with Captain Cardis," she replied. "Though I learned only yesterday that the Captain has business with my mother, much to my surprise."

"With your mother?"

"Apparently he wants to make Umber a terminus world."

"Ah, yes. The Stellar Game. That is something I learned about only yesterday, too—at least, so that I fully understood it. But why does Cardis need another terminus? I should think he has enough already, the game has been going on for eight years."

"I have no idea. My minister tells me he's been trying to talk my mother into it for a year now."

"Really?" He tried pressing a little further. "Have you informed the Captain of your arrival? Perhaps he isn't aware of it."

She knew Dion was intending to contact the Captain later in the day, in a desperate attempt to rescue the situation with Salmi. She herself considered it hopeless.

"Oh, I think he is likely aware of it." On another occasion Pallas would probably have bridled at this stranger's insistent

questioning, but today an enervation was overriding her usual volatility.

Glenn asked: "Is your business completed? Are you free to concentrate on the pleasure now?"

Pallas gave him a dispirited smile. "I don't know. I'm afraid that things were left up in the air—"

She stopped. She had glanced across the room and now her face became ashen. Both Glenn and Destan turned in that direction. Nathan Salmi had just entered the casino with an aide and was calmly surveying the room. His eye fell on Pallas.

Destan said slowly, "If I am not mistaken, that is General Salmi of Balkin, is it not?"

Pallas nodded. When Glenn looked at her he did not have to ask: he knew that the man who had just walked in was her enemy.

She said softly, "He must have had me followed. I am sure this cannot be a coincidence."

Glenn watched as Salmi crossed the room, a figure wearing power and self-assurance like a tailored suit, and he took an instant dislike to the man. Without doubt he was dangerous. Glenn fought an impulse to move closer to Pallas in a protective gesture.

Salmi stopped before the table and nodded in Pallas' direction. His voice was quiet. "Gatrin Pallas, I believe things were left unresolved between us last evening. I did not want you to depart the ship until we had a chance to reopen negotiations."

From her still seated position she looked at him squarely. "Between us personally, no, not unresolved. But Umber still craves your indulgence in the matter of Io."

Salmi stood easy, wearing a faint smile. "There is more at stake than that. After all, what is a barren rock with a few holes in it? Your impulsive behavior last night I don't hold against you, it is part of your appeal. But I would have hoped that after a night's sleep you would reconsider your position. Also, I don't think your mother would be happy to have you return to Umber leaving affairs as they presently stand. Why don't we take a stroll through the ship? There is much to enjoy on it. We can talk further in more amenable surroundings."

Glenn spoke up, keeping his voice neutral. "The lady has just consented to spend the day with me." Salmi looked his way for the first time.

"I like it here," Pallas said simply.

"Then dismiss your acquaintances and we will talk at this table, although I would have preferred a somewhat different article of furniture."

Glenn glanced at Destan. The Historian's face was placid, as though he were attending an exchange at an academic convention.

Only his eyes betrayed an intense interest. Glenn's own stomach churned.

Pallas' cheekbones became ruby-etched as she flared: "What do you think to gain by being so brazen with me? Do you imagine I will be swept up by your bravado? I too am a member of a ruling house."

"All the more reason why we belong together."

Pallas turned in her chair and stared away, as if to dismiss the insolent figure.

Glenn spoke again, his eyes on the bag of tokens which he idly turned in his hand. "On Cosmopolis it is considered bad taste to force one's company on someone else."

Salmi spoke in the coldest of tones: "This is none of your concern."

I am no match for him on this level, Glenn thought. He looks upon me as no more than an insect. But perhaps there is a different approach. Perhaps I can use his own swagger to cut him down to size.

"Well," he said, affecting a more disinterested air, "if you want to stick around and talk, why not play a game of cards? Perhaps you can gain the lady that way. If you win, I'll release her from her previous commitment to me."

The temperature of Salmi's expression dropped even lower, but in his eyes there was a flicker of uncertainty. Pallas still sat pointedly ignoring him: a stalemate of wills, and he could hardly seize her bodily. But he could not allow himself to lose face. Damn these intruders!

The gambler was persisting. "Do you play combo?"

Perhaps a delaying tactic—until she softened. In his indecision Salmi nibbled at the bait. "Combo? Yes. But competent opponents are difficult to come by."

He's shifting his attack to me, Glenn realized. Good. "I feel the same," he said. "But you strike me as just such a man. Has Balkin not produced any other competent combo players?"

Salmi allowed himself a faint smile. "My aide here plays combo." Glenn knew what the General was thinking: if one could count on another player in the game one possessed a definite advantage. "But are you sure you have sufficient resources?"

"Fortunately, I just happened to hit a winning streak before you came in." He patted the bag. "I'm sure I can find another player in a room like this."

Salmi gestured at Destan. "How about this man here?"

"I am not a gambler," Destan murmured.

Salmi looked over at Pallas who still sat in profile and now he seemed to hesitate over the direction events were taking. Glenn

saw that he had to move quickly. He took a step away from the table and looked around, calling to the room. "We need a fourth for combo here. You will have a distinguished fellow-player: General Salmi of Balkin. Will anyone match wits with him?" Salmi glanced with visible irritation at his stone-faced aide, uneasy at the atmosphere the situation was taking on, but he did not bring himself to halt the proceedings.

Two men approached. Glenn sized both up as professionals and off-handedly chose the gaunt one, who looked the more adept.

"Good. Let's say, General, that whoever wins the most money in four hands gets the girl. If your aide wins, the prize also goes to you. If this man wins, it goes to me...Not the money, of course," he told the newcomer. "What you win, you keep. It's just that there's another stake involved. What's your name?"

"Rap."

Apparently a reticent man.

Destan vacated his chair for Salmi's aide, while Rap pulled up his own. Pallas, her face an impenetrable mask, got to her feet and Glenn took her place. A group of interested bystanders began to gather round.

The table seated Glenn, the aide, Salmi and Rap going to the left. Glenn reached into his pocket for a combo deck. "I'll be Hearts: the first dealer never has the initial advantage." He broke the seal, shuffled the deck. Fanning the cards face down on the table, he drew out the four cards with a different back design and set them aside. The others he turned face up and began to sort.

From the edge of the circle of spectators Pallas watched both protagonists. General Salmi was peeved; his nostrils dilated and contracted like a fish caught on a lure it had snatched at too hastily. And what of this gambler, about whom she knew so little? The idea of a game with herself as the stake was offensive, but it had diverted an awkward situation and she trusted his motives. But did he realize what he had taken on: a powerful Hierarch who would not stand to lose at anything?

"Now remember, gentlemen," Glenn was saying, "just to keep things friendly, that the immediate object of the game is to share the pot with another player. We must use our Assassin cards with discretion." A slight smile nudged the corners of his mouth. "Otherwise, we might not want to play with each other again."

Salmi's aide took out a purse of high value tokens, passed half of them to the General. At this Glenn scanned Rap's saturnine countenance, but the man remained unperturbed. Glenn proposed a raising limit: it was high, and if he lost a lot it could break him. Everyone nodded.

All four players tossed in the ante for the first hand. Glenn

distributed the cards, the same five to each player: King, Queen, Peasant, Throne, Crown, but following the sequence of suits around the table, beginning with himself: Hearts, Diamonds, Clubs, Spades. Then he took the four Assassins which had been set aside and dealt them face down. Each player checked his own and left it unrevealed in front of him. Glenn had received the Assassin of Diamonds, the suit of Salmi's aide.

Diamonds had the first round of the hand. The aide exchanged one card secretly with each of the other players in turn; a player receiving a card could give back any card from his own hand except the one just received. To Glenn, last in line, the aide gave his Peasant, the dummy card. Glenn gave in return his Throne, the cancel card of his King.

Next, Salmi's round, Clubs. When he got to Glenn the General gave his King. The high pay card. Was Salmi going to play without subtlety? Did he have the Assassin card of Glenn's suit?

Glenn considered. He gave back his Queen, the low pay card. He and Salmi, unknown to the others, had now formed a combo—an exchange of pay cards—between themselves, but one of only medium rank, a King and a Queen. The General completed his round by exchanging a card with his aide.

Now it was Rap's round, Spades. Rap, too, gave Glenn his King and Glenn returned his own King. Their combo now outranked the one he had formed with Salmi, provided it was not sabotaged before the end of the hand: provided the Throne card he had given the aide did not end up in Rap's hand, or Rap's Throne in his.

The last round of the hand was Glenn's. As he had earlier given out his Throne, he now had to get rid of his Crown, the cancel card of his Queen, which Salmi held. The rules specified a penalty for holding on to one's own cancel cards: for each card, the loss of half whatever winnings one gained in that hand. But should he give it to Salmi and deliberately sabotage their combo, as he suspected that Salmi had the Hearts Assassin? Or should he assume that Rap and he would be successful anyway? At the beginning of his own round, each player had elected to raise the stakes—Salmi by a considerable sum, Glenn as well—and all others were forced to meet it each time: in combo, a player was not allowed to fold. Salmi's raise would indicate that he was counting on his King. So Glenn gave him his Crown, which cancelled the Queen of Hearts Salmi had received from him earlier. A frown passed over the Balkin ruler's face. Glenn feared for a moment that Salmi would return Rap's Throne, but it was only one of his own cancel cards.

The last exchange with Rap proved superfluous. Then all cards were laid out. The King-Queen combo with Salmi stood cancelled, while of the others formed around the table, Glenn's combo with

Rap was the highest ranking, since it involved Hearts, and had not been sabotaged. Rap did not produce the Hearts Assassin, either because he didn't have it or chose not to do so. He and Glenn shared a sizeable pot.

"I see you play this game well, my friend," Salmi said to Glenn. "I also see you are not to be trusted."

"Who is, in combo?" asked Glenn ingenuously.

The second hand. Hearts and the deal passed to the aide. All players received the same five cards again, but with the suit sequence rotated one position to the left. Again the four Assassins were dealt separately, their identities hidden.

After the four rounds of the second hand, Salmi and his aide formed the highest ranking combo. But the General promptly produced the Assassin of Hearts—the aide's suit—and captured the aide's share of the winnings for himself. This move of betrayal was the principal element that gave combo its notorious character, for when one received a pay card from another player, especially the high one, there was always reason to suspect that such a betrayal was in the other's mind. If, as happened occasionally, both players had received each other's Assassins and played them, all winnings were blocked and remained on the table as part of the ante for the next hand. However, a prudent combo player often passed up the opportunity to produce an Assassin; it gave him a better chance to pull in an unsuspecting partner when the stakes were higher.

Though this hand's pot was smaller than the previous one, Salmi had taken it all and now held more tokens than Glenn. The General became more expansive; he seemed to be relishing the contest.

The spectators had pressed about, leaving the traditional meter gap between themselves and the backs of the players' chairs. Destan had made his way around to stand beside Pallas. The game had attracted attention from other rooms and soon the lounge became packed with curious people. Combo had a tendency to draw thrill-seekers.

In the third hand the deal passed to Salmi. He and Glenn eventually formed a winning combo, which was somewhat unusual since Salmi occupied the weakest position and Glenn had not played his high pay card with the Balkin. But the aide had successfully played to sabotage the overtures that Rap—in the strongest position—had made, obviously to support the General's chances. When the cards were laid down, Rap's mouth tightened by a hair but otherwise he maintained his impassivity.

Neither Glenn nor Salmi held the other's Assassin and so they shared the pot. But Glenn had still managed a damaging move against the Balkin. One of Salmi's cancel cards had been passed to

him by Rap, and on Salmi's second-last exchange Glenn had returned it into the General's hand. But Salmi meanwhile had been holding on to his other one, intending to get rid of it at the very end; so now he held both, with only a single exchange remaining. Thus he was left holding one of his own cancel cards and had to suffer the penalty. Half of his share—and it was a large pot this time—remained on the table, to be included in the ante for the next hand.

Glenn's skin contracted at the wave of hatred that seemed to seethe across the table; the General had been caught in one of the game's most elementary traps.

The fourth and last round: Salmi's winnings now stood only slightly greater than Glenn's.

Pallas found herself trembling. What if Salmi should win? Not that she had agreed to this farce, but the whole thing had taken on magnified proportions. Glenn maintained a cool exterior but he was obviously taut inside, while Salmi's volatile emotions bubbled at the surface. The atmosphere around the table might have suggested that worlds were at stake. If Salmi lost, would he be sufficiently deflated to give up pressing her—or would his fury be unbounded? If he won, would he be swept up by the intoxication of the game and try to claim her as the prize?

Now she wished she were carrying the dagger. She stared at the Balkin ruler, at the face heavy with animal excitement and desperation, the brow pockmarked by moisture. When he looked over at her for the first time in the game, she was unable to pull her gaze away, caught by a madness in his eyes.

Glenn, what have you done? I will be damned if you win, and damned if you don't.

Hearts and the deal was now with Rap. Glenn would have the first round, the strongest position. He received his Assassin, turned up the corner. Fates, what have you done: it is Salmi's!

One chance in three: the odds that the General had his. If Glenn played right he might be able to deduce it. But even so, could he play strongly and give Salmi his King—a move that always aroused suspicion? Yet if he didn't, Salmi might play strongly elsewhere and win.

Glenn decided to risk it. He gave his Queen to the aide, receiving the other's Crown in return: a response that virtually assured him that the aide did not hold his Assassin. Then he gave Salmi the King.

The Balkin hesitated. After a long moment he returned his Queen. Glenn thought: of course, he doesn't trust me. Or perhaps he really holds my Assassin and is trying to pull me in with a subtle play.

Glenn now looked at the poker-faced Rap. Surely he had picked up an idea of what was happening here. If Rap were holding Glenn's Assassin, could Glenn get him to indicate it? And the taciturn gambler had been provoked on the previous round by the aide's support of Salmi—another treacherous aspect to combo, which an experienced player could usually detect and retaliate against. Would he do so now?

Glenn passed Rap his Throne. Rap returned his King! An unorthodox exchange. The standard amateur move that indicated the second player held the first's Assassin and hoped to get him to save a pay card for him on a later exchange. But Rap was not an amateur. He had given Glenn his signal: the Diamonds Assassin was in Rap's possession. Now Glenn could concentrate on Salmi.

But he held only Salmi's low pay card. If the General used his King to form a combo with another King—and it would certainly be with the aide—it would outrank the one he had formed with Glenn. Somehow it had to be sabotaged. But Glenn saw that he himself could do nothing about it. His round was over; he had one more exchange with each of them—at their initiatives. Salmi would clearly get rid of his Throne. He wouldn't give it to the aide, and he would not risk giving it to Glenn.

That means he'll give it to Rap. What will Rap do with Salmi's Throne? Will he decide to take revenge for the previous hand?

The exchanges proceeded. When Salmi on his round gave a card to Rap, Glenn repeated over and over in his mind: give it to the aide, give it to the aide, as if he could implant the suggestion by telepathy. But he was suddenly distracted when Salmi passed over a card: his Crown! The Balkin had just sabotaged their combo! But no—Glenn had one more exchange with Rap. He could get rid of Salmi's Crown then.

The last round: Rap's. Everyone had been conservative in raising the pot and now Rap passed it up entirely. Still, the pile of tokens was considerable, augmented by Salmi's penalty in the previous hand.

The final exchanges were made. Did Rap hand the aide the right card? Then with a sinking feeling Glenn realized that Salmi, if he had had his wits about him, would have saved his Throne for Rap's last exchange with him, the last exchange of the game. But he had suffered for such a delay in the last hand. Had it affected his judgment this time?

The aide, until now almost as poker-faced as Rap, looked troubled. Down went the cards. Glenn's eye pounced on the aide's hand. There it was: the Throne of Spades, right beside Salmi's King of Spades, canceling it. In Salmi's hand, the aide's King—now also useless. The General's face was black.

Rap had inflicted retribution.

A check of the other cards showed that Glenn and Salmi had formed the winning combo. Hesitantly the General looked up at the gambler, but Glenn showed nothing on his face. He could not resist: he waited until Salmi adopted a look of triumph and reached over for his share of the pot, for even with half to him and half to Glenn, his total winnings were greater.

"One moment, General Salmi." Glenn flipped over his Assassin card.

Spades.

The crowd around the table let out a collective sigh, as Salmi's arms stopped in mid-reach, his face dead of expression. Then he flushed to the roots of his hair.

Pallas rolled her eyes.

The ruler of Balkin straightened in his chair, and his gaze upon Glenn would have withered a forest. Glenn's insides turned to jelly, though only the glaze in his eyes betrayed it.

For a long moment everyone around the table seemed frozen, until the sound of Salmi's breathing became the loudest noise in the room. At that point Rap gathered up his tokens, rose from the chair and without a word or glance for anyone disappeared through the spectators.

Slowly Salmi's head swung toward Pallas. He spoke like a volcano about to erupt, one measured word at a time. "You put him up to this. You hired this whelp to make a fool of me. What are you paying him? Will you open your legs to him in the House of Love and let him shove himself in where you denied me? Me! Salmi of Balkin!"

The lava was flowing. "I will reduce Umber to a cinder! I will hack the head off every stallion!" Salmi's powerful voice rang from the high ceiling; the crowd, infected with fright, backed away.

Destan stood immobile beside Pallas. As Glenn rose and moved sideways toward them, Salmi bellowed, "I will drag you and every woman of Umber to my Retreats! I will take my fill of all of you!" Cosmopolis attendants had appeared and were pushing their way through the spectators, but when they reached the open space even they stood with uncertainty before Salmi's towering rage.

Pallas was glaring at the General, taking deep, deep breaths from the pit of her body. Now she too exploded. And her eruption was the greater.

"You filthy Balkin pig! You mashga! You dung heap! You think you would drag me to your dungeons? I would shred your throat with my bare hands! I would tear out your ugly tool and throw it to the rats!!"

Salmi recoiled, sinking back into his chair, mouth gaping, eyes

starting. He made a guttural rasp: "No woman—" He faltered. Two male attendants approached with mollifying gestures.

Pallas began to swing her body, expelling a steady braying cry. Pushing past Destan, Glenn seized her arm. "Pallas—Pallas—"

Salmi's head had dropped back; his breathing was labored. The attendants leaned over him.

Glenn turned to Destan. "I've got to get her out of here." He gave a quick glance back to the table. "Take my winnings, Miles. Keep them for me—I trust you."

Glenn dragged the distracted woman through the press of onlookers and out into the corridor. Down the walkway Pallas staggered, as pedestrians turned to stare and sideway riders craned from beyond the boulevard. Glenn came behind.

"That foul, slimy, stinking reptile!" She beat at her temples. "I should have killed him! I should have killed him!" She threw back her head and hollered, fierce and unconstrained, at the vaulted expanse overhead. "There are not enough ways, mother, to satisfy both you and me!!"

Glenn wrenched her arm, pulling her around to face him. "Pallas, they will come and restrain you! Control yourself!"

Her voice lowered but still a wild look fired her eyes. "I missed my chance, Glenn. I missed it last night. I could have done it. Even today, back there, I could have done it."

"Pallas! We would have stopped you."

She turned and darted across the near roadstrip onto the boulevard and Glenn dashed after. Where can I bring her to calm down? he thought. What could possibly calm her down? She will rage from one end of the ship to the other.

Grasping her arm he guided her over the inner walk and mounted the far slideway, pulling her aboard. His arms encircled her as they stood on the running strip carrying them past chamber after chamber. He could feel her breath coming in rapid pulsations; her breasts through the tunic, hard, pressed into him.

It will take more than soothing words, he realized. His mind ran rapidly around the ship. Where? What?

The Sensorium. They could set up one of their pacifying programs on a helium recliner. He had done it himself on occasion and it was not far ahead.

They almost missed the end of the slideway. At the intersection Pallas looked at him again, desperation still heavy on her face. "Glenn, help me do it. Please help me do it. We can wait for him near his cabin. I have a dagger in my things." She shook her head in frustration. "I came here to do it—why didn't I? I had poison with me when I went to see him last night. I know I could have done it. He would have died slowly."

Then the memory of why she had been diverted from that resolve returned and it eroded some of her frenzy.

"Come on, Pallas. If you want me to help you murder someone, we can't stand here discussing it in a major intersection on Cosmopolis."

On down the corridor. Into a familiar concession area. Past crowded chambers. Pallas began to regain her wits, she breathed deeply. She brought back the image of the ruler of Balkin, furious to the point of derangement, reeling from her own assault, collapsing. She drew strength from the memory.

Perhaps she had broken him. But no, not by herself. She surveyed the man beside her. Who was he, to humiliate a Hierarchy like Nathan Salmi? Was he a powerful person on his own world? No, he had no particular home, so he said. What kind of strength did someone need who had no family, no people to return to, who wandered the Concourse on his own resources—

Still she was oblivious to where they were going. Glenn led her through an archway, down a lane and into a wide courtyard. It was the Seven Worlds Pleasure Dome.

Pallas finally awoke to the familiar surroundings as Glenn started across the patio to the Sensorium. "Let's go in here. It will help us to relax."

She pulled him to a stop. "No. Not the Sensorium. I don't want to have my brain probed and my mind manipulated." Her eyes fixed onto his own and now they smoldered with a new intensity. Deliberately she turned and pointed across the courtyard.

"There." Glenn followed her gesture. The House of Love.

His head swam. Caught once more in her gaze, Glenn was suddenly seized by the full impact of all that had happened. While distracted by Pallas' reactions he had had no time to feel his own. Now he realized that he had just played one of the greatest games of his career. He had conquered and humbled Salmi of Balkin. Championed the most beautiful woman of his experience.

And now this woman was leading him to the House of Love.

He felt a dizzying surge of power and desire as they walked toward the beckoning structure. He had entered the place before, but never with such a thrilling rush of excitement, every nerve electrified.

They passed through the portal into the foyer. The subtle warmth brushed them, the soft light bathed them. They were met by two attendants: a man and a woman. Both were nude.

"Welcome to the House of Love." Their voices sounded silken and they spoke simultaneously. "Here you may indulge whatever grants pleasure and no pain." The skin of their bodies was smooth, their proportions seemed perfect in the tactile light. "Come."

Across the foyer they went, into an inner chamber, broad and round like a theater. Here the lighting was subdued, the air perfumed with a mixture of special scents and the smell of male and female. There were people in the room. The attendants turned to Pallas and Glenn. "You may disrobe if you wish; we will attend to your clothes."

Glenn looked at Pallas. Without a word, hardly taking her eyes from his, she removed her shoes and tunic, her loose trousers, her underclothes, and stood naked in front of him. He drank in her body as he removed his own clothing. His desire was frank and unabashed.

She took his hand and they walked further into the room. On a dais in the center a couple were making love in a luxurious fashion. Other couples stood or reclined about, fondling each other as they watched. Presently the female attendant returned. She was shorter than Pallas, her breasts smaller, her thighs slimmer, but the sight of those two lovely bodies side by side, almost touching, made Glenn ache: for the glory of being human, being alive, being himself.

"If you wish to use the dais, it will be an hour."

"No, it will not be necessary," Pallas said.

"We have massage platforms, single or double capacity." She indicated alcoves to one side, some open, others with curtained closures drawn. "They can provide a marvelous relaxation."

Pallas shook her head. She did not want to dissipate any of her tension.

"We also have a full range of stimulant chambers: sounds, visuals, odors. Any combination to suit your needs or preferences."

"Thank-you, but we wish only a simple private room. One with a very broad bed."

"Certainly." She led them to a side door, down one corridor, then another, in whose air hung faint sounds like distant dryadic echoes, and into an inner bedroom. It was simply furnished, with a washroom off to one side. In the middle stood a great bed covered with a spread of deep pile, flanked on the far side by a long movable ottoman of the same height.

"There are spreads of three different fabric underneath," the attendant told them. "Under that, sheets of finest silk. All are fresh. The lights can be set to any level, and"—here she indicated small touch bars set into the midst of the bed's erotically sculpted headboard—"the mirrors can be opaqued or expanded."

She retreated to the entrance with a passing word for the rack of aphrodisiacs. "Your time will be four hours. Thirty minutes before, a chime will sound."

She withdrew and closed the door.

Pallas sat upon the bed and ran her hand over the spread. She lifted the corner, checked each one beneath. "These are nice, but I do not often have a chance to feel silk on my skin. There is little of it on UMBER." She stood up and dragged back all four spreads together, letting them fall in a heap at the foot of the bed. Glenn watched her move, bend. His throat felt thick and his heart pumped a giddy excitement to the outer limits of his body.

Pallas turned to him. That vibrant, feline quality she wore like a second skin shimmered through a swirl of unfettered sensuality, and her voice seemed to stroke the deepest nerve of his male being.

"You are a strong man, but gentle, Glenn. Your mind is quick but not cruel. You are alone, I can tell, but you are open to others. You are courageous. I love you."

Her arms flowed around his neck. Glenn's body flooded with her body's contact at the same moment that her mouth seized on his. The tension she had so long accumulated radiated from her and he felt it envelop him.

He could not say how they had reached the bed. She seemed to range over the whole of it with him in fluid movements like a lascivious cat, as if motion were the secret of life. She would twine long limbs about him, then withdraw to a hand's caress, and he felt her grace in contrast to his own inelegance. Still he did not enter her, making no claim on her initiative. Her touch, her wandering murmur, the combination of supple muscle and pliant flesh, the smell of her body with its touch of acrid flavored with a woman's excitement, were intoxicating his every fiber. Never had he been so rigid, so thirsting.

She pulled him across her and they rolled once more, so that Glenn lay on his back. She swung above him, pushed on his chest, lifted her hips up and back. Heat, moisture, the breath of passion, gushed over him as Pallas sheathed him to the deepest of her recesses.

Upright now, the third daughter of the Matrinx reverted to an untamed state. Eyes wide and alive, body writhing free, her sounds and movements made her kin to the plains creatures and the rushing waters. She knew what it was to be herself. To shed all constraint, to hide nothing, to unleash the elemental force of her female nature and grapple with that of a man, embracing it within herself, merging and emerging whole and unconquered.

Her fingers meshed with the hair on Glenn's chest. She felt the sweep of wind on her skin.

Through the halo of his own arousal Glenn could see the magnetism that had drawn him to this woman. His life had been spent in taking risks. For the challenge of the game, the pitting of

his own strength and resourcefulness against that of another, was needed to give the prize its luster. Yet he knew that no prize thus far had seemed sufficiently worthy. Now he had found Pallas Dhin-Asper, Gatrín of Umber, a challenge and a prize combined. It might be a long contest before he would know whether he had won or lost.

But he had won the round of the moment. So much beauty above him, so much warmth and excitement within his hands, sharing such intimate space with his own mind and body. His climax built until it swept him into a whirlpool, sucking him upward in a drenching penetration to the very heart of the woman.

Pallas felt it. She shuddered in a spasm of orgasm. On and on it went: She is Gatrín. She is Umber itself. She is woman. Man is hers. The Hrabas is hers. The rolling plains fly beneath her. She mounts to the very crest of the Great Scarp. Down upon her shower the stars....

They were cool and tingling. She collapsed forward onto Glenn's chest, her mouth on his cheek. Their warm breath, their deep sobs, mixed. She ran her hand over him, beneath her. Like the grass, the earth. The long, long tension drained from her body.

Pallas slept. Glenn turned low the light and lay beside her. He watched her slow breathing, the quiver of her eyes under the closed lids; he looked over the quiescent body murmuring in long, languid swells. To watch a naked woman sleep, one with whom he had just made love, he found serenely fulfilling, like the contemplation of one's act of creation.

He knew so little about her. How did her mind work? What motivations, what experiences shaped her behavior? Was she loyal, possessive, fickle? Devoted to her family, her world? How did she spend her days? What arts or pastimes did she love? What made her cry? It all slumbered there, behind the dusky brow.

There might be no place for him in her life. How could their backgrounds, their lifestyles, be reconciled—what could they have in common? Still he knew that he wanted her. But whatever the bond, it must not compromise her personality, her spirit. If he must play to win her, he knew that he also wanted to play to keep her. That fierce independence he had witnessed in the casino, experienced here on the bed, made her the most exciting woman he had ever known. It was not his intention to try to subdue that spirit, only to direct it toward himself.

He kissed Pallas' shoulder gently and lay back. Before long he was dozing.

At the chime, Glenn woke. Pallas stirred and opened her eyes.

"It is time to leave," Glenn said, and he realized that he felt apprehensive. Would the spell be broken?

Pallas sat up and kissed him warmly. "You mean we have been here for four hours? Dion and Vera will be worried, I expect." She stretched and bounded off the bed, feeling lighter than at any time since coming to Cosmopolis. They washed, then dried themselves in a provocative airbath, and Glenn wished that they had left themselves more time.

At the four hour mark they returned to the central chamber. The attendants handed over their clothes. As they dressed, the sounds and sights around them were much the same as when they had arrived, though no doubt of different patrons.

"Don't look too closely now, Glenn," Pallas said cheerily. "We don't want to get distracted again just as we have to leave."

Glenn paid the fee. The attendants bade them goodbye, inviting their return, and they walked out into the brighter, cooler courtyard. Leaving the Seven Worlds Pleasure Dome they made their way back to Pallas' suite.

The further they got from the House of Love the more Pallas seemed to sober. When Glenn tried to question her about the situation with Salmi, she hedged, reluctant to have him drawn in further. Part of her wanted to keep him on the outside, as a kind of refuge, and she believed there was no help he could give her in a situation that had worsened past the point of salvage. War loomed closer than ever. Salmi had been right about one thing: how could she go back to her mother having created such a state of affairs?

The idea of appealing to Captain Cardis, aside from seeming fruitless, now nettled her pride. The problem she had created she must solve herself. Dion would have to accept her decision not to make any overtures in the Captain's direction.

At the door to the Umber suite Pallas said, "I must confer with my minister and let him know what took place today. I fear he will be much dismayed."

Like countless apprehensive lovers before him through countless ages, Glenn asked, "When will I see you again?" Once more that frustration at feeling she was completely in charge of the affair.

"My mission here is very important, Glenn. I cannot place my own feelings ahead of it." She put a hand to his cheek. "But we have booked a full week on Cosmopolis, so I am sure there will be time to spend together once the problem with Salmi is resolved." That she despaired of such resolution except by desperate means she left unspoken. She could not assure herself that she would ever see this man again.

"Are you still intent on what you told me? I am afraid you will do something rash."

"I was not fully myself then. I will do nothing rash, I promise you." Her kiss was gentle and lingering.

Glenn walked the long way back to his own quarters in the Alpha pod and there found a message strip in the visicom: Miles Destan wished him to call at once. He punched the code.

"I was beginning to fear something had happened to you."

Glenn assured him that Pallas was safe in her own quarters.

"I have your tokens here. And I want to warn you, in case you had not thought of it: Salmi may try to retaliate for what happened in the casino. Trust me once more, Glenn. Take what things you need for the next 24 hours and come to my cabin right away. Be wary of anyone you meet in the corridors."

When Destan broke the connection he felt only a slight twinge of guilt. He was getting used to the idea of manipulating other people for his own ends. Of course, it was highly unlikely that Nathan Salmi would even be able to learn Glenn's identity and even less likely that he would violate the Cosmopolis rule. But Destan wanted to make his link with Glenn Berenson as strong as possible. It had already led to some intriguing information about Cardis' interest in Umber. There had to be more. The Gatrín, he knew now, had come to Cosmopolis for business with the ruler of Balkin, but there could still be a tie-in with Cardis' own plans that neither of them might be aware of. And of all those he had met on the ship thus far, Pallas Dhin-Asper stood the greatest chance of coming into personal contact with the Captain—perhaps even a more intimate contact than anyone else.

As he waited for Glenn, Destan scanned once more the letter he had received a few hours earlier: an invitation to attend the Captain's reception for the Intersect players the next day. It included no personal word from Cardis himself, but he had little doubt that the invitation had been sent at the Captain's direction. He also had little doubt that a similar invitation had been sent to the Gatrín of Umber.

Glenn arrived ten minutes later carrying a small satchel. Destan offered the hospitality of his cabin, poured them drinks and began a casual conversation.

"I assume you were able to calm the Gatrín down after you left the casino."

Glenn sipped at the smooth deep green cordial, letting it trickle down his throat. He had not eaten in many hours and its effect was instantly heady. He said, "The Gatrín has her own ways of calming down, but I suppose you might say I had something to do with it. By the way, what happened to Salmi after we left?"

"He recovered quickly. I think he couldn't stand to have all those people looking at him. When he walked out with his aide his face was like granite."

"He is a formidable man. I admire Pallas' spirit for standing up to him."

"Do you know anything about horses, Glenn?" Destan had been to the Library that morning where he had perused several entries on the planet Umber, once again marveling at the Cosmopolis interest in all aspects of the Concourse.

"I've never ridden one, if that's what you mean, Miles."

"There have been many breeds evolved on many worlds over the centuries, but possibly the most formidable one today is the Umber stallion. It's a strong, spirited animal; quite aggressive, so I'm told, and utterly without fear. The surprising feat is that the women of Umber have managed to breed such a type and yet train it to obey and respond to the rider. Have you heard of the hunts on Balmorgen?" Glenn shook his head. "Half the planet is wild, kept as a hunting preserve and stocked with some pretty fierce creatures. The place is frequented by sportsmen and women from all over the Concourse and when they hunt on the savannas they need to rely on their mounts implicitly. A full quarter of Umber's export goes to Balmorgen."

"It sounds like you're suggesting that Pallas has had some experience in dealing with formidable adversaries—and taming them." He gave a loud guffaw. "I wonder if Salmi really knew what he was up against."

"I'm sure he did. It's not only gamblers at cards who enjoy a challenge."

Glenn winced. Destan smiled and asked, "Did Pallas give you any indication of what further steps she intends to take in her dispute with Salmi?" He detected a troubled hesitation. "Or perhaps she has a more unorthodox idea in mind?"

Glenn answered tentatively, "Apparently she visited Salmi last night. She said she was carrying poison but something prevented her from using it."

"What happened in the casino would hardly serve to reduce such a resolve."

"That's what worries me. She also mentioned a dagger. I think she regretted not having it with her today."

Destan pondered the implications of this information. How could he make use of it?

"Tomorrow I will be attending the Captain's reception and I suspect that Gatrín Pallas will be there also, as will General Salmi. I can try to warn the Captain of the potential danger. I am sure he would not want to handle something like the murder of a Concourse ruler at the hands of another here on Cosmopolis."

"Pallas promised me she wouldn't do anything rash."

"Rash? That implies a certain haste and lack of thought. It strikes me that Pallas Dhin-Asper would not do something like dispatch her enemy, especially at a Captain's reception, without careful planning and premeditation.

"But I insist you stay here for the night. Keep clear of the casino tomorrow—at least until after the reception. What transpires there may determine whether you will see Pallas again."

A little before the designated hour the next afternoon Destan changed into more elaborate attire. In a decorative epaulette he concealed a microcamera, controlled by a remote device placed in an outer pocket. Into an inner pocket he dropped a broadcast chip the size of a button, and an ear-insert pickup; into another, a lock decoder and a tiny contact amplifier. All were fashioned of scan-proof material.

A short time later he presented himself at a security post just inside the Captain's pod. Other guests were arriving and each time their number reached ten the group was taken under escort by an attendant, to be brought by slideway and elevator to the upper deck. Here, in the inner sanctum of Cardis and his officers, Destan observed a surprising lack of ostentation. Even the lowliest of the Beta cabin corridors boasted greater luxury, and he felt sure that those to whom the Captain was something of a legend would not have pictured him amid such austerity.

In the foyer of the reception complex the party was turned over to a hostess who checked their names against the guest list, then led them into the main reception chamber: a room large and unrelentingly square, perhaps thirty meters to a side. If here there was a bow to opulence, it was a restrained one: the walls were paneled in what looked to be genuine wood, a delicate grain in lightly burnt ochres like wisps of decaying star-stuff. Low, elegant furniture flanked the walls, blending simple lines and colors unobtrusively. At intervals hung a selection of paintings, aquapanel and on opposite sides, two subtly modulating light-screens. A familiarity struck Destan at once and he remembered the stolen scene of fourteen years before, frozen in the lens of the Council auditorium.

But what that photo had not shown proved to be the room's most distinguishing feature. A ceiling high and entirely mirrored made the room seem like the lower half of a great chamber of double height. A hue clouded the glass and as the room's light was mellow with cool overtones, the reflected image, the upside-down world above, possessed a veiled and amorphous existence. Still, the effect was very much like standing at the bottom of a huge Intersect chamber.

The hostess led them across the room through perhaps eighty other guests. As at that initial launch party, jeweled limbs sparkled and tinted flesh gleamed in a commingling of many nationalities, but it seemed to Destan that the overall atmosphere had changed. If affluence still abounded, the picture of patrician extravagance had been compromised. Much of the costumery seemed modest, mistrani were scarcely in evidence, and if any Hierarchs had been invited they failed to dominate the room as before. Clearly, Cardis no longer maintained the exclusivity of his first guest list.

They approached a knot of people on the far side and now Destan turned his attentions ahead, for he was about to meet the most distinguished occupant of the room, indeed of the whole ship; perhaps, some would say, of the entire Concourse. A tingling sensation arose beneath his skin, accelerating to a flurry as the moment of contact neared.

The Captain was engaged in introductions with each new arrival. Well, thought Destan wryly, he is not on a throne, nor even on a raised platform; no dramatic spotlight illuminates him. The Historian realized that, as absurd as it now seemed, he had half expected some touch of theatrics, perhaps even a grand entrance.

Now he could make him out. A man of medium height, dark hair worn in a natural style, a conservative uniform of neutral color. From this distance Destan found his features undistinguished, though they possessed a certain strength and there was an evident assurance in the poise of the head. Still, he rather doubted that this unimposing figure of flesh and blood fitted popular conception. Could this be a reason why Cardis insisted on maintaining a certain anonymity?

The previous group had moved away and now Destan's own party approached. The hostess announced each guest's name as Cardis gave the ceremonial handshake to male and female, exchanging a few words with each. There was no formality to the process, the party merely milled about. Destan hung back, hoping to be introduced last.

He glanced momentarily about the room, which seemed close to full. His first impression was that there were more women than men, and remembering his conversation with Jan he wondered if it were at receptions such as this that Captain Cardis picked his occasional rumored encounter. He caught sight of one woman he recognized off to one side, but a scan of the rest of the room did not reveal General Salmi of Balkin.

The hostess' words broke in. "Miles Destan of Rhodes." A hand was extended and he took it. Cool but firm.

"Mr. Destan. I've looked forward to meeting you since you sent me your letter. You are a member of the Historians Guild. Not

too many of them visit Cosmopolis and it is a field of great interest to me. Also, I was pleased to hear that the Association of Universities is going to offer me some recognition."

"It was long overdue, Captain, though I must admit I have not had occasion to make use of the Library before. This is my first visit to the ship. I sampled the Library when I first arrived and found it most impressive, but I'm afraid I've been a little lax about getting down to my assignment in earnest. The other attractions on Cosmopolis are quite distracting."

Cardis glanced beyond Destan toward the foyer. "I see the last party is just arriving, so we have a few more moments. How will you go about your assignment if I may ask, Mr. Destan?"

"I think the Association is interested more in my impressions than in a lot of specific information. But I will ask to reproduce parts of your Index to give an indication of the scope of the contents, particularly that portion produced by your own writers, and I will, of course, be concerned with examples that would indicate the level of scholarship. Perhaps you'd consider giving me an interview? I am anxious to learn some of the background of the Library, who the contributors are and their qualifications. As well, something about your own background would be of interest to fellow academics."

"As to that, I'm afraid I always decline such information as a matter of policy. I prefer the public impression of Cosmopolis and myself to be based on the image and not the actual fact. Reality rarely lives up to the myth. In fact, my background is so obscure and unexciting that many would be disappointed to learn of it." He smiled. "Mystery always attracts."

There was something distinctive about the eyes, their expression, Destan thought. Difficult to describe perhaps, but he might suggest that there were two dimensions to them: one a surface quality, the other deeper, the two somehow coexisting, predominance shifting subtly between them. The outer presentation and the real man?

Or perhaps it was his own imagination, Destan chided himself. Could he be trying too hard to penetrate?

"We will speak at greater leisure once the reception is under way," Cardis said. "Now I have more visitors to greet."

Destan nodded and moved away. As he did so, an attendant bearing a tray approached to offer him a drink. He sipped at a medium dry catourie while wandering among the other guests.

Still no sign of Nathan Salmi. Destan threaded his way toward the side of the room and when he came into full view of Pallas Dhin-Asper he stared.

She was wearing an elegant, form-fitting gown that flared out above the knee into many folds. Heeled shoes gave her a greater

height than usual. Her arms were bare. The neckline of the gown plunged in a long taper to a point well below her bosom, revealing a sweep of cleavage that made Destan swallow. On a chain about her neck hung a red jewel.

At that moment she was looking toward the foyer with a faint air of anxiety.

Though others were dressed more flamboyantly, she was easily the most stunning woman in the room, and while the gown was flattering, Destan could almost guess that she had bought it on the ship, so out of character it seemed from what he had previously seen of her. Who was she trying to impress—Captain Cardis? But her attentions were not in his direction and Destan suspected she was awaiting the arrival of Salmi of Balkin. But dressed like that? She would drive the man mad.

He approached. Dion stood nearby while Pallas periodically conversed in an absent-minded manner with a group of women and men. One of the men, Destan noted, seemed to be taking a special interest in the red jewel—or more likely its setting.

When Destan caught her eye she excused herself and came over to him. “You’re a friend of Glenn, aren’t you? I remember you from the casino.”

“Miles Destan. We spoke at some length—about UMBER and other matters.”

“Yes, of course. So much happened afterward that I had forgotten your name. Did you see Glenn today?”

“I did, several hours ago. I believe he had decided to spend a quiet day in the Library, or some such place. His gambling instincts needed a rest. He spoke of you and hopes to see you this evening.”

He could not interpret her expression. Again she glanced to the foyer. When referring to an encounter with Salmi she had told Glenn she had poison with her. Was she carrying it now? The upper parts of the dress were close-fitting; they molded her breasts and hips. Where? In the lower folds? Perhaps, but difficult to retrieve. The red jewel? He momentarily focused his eyes on it—and found it hard not to be distracted. The jewel was richly colored but clear, the chain fine. A solution glossing the surface? But she was unlikely wearing this dress on the occasion referred to, and the ornament seemed too luxurious for lesser attire.

She raised her glass to her mouth. The index finger of her right hand bore an elaborate ring. Destan looked at it as he sipped his own drink.

“When we spoke, as I recall, you were not certain that you would be seeing Captain Cardis.”

“We received invitations only yesterday.”

“What do you think of him?”

"He is not quite what I envisioned. Still, he is an intriguing man." What did Umber women find intriguing? Destan wondered.

"Did he seem aware of your...experiences since coming on board?"

"We spoke only briefly. We will talk at greater length later, he says."

Dion came up quietly behind her. "General Salmi has arrived, Gatrin."

Pallas swung about. Salmi, presenting himself sufficiently late to make a grand entrance alone, had just emerged from the foyer accompanied by his aide and a hostess, and as he crossed the room Captain Cardis disengaged himself and went part way to greet him. The ceremonial handshake was vigorous.

"Well, Dion," Pallas said, "so much for the idea of appealing to Captain Cardis. It would seem he has a special relationship with General Salmi of Balkin." Destan, too, had taken note. He glanced at the Umber woman, at the eyes sparking like steel, fixed on the Balkin ruler.

Presently Captain Cardis spoke to the room, welcoming the entire company once again. "This reception is in honor of the two Finalists who will play the Stellar Intersect game the day after tomorrow. They have just arrived on the morning shuttle. Please join me in honoring them."

Two figures emerged from a side door and were introduced as Alman Jedals from Earth and Dierdre Roth of Wexton, both wearing expressions which told that this was the most exciting day of their lives. The woman was a pretty wisp of a girl, no more than twenty, while the man had a stocky build with the look more of a laborer than an Intersect champion. As the couple hovered about Cardis through much of the reception there seemed to be considerable fraternization between them, though in two days' time they were to be opponents in the grandest game they had yet played.

Before the serving of the cuisine, the Captain invited all who were interested to join him for a look at his private games room. Many of the company followed him into a smaller adjoining chamber dotted with tables and consoles, gathering around first one then another as Cardis provided commentaries on several of his own favorites, both antique and modern. The onlookers were especially fascinated by a strategy game whose play proceeded by the creation of colored light mixtures. Destan noted the ancient chess and backgammon and, of course, a separate table bearing the ever-present Intersect cube.

To the Historian the place felt more like a museum than a playing room, and when he looked about for an intersect chamber he could see no sign of one. Instead, he noticed a door on the

opposite side to the reception room and something about its unobtrusiveness suggested that it might lead to a more private area: perhaps the Captain's personal quarters?

One of the party asked, "Do you play all of these, Captain?"

"At one time or another I have. Games have been a source of great fascination to me. Perhaps you do not realize how much they indicate about the mentality of a race—or even an individual. But what we have always lacked, so it seemed to me, was a game on a grand scale, one in which worlds could take part. Thus, the Stellar Intersect game."

Destan wondered what such a creation indicated about the mentality of this particular individual.

"By the way," the Captain added, "everyone present today will receive passes to the Intersect Gallery for the next game. I urge you to attend." He turned and spoke a few words to Salmi who stood close beside him. Destan noted that Pallas and Dion had remained outside.

Everyone filed back into the reception room, where a group of musicians had set themselves up in one corner. All bore plucked string instruments: a harp, cithern, two mandolins, sitara and three descant dulcimers. Attendants wheeling carts brought in the first course: tender balls of pressed fish, pierced by a little spit, soaked in a pungent sauce.

The musicians began to play. Soft ethereal sounds of intricate melody and interweaving counterpoint drifted over the noise of conversation, subduing it by a few decibels as the guests lowered their voices in deference to the music. Reflected off the mirrored ceiling, the sound struck Destan as coming from the vague, reverse world above. And it could well be the music of the spheres, he reflected, for the outer layer of the pod could not be too far above them and beyond that were the vast interstellar spaces, dotted with a billion burning sparks.

But there was a potentially explosive spark in this very room, and perhaps only he was fully aware of it. Pallas Dhin-Asper and General Salmi of Balkin had not yet made contact, but watching first one, then the other, Destan could perceive a definite tension in both figures. How long should he wait before speaking to the Captain?

Pallas was watching Salmi. The Balkin ruler no longer stood with Cardis but had retreated with his aide to one side of the room where, after an exchange of words, the two fell to examining one of the light-screens, as if uncertain what to do next. There was little point in delaying any longer and Pallas turned to her minister.

"I am going to speak to General Salmi, Dion. Please do not interfere." Dion showed concern but advanced no objection.

She reached Salmi's elbow. The aide had seen her approach but the General stood impassive, staring at the shifting iridescent patterns of amber, white and indigo.

"General Salmi."

He turned, blinked. In her heels she equaled his own height. They stood a few moments, silent, looking at each other, Salmi's mouth set, the memory of the fury he had shown on their last encounter only hinted at, Pallas holding her face expressionless, her own fire to a smoulder. She spoke first.

"For reasons I could not have anticipated, General, I have failed in my mission. My mother chose me partly because she believed your memory of me on Balkin would carry weight in our appeals to you, but she could not have foreseen that very memory would prove our undoing."

After a grim pause, Salmi responded. "Events have taken a turn which I also did not anticipate, Gatrín Pallas. It did not occur to me that the proposal I made to you would be looked upon with anything but favor. But even then it could have been further discussed on Umber itself in the presence of the Matrin, whose interests are also concerned in the issues at stake."

He made a slight gesture to his aide, who discreetly withdrew. The soothing harmonies of the plucked instruments continued to float across the room, and now the attendants returned from the kitchens, their carts laden with the second course: small rolled cutlets of Arrian beef, crusted and stuffed with herbs and rice and served with cool Marchesan wine.

"However," Salmi went on, "in the events of yesterday certain things passed between us that cannot be ignored. I was humiliated in public, if not at your instigation, then without your interference. Perhaps your friend will yet suffer for his insolence. You yourself spoke words which it would be difficult to forgive. It seems I must agree with you when you say that your mission has failed."

Pallas turned toward the wall, allowing her gaze to go to the light-screen, her eye following the slowly evolving shapes. Salmi's own glance fell, tracing another pattern: the line of her shoulders, the glowing red jewel above the deep cleavage, the broad hips. He pursed his lips again.

"Memory can be misleading, General." Pallas' eyes remained on the screen as her words probed the gulf between them. "You may not have realized how impressionable I was at fifteen. Certain tales about you were circulating on Balkin and were repeated to me. Certain events took place...as you may recall." She was breathing a little deeper, letting her bosom rise each time, and she could feel Salmi's eyes on her body. Still she traced the white swirls as they meshed with the expanding splashes of indigo.

"I carried back to Umber a negative image of you. When I saw you again here on Cosmopolis that image conflicted with new impressions, new sensations—which my mind found difficult to accept." Her eyes dropped to the fingernails of one hand, cupped near her breast. "And I imagine any woman, no matter what her feelings about your proposal, might have reacted as I did if she thought you were to be shared with someone else." It was all nothing but the truth.

An uncertain frown passed over Salmi's features and he lifted his gaze to her face. Pallas turned back to him with a toss of her head, eyes suddenly spirited. "As for yesterday—your words were as unforgivable as my own. And they were spoken first. Such things can happen when two fiery temperaments collide. As you said, we are both of ruling houses."

Salmi peered intently at her. The woman's seductiveness was beginning to unsettle his nerves. And could she possibly be trying for some kind of reconciliation?

An attendant was passing with a cart bearing a few remaining portions of the second course, but only a single glass of the green Marchesan wine.

"Wait, please." The cart came to a stop. "General, we are passing up some delicious looking delicacies. But there may yet be time to indulge ourselves." To the attendant she said: "Please leave the cart. We'll manage what's left."

She bent forward and reached for one of the small rolled cutlets. The red jewel sparkled as it swung.

"People have always been my fascination," Captain Cardis was saying to Destan. "I like to study them: as they were in the past, as they are now. Here on Cosmopolis a cross-section of the entire Concourse passes before me. Some call me a recluse, but I assure you my greatest interest lies in those around me."

Cardis seemed expansive, and Destan hoped it was because he sensed a kindred spirit in the visitor before him, certainly a sharing of interests. At the same time, and perhaps for that very reason, Destan detected moments of wariness: again those two coexisting dimensions.

"The inventor of the Stellar Intersect game could hardly be accused of reclusivity. You have drawn the worlds of the Concourse together—if in a somewhat unorthodox fashion. But I wonder at your mix of disciplines. Was your training in physics initially, or in the social science area?"

"My initial training was deliberately comprehensive. I have made my own choices since then. But what of yourself? I'm curious to hear of your own special interests." Cardis had neatly turned around his probe and Destan was forced to follow it.

"Within my own field it is the philosophy of history: you might say people abstracted. How do social and political developments proceed? What gives rise to them? My research has involved study of the histories of many Concourse worlds and always I look to see what forces, what great men and women shaped their destinies."

"Surely the truly great man or woman comes along only rarely. If the history of humanity had to rely on the actions of great individuals, how slowly it would proceed."

"And yet, perhaps that is precisely the case. We have had a thousand years of space travel, almost eight hundred since John Addison. Our expansion has been phenomenal. But in other ways? Think of what could happen in a thousand years' time, the kinds of progress, and then consider where humanity is, as a political and social animal. If one looks at it that way, things have proceeded rather slowly."

"Possibly, Mr. Destan. Very possibly."

Destan was again trying to define Cardis' appearance. He seemed to be in his mid forties, Destan's own age, but for a man of those years there was an unusual smoothness to his skin, as one that went unexposed to the elements of the planetary surfaces on which most of his fellow men moved. Yet he seemed lithe and firmly muscled, evidently keeping himself in good condition by his own means. But about his features, his manner, his style of speaking, there was nothing to suggest a specific world with which Destan was familiar.

Earlier he had thought Cardis' face somewhat ordinary. Now he found a great depth of character in it—one spelling uniqueness, as though no one else in the Concourse could possibly have manifested this same character. Considering the nature of his experience as Captain of Cosmopolis for fourteen years, exposed to all manner of visitors, ideas and adulation, influenced by the knowledge gained through his researches and by the subtle sense of power it had all provided, such a uniqueness would hardly be surprising. Indeed, Destan reflected, one might look upon the Philip Cardis of today as having been born on his own ship.

Well, he now had several pictures of the captain in the micro-camera on his shoulder, so that someone more expert than he could attempt an analysis of the man's background. Destan finished off his cutlet with a comment on its culinary perfection and followed it with a refreshing sip of the wine.

"There are some," he went on with not too much nonchalance, "who might consider yourself a very prominent figure in today's times. After all, where are the great men of today, the leaders? Perhaps our last great man was Marcus Sand." He hoped that in camouflaging the comment he had not broken the link to it.

"Myself a leader? Toward what? I have no particular ideology, I assure you. As for what I want to give my fellow human beings"—he gestured about him—"surely I have already given: joy of life, diversion...freedom."

One other impression registered on the Historian. Here surely was the classic self-made man, the greatest entrepreneur the Concourse had known since John Addison. If his background seemed obscure, then it could only be because it really was so. Somewhat like his own father, Destan mused a bit wistfully, though his father had failed in his ultimate ambition.

And what were Cardis' ultimate ambitions?

The string players had altered their music, making a subtle shift to dance rhythms with elaborate syncopations. Pallas pushed the last piece of the cutlet into her mouth, licking the tips of two fingers as she drew them away. Her body began a slight sway to the intricate rhythms.

"I learned to love dancing on my visits to other worlds," she said, her manner more relaxed now. "Dancing is not a popular pastime on Umber, but some of the sensations I enjoy in dancing are like those of riding the Hrabas: a feeling of vertigo, of soaring off one's feet. Do you like to ride, General Salmi? It is a sensual experience, straddling that great animal."

Salmi, to hide his edginess, reached for one of the cutlets. Something in him wanted to stop her, to end the confusion she was creating in his body and mind. He had an instinct of mistrust. But the rest of him was becoming intoxicated: from the strength of the woman, her proximity, her exposed flesh. And surely if she were attempting to reverse their enmity it could only be because she had decided to give in to him after all.

Pallas' eyes seemed to take on a glaze, a moistness as they looked directly at him. Salmi saw an image of glistening female parts, soft and open. "There are no men on Umber like the Hrabas," she said. "I am sorry for that, though perhaps it took me a while to realize it."

Salmi gulped down a mouthful of meat and rice. "Gatrin Pallas I too am attracted to strong women. You know that. So you know what I implied when I talked about my memories of you. They have only been reinforced since our meeting again." He wiped his fingers on the girdle of his suit. "Had I not felt so awkward at the time, I would have valued that strength even in your outburst in the casino."

Now through the bluster came a note of pleading, of thirst. "Would I have consigned such a woman to a harem, as you put it? Do you think I could ever have my fill of such a woman?"

"And what of the Council?" Destan asked. "Do you think it will ever achieve its aims?"

"Political and social developments, especially on such a scale as the Concourse, move slowly. Unless, of course, some unusual event takes place. As an Historian you undoubtedly know that. It's possible the Council and the Federationist movement may be the germ of a new evolution, but I don't expect to see it in my lifetime."

Destan realized that the Captain was well accustomed to hiding any insight into his private thoughts.

But he had a couple more lines of attack. "Quite frankly, Captain Cardis, now that I have seen your Library and have had a chance to speak with you, I marvel at your interest in subjects which a person in your position would not be expected to show. You are not a Guild member, yet your work may rank with that of many of them. In fact, It might be considered to surpass them in its unusual approach and universality. Where have you derived such broad interests?"

Had this one penetrated? Destan could not mistake the hint of pleasure which showed in Cardis' eyes.

"To explain that fully, Mr. Destan, would be to reveal more about myself than I wish to. But it pleases me to have met someone who can appreciate my efforts with an open mind—though that is not the reason I have undertaken them. I seek no recognition. My researches serve other purposes. But perhaps you would care to remain after the reception is over and we could discuss some topics in your field which are of particular interest to me. You may also like to see my personal library. Or if it is not convenient for you, another time."

Destan struggled to conceal his sense of triumph. "It would certainly be convenient, Captain."

But he had been forgetful, distracted for too long. Casually, he glanced about to the spot where he had last seen Salmi. Pallas Dhin-Asper was standing before him. The two seemed very intent on each other, although Pallas' expression was indistinct and he could not see Salmi's face. He had better bring the subject around quickly. "I notice that you have two distinguished visitors: General Salmi of Balkin and Pallas Dhin-Asper of UMBER."

"Yes, there is a matter of some little difference between their two worlds and they have been trying to resolve it by meeting on Cosmopolis. But I am surprised that you know her."

"Only through someone else, who has formed a degree of admiration for her."

"She is an unusually attractive woman...and just who might this admirer be?"

"Someone whose acquaintance I made only a few days ago."

But I also gather that those differences have not been resolved." Cardis furrowed his brow. "I was in the casino yesterday when a very ugly incident took place between them."

"Ah, yes. It seems the whole ship has heard about it. However I think things are under control. As you can see,"—he glanced over to the two figures by the wall: he had been aware of them all the time, Destan thought—"they are still on speaking terms. Nothing to worry about."

"As to that, Captain, I am not so sure..."

"General Salmi, it is not too late—for Umber or for Balkin." Salmi's head was swimming. "It would be easier for me to say I would accept your proposal for the sake of my own world, and for my mother. I do that. But it is more difficult for me to say that...I do it for my own sake, too." Her hand seemed to make a small involuntary motion toward her abdomen. "You will not have an easy time of it, General. I am a strong-willed woman."

Pallas' voice was genuinely quivering. With her right thumb she brushed the edge of the ring.

Salmi's desire coursed through his body. "Gatrin Pallas—" he said thickly. "You will not be sorry."

A fire glittered in her eyes as she reached down to the tray for the glass of sparkling Marchesan wine. She had not dared to take it up sooner, and Salmi had deferred to her, making no attempt to procure his own. "Then drink to the union of our two houses." The cart stood to her right and she had to grasp the head of the glass with thumb and fingers apart. "And of ourselves." She raised it to chest level, placing her left hand on the stem to free her right thumb. Only a quick motion and she would hand it to Salmi.

But a longstanding instinct was still operating in Salmi's subconscious, the instinct that had allowed him and his forebears to survive several generations amid the devious intrigues of Balkin nobility. While his thoughts were filled only with a graphic picture of the proffered union with this woman, the instinct glued his eyes to the glass. Pallas saw it and a chill ran through her.

He is still suspicious! It will have to be the dagger later, after all.

But her self-possession came up with one last ploy, and she raised the glass to her lips and drank. One mouthful. Two. He could not mistake it. She offered the glass and said, "Drink with me." Her mouth was wet with the wine. Salmi took the glass as though hypnotized and finally raised his eyes from it. The instinct disintegrated in those glistening lips.

The lips said, as if on a sudden thought: "Where my mouth was—" She extended her hand again, over the glass: the motion was quick, she dared not glance down. "—put your own."

Salmi's eyes had remained on her. Now she grasped the glass normally and turned it a half turn.

He looked down again. If it worked, she told herself, the drop, invisible, will be covering the surface of the wine. "You will not be sorry, Gatrin." His voice trembled as he raised the drink toward his mouth.

A hand suddenly reached out, grasping the glass. The voice of Captain Cardis said: "I think there is a better way to resolve your differences."

Salmi was dumbfounded. His eyes followed the glass as it was borne away in the Captain's hand. He looked up at Cardis, then back to Pallas.

Pallas was staring at the Captain with eyes full of hate, fear, indignation, and Salmi slowly turned back to the glass in consternation. Cruel knowledge came in a flood. She had been duping him all along! She had been about to poison him—impossible! But her face told him that she had somehow done it. The deadly liquid had been about to flow down his throat, fill his stomach, destroy his life.

She had made him desire her, until he had lost his wits. She had played with his senses, his masculinity, until he would have been willing to grovel for her...

"General Salmi—" Cardis repeated.

Something inside Salmi slumped. The wells of fury were smothered as humiliation flooded every cell of his body. He looked hollowly at the Captain of Cosmopolis.

"General Salmi, allow me to offer my services in mediation of the dispute between Balkin and Umber. In fact, I insist upon it." He looked at Pallas and his own eyes glowed. "I suspect you are too well matched, the two of you. And equally volatile. You need a calmer hand to pull the issue into perspective." A triumphant gleam spread over Pallas' features. "Please come with me. We will leave the reception for a short time to discuss the situation, and perhaps resolve it."

"As you wish," said Salmi dully.

The Captain set down the glass of wine. As an afterthought, he turned it top down on the cart and the liquid spilled out to soak the covering mat. He took out a key plate. "We can use the Green Room."

The Umbrian and the Balkin were led out through the foyer and across the corridor, into a room furnished entirely in green, and there Cardis addressed them. "I know of your dispute, and I know that instead of resolving it you have let things get out of hand. There have been a few occasions in the past when I have been asked to mediate in such situations. This time I am volunteering."

What he then said might have been a copy of Dion's brief at

the conference, Pallas thought: all the arguments Umber had been insisting on for so long. Would Salmi heed them now, coming from this source?

The General, in a faded monotone and without once looking at Pallas, raised certain precedents of a world sharing its own system with another. Cardis waited patiently, then stated: "They are not analogous. Such situations arose from parallel colonization efforts, or commercial ventures sent out by private groups. Not by the action of a powerful neighbor when the affected world could do nothing to prevent it or had no say in the matter."

When Salmi managed to stir himself to a final expression of obstinacy, Cardis interjected: "General Salmi, I have always valued your friendship and will continue to do so. Balkin was among the first group of worlds to set up a terminus when I established the Stellar Game. I am no politician, but one of the possible outcomes I envisioned when I began the game was a greater feeling of cooperation among the worlds who played it. I believe it to be a worthy principle. But if Balkin as a terminus world is going to flout that principle in an unreasonable manner, it is within my power to disqualify Balkin as a participant in the game." He did not have to spell out the consequences this would have for Salmi's position at home.

The General stared at the opposite wall. He knew he was beaten. Still without looking at her he said, "Gatrin Pallas, events have vindicated the justice of your cause. I will so inform your mother when I return to Balkin. My interests on Io will be withdrawn immediately."

"I extend the thanks of my mother and the people of Umber, General."

Salmi stood up. "I wish to return home as soon as possible, Captain. I would ask you to arrange for the return of my ship from Balkin to pick me up."

"Certainly. My navigations office will see to it within the hour."

Salmi left the room, summoned his aide and was escorted out of the pod.

Pallas said to the Captain: "Allow me to express my gratitude on behalf of my mother. But tell me, did you side with our cause because you really believe in it and in the principle you spoke of? Or was it influenced by your negotiation with my mother to make Umber a terminus world?"

"Surely they are part of the same thing. The more terminus worlds that are established, the stronger the principle becomes."

"My minister tells me that my mother has almost agreed."

"Yes. In fact, I communicated with her only yesterday and gave her certain assurances. Today she sent me her official authorization to dispatch a construction team at my earliest convenience.

It occurred to me that you and your party might like to accompany it back to Umber directly, rather than travel by the commercial space routes. The team will be leaving on my research vessel in three days."

"That is most kind of you."

"It should give you enough time to enjoy Cosmopolis now that this affair is out of the way. Perhaps you would favor me with your company on some occasion during that time. Umber is a fascinating planet. I would enjoy the opportunity to talk about it with you. As well, my own experiences have not been without their fascinations, so we might spend a stimulating evening together. Perhaps tomorrow."

Pallas smiled, though something inside her was hesitant. But she said, "I would enjoy that."

"Good. I will be at your convenience. Simply use the code number to my operator one hour before you wish to come and I will have an aide call at your suite. Now let us return to the reception. I fear we have missed a course or two, but we may still be in time for the stuffed Katerina melons: they are superb!"

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Home Page - <http://jesuspuzzle.com/jesuspuzzle/index.htm>