

Miles Destan followed the Captain of Cosmopolis toward the door that had drawn his interest during the tour of the games room. Cardis took out a key plate and pressed it to the lock face: the magnetic channels in the plate matched those of the lock and the door swung open. As he passed within, Destan wondered if he were the first male guest to see the inside of these apartments.

The room was a study lined with bookshelves and maps, crowded with neat arrangements of geographic globes, lamps, the occasional curio. It contained a fine wood desk and two deep arm-chairs, beside one of which stood a movable lectern. There were two other doors leading from the room.

"What you are seeing few have seen. This is my private library where I like to read and ponder the implications of existence. When I am not so momentarily engrossed, I study research materials and make my own humble contributions to the Cosmopolis Library." He wandered around the room gazing along the line of bookshelves. Destan followed his lead.

"If I may say so, I think the average Concourse citizen would not imagine you spending your days in such a manner."

"And how do they imagine it, I wonder?"

Destan did not venture an answer.

"Most of the books you see here concern the past: histories, studies of societies and religions, biographies. Please look them over if they interest you."

Destan moved slowly along one wall completely filled with traditionally bound volumes. There were books relating to his own field, others he had no knowledge of, and as he made passing comments on a few familiar titles, he sensed that Cardis was deriving a rare satisfaction in sharing his retreat with someone of similar interests.

The paradox of the man suddenly struck him: Jaynes himself had expressed bafflement over it. Why would a man who seemed basically a recluse build an entertainment center like Cosmopolis, create a cosmic game that drew the attentions of every human

being his way? And why would he be plotting, as the Chairman was convinced he was, some scheme that embraced worlds?

Right at the moment, Destan could think of only one possible answer. The Captain as he was now had changed in some way since the launching of Cosmopolis. Had Jaynes tried investigating those early years, to compare them to the Cardis of today?

He dismissed the only other idea which occurred to him: that the man was mad. Cardis looked painfully sane.

Destan's eye caught a group of books on a common subject and he drew one out: a reprint of an old twentieth century work by W. W. Tarn on Alexander the Great. Had the Captain taken the essence of his survey in the Library from a book like this? Or had the outlook he had thought to recognize—the Great Man theory—been truly his own?

Cardis watched as his visitor leafed through the pages. "Of course, the roots of all our natures lie on Earth," he said somewhat ponderously. "To understand oneself, one must go back to earliest beginnings."

"There have been few men since like Alexander," Destan said.

But his host was not to be drawn in so easily. "For a man to accomplish the equivalent of what Alexander achieved would be extremely difficult today, Mr. Destan. He could never muster such forces within a divided society like the Concourse."

"But it was surely the sprawling divisions within the Persian Empire which allowed it to fall. And as I recall, the size of the force Alexander brought with him was relatively small, yet he defeated armies larger than his own. The Macedonians' greatest asset was Alexander himself."

"True. Without him, no conquest would have been possible. Consider what he did when storming the fortress of Multan in India: with only three men he leapt from the wall into the midst of the enemy defenders. The action spurred his army to a superhuman effort to follow in order to protect him. The wound he suffered that day eventually contributed to his death."

"Perhaps the Concourse would be better off if an Alexander did come along. There are many today who lament its fractious and decadent state—as they see it."

Cardis gave an ambiguous chuckle. "You are forgetting your history, Mr. Destan. Essentially, Alexander failed. He died too soon. He certainly destroyed the Persian Empire, but the era that came after, while it may have been culturally much richer, was politically more divided than the one that came before. His successors were responsible for far more war than the Persians ever were."

Destan replaced the book. He was pursuing riddles into enigmas. Whatever personal significance the past and the men in it

held for Cardis, he doubted he was going to learn its implications through word games like this.

But perhaps he was being more devious than was necessary. "When did you develop your interest in history, Captain? Have you had it all your life? Myself, I came to it somewhat late."

"Let's say I've had it through the important part of my life. It fills a need. I know you are thinking my academic leanings and the public image of Cosmopolis are at variance, but the well-rounded person must possess more than a single dimension, don't you think?"

Destan found that the remark brushed one of his own exposed nerves, being too reminiscent of intimations sometimes laid at his personal door. But it prompted a further thought. Cardis and himself, he sensed, shared a certain emotional kinship. Jaynes could not have foreseen the accuracy of his own instincts. Might there, in this area, be an even deeper parallel: had Cardis, like himself, sought to reject or blot out a part of his past by recourse to another, greater past, one in which he might find the answers to whatever he was trying to resolve?

"After all, what is Cosmopolis but a diversion?" the Captain was saying. "We use diversions to distract our minds from weightier things; sometimes as a respite to renew the strengths we need for more crucial matters." He put his hand on the globe that stood beside him—was it Earth itself?—and as he nudged it into a silent spin his mouth curled into the suggestion of a smile. "I could have drives and ambitions that most men would not guess at."

How deathly still this room is, thought Destan. Insulated, guarding its own mysteries. The Captain's quiet voice, speaking words on the surface idle and innocuous, seemed invested with ominous implication. How much of it was Destan's own imagination? Yet he could not escape the feeling that Cardis was talking around some hidden secret, coming as close as he dared, caught by a perverse need to flirt with exposure or just to let out, however, ambiguously, something he had kept bottled up for too long. At the same time, Destan sensed that he could never entice the man into an inadvertent or incriminating revelation. The hands were still too firmly on the reins.

"How long will you be spending on Cosmopolis, Mr. Destan?" Cardis gestured toward one of the chairs. "Please sit down." He took the other himself.

"The Association has paid for eight days, which gives me another four to complete my survey. I intend to get down to it in earnest tomorrow."

"And how long after that before your report is completed and submitted?"

"Not too long, I should imagine. A few weeks. I have other work I want to get back to."

Cardis delicately placed the tips of his fingers together. "Although I have given you reasons why I do not wish to reveal more of my personal background, especially for publication, I would have no objection if your own impressions about me found their way into some aspect of your report. As for the Library, I don't mind telling you this: the scanner codes that show an additional reference number preceded by a "C" were written by myself. They are not too many, but they can be found in historical areas such as you see here." He gestured around the room. "I would be pleased to feel that a little part of posterity would remember me for something that may be closer to my real self than all the glitter of Cosmopolis."

Destan nodded once, slowly. The two men sat looking at each other across the gap. For long seconds neither spoke.

A faint buzz sounded from the direction of the desk.

Cardis stirred. "I am being paged by the communicator in my office." He rose and went to the side door. "I should be only a few minutes. Please feel free to examine any book that interests you." He used a key plate to open the door, passed through and closed it behind him.

Destan's mind went instantly into high gear: Cardis had left him alone in his private study! This made it seem unlikely that any sensitive material lay to hand. Should he plant the broadcast chip in here? But if the room were what it appeared, Cardis might never use it to receive visitors or other officers of the ship, nor did it contain a communicator. The effort would probably be a waste.

This mental argument took scarcely a second, and Destan seized on the other alternative. Getting quickly to his feet, he fished the little contact amplifier from his pocket and moved to the door. One end of the device he jammed into his ear; the other he pressed against the door's center panel. His body muscles held taut, ready to step away at a moment's notice.

The sounds from the next room, Cardis' voice and the one over the communicator, came through small but distinct.

"Yes, Kyle?"

"Bad news, Captain. General Salmi has just been the victim of an assassination attempt."

"What?! Attempt—you mean he's still alive?"

"He is so far. They're treating him in Medics. That's where I'm calling from."

"Who did it?"

"Some young man. Salmi's aide killed him. Security's working on an identification, but we assume he was from Balkin."

"Damn! Damn!...Kyle, we've got to keep Salmi alive. If he dies like this, it could turn Balkin upside down."

"I know, Captain."

There was a thud. Cardis may have struck the communicator.

"How is Salmi hurt?"

"Stab wound. Below the base of the neck."

"Is he conscious?"

"Just. They're doing a local bypass while they try to seal the lung passage."

There was a pause. "I'm coming over. I was forced to give Salmi a jolt today and if he recovers from this I've got to be sure he's not totally alienated. By the way, where did it happen?"

"On the cabin deck. Near his suite."

"Can it be kept quiet?"

"We're trying."

"Tell Salmi I'm on my way."

Destan retreated quickly. He grabbed a book at random from one of the shelves. Cardis would come in with his regrets and send him off under escort, perhaps ask him to return another time...

Long moments passed. The door did not open. Destan waited, listening.

Could Cardis possibly have forgotten him? There had been an urgency, almost a panic, in his voice. Salmi's assassination on Cosmopolis would be a major incident, certainly—but a disaster of some kind?

Destan risked another eavesdrop at the door. Silence. Either the Captain had forgotten him or had decided he was safe enough in his study, although if the former he would certainly recall it when he reached Medics—or sooner—and send someone to attend to him.

How much time might he have?

He tried the door: locked, of course. He went to the one by which they had entered, then to the third door and found both locked as well. Cardis, when he remembered, would assume Destan could cause no trouble.

He took out the lock decoder and applied the plate on the door to the games room. It opened. He glanced out, found the room empty. He was not likely to be interrupted from this direction.

He returned to the door of the office, but when he applied the decoder the door would not open. Destan gave a silent curse. For some reason, here was a lock the decoder could not unscramble. He tried the third door; it opened and he peered out into a corridor, then quickly withdrew.

For a moment he stood in the middle of the room, puzzled. One of the fundamental instincts that had evolved in the human mind, he told himself, was always to keep a second key around.

Well, he had nothing to lose. Going over to the desk he looked through all the drawers, fishing under paper, handwritten sheets, pens and paraphernalia of various mundane sorts. The fact that the desk was unlocked seemed to verify his earlier assumption that there would be nothing incriminating to be found in the room.

He stopped and gave himself a mental slap. Where does one conceal a key in a library? In a book, of course. Fine—there were only about two thousand of them. He'd better pick one and settle down with it until Cardis got back.

But wait a minute. He went over to the group of books on Alexander the Great, passed up the one he had leafed through earlier. In the third book he found a key plate.

He would ponder the significance of that later...

The office was plain: a desk, a communicator, a holograph viewer, computer terminal and filing cabinet; not much else. Opposite the desk a large blank screen filled most of the wall, no doubt activated from the panel in the desk top, though he was not about to experiment with any of its switches. Again, two doors led out of the room, one obviously to the corridor.

He might not find anything in this room, he might not try. But here was where he should plant the broadcast chip.

He knew he was taking a chance entering Cardis' office, for there would be no way to explain it away. But he was convinced he had reached the wall in Cardis' mind beyond which simple social contact would not penetrate, and Jaynes would want more than the inconclusive impressions he had gained thus far.

Where to plant the chip? He chose the underside of the lip at the outer edge of the desk. Attached and activated, it now had a life of ten hours, after which it would corrode and disintegrate within minutes. He hoped the time was sufficient. The use of a permanent chip had been rejected as inadvisable.

He glanced over the papers on the desk, a mix of navigation instructions and other missives relating to the running of the ship. And what was this? He peered down at a telex strip from the Communications Center: a message from Matrin Fedria Dhin-Asper, Matriarch of UMBER, approving the establishment of a terminus satellite for the Stellar Intersect game.

So Cardis had gotten his wish.

On impulse, he took a picture of the desk top from the micro-camera in his epaulette.

His mind conducted another rapid argument: He was pushing his luck. The chances were minimal that he could dig out any telling information by going through desk and files, and he could be discovered at any moment. Besides, he really didn't know what he was looking for. Best to count on the chip.

But the third door intrigued him. He had come this far—

Hearing no sound through the amplifier, he used the key to open the door.

It was a bedroom, neatly, unostentatiously made up. Even in his most private area the man had simple tastes. There was not even a rug on the floor. Beyond, an open door led to what looked like a sitting room, while to one side an archway gave access to a dressing area and a washroom.

Destan took in all this from a point a few feet inside the room. He allowed himself five more seconds to sweep the walls, furniture, night tables, writing desk, but his eye lit on nothing that would relate to Cardis' background: no pictures, portraits, emblems, icons, busts of family or loved ones. It was as though the man had deliberately and methodically rooted out his past.

By now, Destan's nerves were doing a frantic choreography on his skin. He had to get back. He left the bedroom, crossed the office and applied the key to the lock face. He stepped into the study.

The other two doors were standing open.

Cardis had sent someone. Or come back himself—though that seemed unlikely in view of the situation with Salmi. But where was this person? He let the office door close behind him and three long strides brought him back to the books. Damn—which one had the key been in? He shoved it back into the right one, so he thought, but if Cardis had noted a page number he was out of luck.

The sound of footsteps approached from the games room. The man or woman had obviously passed through the study. He spied the armchair with its back to the line between the doors. Perhaps he could pretend—

He sat down. A man's step entered behind him and to his left, moved further into the room, then stopped. Destan turned in the chair. "Excuse me, but do you know where—"

The man had just applied a key plate to the office door and pushed it open a few centimeters when the words drew him up short. He stared at the figure in the chair and his expression turned dire. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Destan had been startled by the fact that the man possessed a key to the office when the special lock had implied a certain exclusivity. He was a stocky man of medium height, with dark close cropped hair and nondescript clothing. His skin was sallow and his eyes, as they looked at Destan, had a leaden quality the Historian found intimidating. The dumbfounded reaction would seem to indicate that the man had not been looking for him.

"I was invited in by the Captain following the reception. My name is Miles Destan."

"He brought you in here?"

"Yes. I'm a member of the Historian's Guild and he found that we had certain interests in common."

The other seemed hardly mollified. "And where is the Captain now?"

"He went in there to answer his communicator maybe ten minutes ago and I haven't seen him since."

The man poked his head through the door, withdrew it. "He's not there now." The expression became threatening again. "And where did you come from? You weren't here when I passed through first." His accent was broad and rather less modulated than usual for Concourse Common.

"Oh, but I was. I was dozing a bit, the chair is so deep and comfortable, and I guess I didn't hear you."

The man grunted. Destan could see he was skeptical, but less than positive about his initial observation.

"Well, what am I going to do with you? I can't leave you here."

"That's what I was thinking. But all the doors were locked—"

Another man appeared at the door to the corridor, this one wearing a ship's uniform and apparently an officer of junior rank. "Excuse me sir, I believe this man is Miles Destan?" Destan nodded. "The Captain asked me to extend his apologies for running off unexpectedly, but there's been a little emergency." He smiled engagingly. "I was sent to rescue you. The Captain seemed to think you would be locked in."

The first man renewed his glare. "What emergency?"

"You can reach the Captain at Medics, sir."

"I see." He made a gesture toward Destan. "Well, take him away." He looked around the study, still unconvinced there was not something suspicious to be found in the situation.

Destan followed the officer into the corridor, while the other man entered the Captain's office. Destan regretted he would be under escort for the next several minutes and would have no way of using the pickup to receive signals from the broadcast chip. As they descended in the elevator he took advantage of a break in the young officer's small talk to say, "My presence in the Captain's study seemed to disturb that gentleman. Who is he?" He recalled that the officer had addressed him with some respect.

"A member of the senior staff," the other answered, with an expression that had momentarily become noncommittal.

"You mean an officer?" The man had not been wearing any kind of uniform.

There was a slight hesitation. "Not the same sort as myself." Evidently the young man—under orders?—was not going to provide further enlightenment, and Destan let it drop. But still he had to



congratulate himself. The disagreeable man's personality had not been sufficiently unnerving to prevent Destan from taking two pictures of him which now rested in the microcamera.

He almost asked about Salmi's condition, but caught himself in time. It would have been difficult to explain the knowledge. As to whether the General had died he personally did not care, but what did intrigue him was why Cardis had become so anxious at the prospect.

When Destan reached the Beta pod, he ascended immediately by elevator to the cabin deck. Jaynes had assured him the power pack could draw in a signal from three kilometers, but Destan was not sure that this would apply on Cosmopolis. Nor did he wish to wait until he reached his own quarters in the more distant Alpha pod, for every passing minute might mean a crucial broadcast lost. Along the all but deserted corridors he walked or rode as though he belonged there, and no one saw him pass the same way more than once. The insert nestling in his ear, the power pack in his pocket surging at full strength, he waited more than three hours before any sound came over the pickup.

First, noises. Footsteps, doors opening and closing, drawers sliding. Someone looking for something? Checking? Two unidentifiable clicking sounds. Then two voices, the same that he had heard through the door: Cardis and Kyle. The latter was evidently a ship's officer. Yes, he now recalled—Kyle had been the man officiating at the first satellite launching ceremony on Amarant in the old news clip Jaynes had shown him.

This time the man was in the room.

"Did you get through to Balkin?" The Captain.

"Yes, the ship will arrive in seven hours. Apparently they're putting a blackout on news of the incident. It will eventually get out, of course, but by that time Salmi may be well on the way to recovery. Naturally, they asked us to keep it as quiet as we can here."

"Naturally. By the way, your idea of sending Dr. Svendal back with Salmi was a good one. He can keep us posted on the General's condition. If Salmi should take a turn for the worse I want to know about it immediately. Are you setting up a message system with Svendal?"

"Already done."

Destan found himself straining to hear. The voices were coming through rather muffled.

"We don't need close calls like that one." The Captain again. "Especially with the participating worlds. We can't afford to lose..."

Destan stopped in his tracks. Why had the Captain's voice faded out at that point—accompanied by footsteps which had also

receded? They could not have left the room so quickly and there had been no sound of a door. Had the chip malfunctioned? It should have no trouble covering the entire office. He waited anxiously.

"...how that young man slipped through. Hendricks now says he had a background of political terrorism on Balkin."

"His cover must have been efficiently organized. The agency suspected nothing."

"That's disturbing. I still worry about..."

A fading out again. Apparently the men were pacing, but why should the chip not pick them up for more than a couple of meters? Destan stood in frustrated puzzlement when suddenly the situation triggered a vague memory and he dredged up his scanty knowledge of sound depressors.

So the Captain had a sound depressor in his office. One he had not activated while speaking earlier on the communicator or else Destan would have been unable to eavesdrop, even with the amplifier. Either he had forgotten at the time or did not think it was necessary. But why would Cardis install a depressor? For occasions when he had visitors about—perhaps in the bedroom? There was hardly one there now. Perhaps the Captain could not be sure of all the employees or officers who had access to his pod, and the depressor would protect him from eavesdroppers using a distance pickup. The range of such a device was limited but it would include the nearby corridors as well as the reception chamber. Jaynes had considered providing Destan with a distance pickup, but it was bulkier and more difficult to focus while maintaining concealment so they had settled on the chip system.

Whatever the reason, Cardis' concern for secrecy would seem to extend to surprising extremes.

"...his name is Miles Destan." That gave him a start. "Garra came upon him alone in the study, a situation he found disturbing."

"Garra is more nervous than we are."

"I don't wonder. Anyway, he seemed to think that Mr. Destan had been wandering around somehow, though all the doors were locked and I didn't see any sign of tampering anywhere. I'm sure Garra was just—"

Voice and footsteps stopped abruptly. "Just let me check..."

Footsteps receding. The Captain's voice had been thoughtful. Destan gave a groan as his mind's eye followed Cardis out of the office, across the study. He saw the hand reach for the book on Alexander. Would he find the key in the right one? Was there a right page? Destan wanted to kick himself for not noting things carefully when he had taken out the key.

Footsteps returning, stopping. "...seems to be in place. I'd be very disappointed to learn that Mr. Destan is not what he makes

himself out to be. He is certainly an academic—he couldn't have faked that. Could Jaynes be getting more subtle?"

"I can have him watched."

A pause. "No, not just yet. If he's what he says he is, I don't wish to antagonize him. But I think I'll have Security do a check into his background. I'll also put in a query at a few places."

Destan's heart sank.

There was another pause before the Captain spoke again. "The Umber party will be returning on the research vessel. Please see that suitable accommodation is arranged."

"Right."

Now Cardis sounded wistful. "The Gatrín is a very fascinating woman, Kyle....I realize how much there is to regret."

"Be careful, sir."

The sound of a communicator signaling, the receiver engaged. "Yes, Moritz?"

"We have a slight problem in course alteration for Salmi's rendezvous, Captain."

"I'll be up right away." Noises. Clicks. Footsteps retreating. A door opening and closing. The depressor had been deactivated.

During the next four hours, as Destan traversed the corridors of the cabin deck, no more sounds came over the pickup. When the chip had disintegrated he returned to his quarters, pondering what he had heard and simmering with an uneasy frustration.

By the end of a frustrating afternoon Glenn Berenson could contain himself no longer, and when he judged that the time had arrived for Pallas' return from the reception he simply presented himself at her suite. When his image registered on the ID plate there was a momentary flurry within and Vera opened the door. Behind her, a full head taller, stood Pallas. Both women held half filled goblets and both were wearing infectious grins. Glenn breathed easier: evidently they had something to celebrate.

"Ah, just what I needed," Vera bubbled. "A man." She peered around him into the corridor, then grabbed his arm and drew him inside. "Unfortunately, Pallas, he didn't bring anyone for you."

The elation on Pallas' face highlighted her every feature and Glenn could see that a great weight had been lifted. When she took his hand, the electricity of the day before resurged across the connection, racing his circuits as through a superconductor. He was led down the hallway into the oak-raftered parlor where Dion was seated at the writing desk, and as they were introduced the Umber minister regarded Glenn with more than a hint of curiosity.

Pallas said, "We have just composed a communication to my mother to inform her that our mission was a success."

"Accomplished through somewhat exotic methods of diplomacy," remarked Dion, though he was not displeased.

"I think you should include something about the wine," Vera piped up. "Your mother would be intrigued no end."

Dion clucked. "You can both entertain the Matrin with the vulgar details when we get home. Don't forget others may read this before it gets to her, even here on the ship."

Glenn was looking from one to another. Whatever happened, it sounded interesting. Then his smile faded as Pallas said, "Oh, yes, you'd better tell her about our return sooner than expected." She tried to squeeze his hand reassuringly.

Dion added a postscript. "I'll get this to the Communications Center immediately. No doubt the Matrin is hanging from the stirrup as she likes to say."

"And Dion," said Pallas matter-of-factly, "I think it would do you good to take in some of the sights afterwards. I'm sure you don't want to spend the evening corralled in here."

Dion didn't bat an eyelash. "An excellent idea, Gatrin." He slipped into his room, emerged a few minutes later and departed for the elevators.

Vera refilled her goblet. When she brought it to her mouth it only partly masked a mischievous expression. "What a clever move, Pallas. Now we can have Glenn to ourselves."

Pallas raised an amused eyebrow.

"When you finally explained about the mistrani, Pallas, I did think it was an intriguing idea. So which of us should take the role? If it's me, though, I refuse to shave my head."

This provoked a reaction of wide-eyed astonishment. "Vera—"

Vera's mouth assumed a pout. "After all our years of friendship, Gatrin—"

"There are limits even to friendship, you little clipper." She glanced at Glenn. "Vera's been away from home too long." Glenn knew Vera was teasing, but the exchange was somewhat giddy. And intimidating: he could never handle two Umber women.

"Well, I guess I'll just have to take that gentleman up on his offer," said Vera with studied unconcern.

"What gentleman?"

"The one I'm to meet in an hour at the Wandering Moon café." She put down the rest of her drink, picked up her hip pouch and strapped it about her waist. "No doubt you would like me to amuse myself in the meantime by my own devices," she said. Releasing a roguish smile, she waved and went out the door.

Pallas laughed. "I wondered why she had gotten dressed like that."

She poured Glenn a drink and then began to recount the events of the day, until Glenn felt that nothing about her could surprise him any longer. On the Captain's intervention she commented, "He twisted Salmi's arm so easily. He is so even-tempered and unpretentious, yet how much influence he wields."

She was reclining on her side on the divan while Glenn sat in a chair facing her, sipping at the remains of his drink. "By now you must think awful things of me, Glenn. But I did it for Umber and for my mother. And—I confess it—for my personal satisfaction. Salmi deserved it."

"But the man is no fool, Pallas. I still do not understand how you could have deceived him after what happened in the casino."

"I deceived Salmi because he wanted to believe what I was suggesting." She scarcely paused before adding, "And because a part of me was not acting at all."

She turned onto her back and looked up. "The other evening in his suite I realized I desired him, that my body could actually have given in. It was one of the biggest shocks of my life. I believed for the last eight years that I felt nothing but hatred for him. He was coarse, over-bearing, supremely confident. He tried to act as though Umber was a dependency, and he balked us at every turn over Io. But for all that, I found I could still see him as a man who possessed exciting power. Probably I even saw that on Balkin when I was fifteen. He has a brute strength that I wanted to master. Not to make it a lesser thing, or something submissive, the way he wanted to have me. But to share in that excitement when two strengths come together—like the rider and the stallion."

She stretched her arms upward and exclaimed, "Oh, I have been away from home too long!"

Glenn said softly: "But must you always be the rider, Pallas?"

She swung upright to the floor in a fluid motion, her eyes glittering. "No, man Glenn. With the Hrabas it is that way because the two parts are what they are. The horse cannot ride me. With a man it is different."

The blaze subsided as she began to pace the floor. Glenn watched her. He could feel in his own gut something of what she was talking about: to nourish oneself on another's strength was, he believed, a basic human need, but one completely fulfilled only when it could be reciprocated. In his own profession he pitted his strength against another at the casino table, yet it was a mutual nourishment nonetheless. This was why gamblers gravitated toward their peers, so the match would be equal. Rima and Tamas were not true epitomes of their class. But at the tables one side had to lose. What if both—in balanced antagonism, balanced cooperation, as Glenn saw the sexes—could win?

He asked, "Are there no men like Salmi on Umber, Pallas?"

She perched on the edge of the divan, calves crossed beneath her. "No man on Umber has occupied a position like Salmi's for over two centuries. But the men of Umber are not weak, Glenn, nor are they more domesticated than many of the women. They simply go about their own business and leave the government and the raising of the Hrabas to us—with a few exceptions like Dion. They don't seem to be moved by the drives and ambitions of a man like Salmi."

But Glenn had detected a note of less than total conviction. "In other words, you have made them docile."

The embers flared. "They have made of themselves what they chose! Very early in the history of our planet the raising of the Hrabas fell to the women, so the men turned to other things. Then after the headship of the master clan happened to pass to a woman

through three generations, they chose not to object when it was finally made mandatory."

"Perhaps by then they felt ineffectual. Perhaps they realized they couldn't compete with the horse."

Pallas made an exasperated gesture. Glenn asked with a tinge of sarcasm, "And now the women are dissatisfied?"

"Not most of them. They enjoy the deference the men show—they've come to expect it, and our traditions perpetuate it. Oh, I've been guilty myself at times; it's hard to break generations of habit." She grimaced. "But it does not sit well with me."

Now her words came more forcefully, like an emerging tide of frustration washing away a dam. "How can you strike sparks without a hard flint? They should assert themselves the way we do! They could develop their own special crafts to take pride in; or let them try to wrest back some power! Why should they be happy to be completely governed by us? You were right: they are docile!" She made a sound of disgust. "Why, if the Hrabas were the same way, no one on other worlds would want them. For that matter, neither would we women. You see, the Hrabas is too strong and independent to be tamed. We simply learn how to control its great strength, to regulate its power. There may be a struggle, but the rider and the horse are still a team of equals."

It seemed to Glenn that in this team one party nevertheless held the rein. How much, he wondered, did she understand of the conflict she was expressing? What was the essence of her hunger: to exult in a galvanization with a strong equal—or in the volatile mastery of it? Apparently the men of Umber were giving their women neither.

She had turned pensive. "I know I will not find the man I want on Umber...though no member of the ruling house has ever married an off-worlder."

Glenn placed his empty glass on a side table. "Somehow, Pallas, I cannot envision what a husband does within the ruling house of Umber."

Now she became defensive. "Well, he is not kept in a cage! He might be involved in the export trade, or help in the administration of the plains communities, like my sisters' husbands. As for the Matrin's consort—my father—he holds an important official position in Umber society."

"That's the first time you ever mentioned your father. I might have believed that the women of the ruling family had only one parent."

She glared at him. "My father and I have a very good relationship. However, I must say that there are no gamblers on Umber; and few academics like Miles Destan. Nothing is more important

than the Hrabas; it is a way of life as well as trade with other worlds."

"But the men are not involved," Glenn persisted. "No wonder they have no choice but to be deferent. You have denied them the priesthood."

Pallas turned grim-faced. "I should be angry with you, but I know that what you say is true. But what can we do? Things are the way they are."

"It depends on what you want more. Perhaps the women will have to give up the stallion. Perhaps it has become simply a substitute."

She rose again, flashing. "I do not substitute a horse for a man! Will you have me here, or in my bedroom?"

Glenn got to his feet and she softened a little. "I am still flushed from the seduction of my enemy, Glenn. But you are not my enemy, and what I hold out to you I will deliver."

"The floor may remind you too much of the Umber plain. I prefer the bed."

Glenn would not have believed her body could be so soft, so pliant. It stretched out beneath him like a languid animal, molding to his every motion. Where he had expected her to try to take command as in the House of Love—an attempt he would have resisted—or to ignite from those sparks of frustration he had helped strike during their conversion, instead she seemed to dissolve into a sea of untroubled pleasure, but with this image Glenn could only ask himself whether a sea surrenders or commands when it suffers a vessel to ply its surface, and he sensed a bottomless depth to this woman that could either fulfill or engulf him...

From the ship's catering service Pallas ordered a light meal delivered to the suite, which they ate with gusto, sitting nude on the end of the bed.

"This is a day I'll remember as long as I live," she said. "You must come to Umber. I'll bet you could even master the Hrabas. You could turn the planet upside down."

"Wait a minute, I've never been on an animal in my life."

"I'm only teasing. But don't mistake me: I'm not proposing to you. Umber isn't ready for that yet." Then she became wistful. "But I may never marry at all. Already I am past the usual age. I always thought my mother was strong on tradition but she has never applied any pressure. I am only third-eldest, so the succession will fall to one of my sisters. Ah, yes...perhaps she sees me as ambassador to the Concourse,"—throwing her arms apart she fell back on the bed, legs abandoned—"winning over every world to the women of Umber."

"It might be more than all of you could handle."



He finished off a jellied tart and leaned over beside her. "I will come to Umber, Gatrín Pallas. Not because I would ever closet myself on a world like yours, but because you are the most fascinating creature I have ever met and that fascination will not be exhausted by a brief encounter on Cosmopolis."

She became more serious. "Well. You cannot come back with me directly. Besides, I'm returning on Captain Cardis' research vessel with the team that will set up the terminus satellite." Her eyes were wide, completely candid. "Come a week later. Come straight to Umber after you leave Cosmopolis. You can win a lot of money while I'm gone if you wish—but if you win another woman, don't bring her with you."

He planted a kiss on her lips and smeared them with red jelly.

"Why didn't you tell me I had jelly on my mouth?"

"Because I was hoping you would give me some."

They made love again, this time, it seemed, with a greater passion and urgency, as though both were aware that some issue had been joined which would affect both their lives.

They were deep asleep when Dion and Vera returned.

\* \* \*

The next day was the eve of the Stellar Game. Destan's spirits had sunk to a low ebb. Discouragement that Cardis now had reason to suspect lay on him like a weight and he had gained no conclusive evidence from the broadcast chip to compensate. Many hours had he ruminated over the notes he had made upon returning to his cabin: all he could remember of Cardis' and Kyle's conversation. Something was definitely going on, but the indications lay entirely in hints and innuendo, and what proof did he have that whatever it was posed any threat to the Concourse, or to the Council, or to any individual world?

None.

He went through the motions. Spending time in the Library, he read, took notes, made copies, checked hundreds of entries on various subjects to determine which were contributed by Cardis himself. He drafted an introduction to his fictitious report to the Universities Association. As long as Cardis might be lulled into feeling secure about him, Destan had to maintain his cover.

But he would not neglect his other channels, and calling the Umber suite he was informed that Glenn was in the Gatrín's company somewhere in the Beta pod. By a piece of good luck, he came upon them after a two hour search in an ancient style coffee house.

"I hope you haven't forgotten that you still have a small fortune in tokens sitting in my cabin," Destan said to Glenn.

"I'm sure there's nowhere they could be safer, Miles."

"He can use them for a journey he'll be making soon," said Pallas.

With Destan's help the conversation turned to the Captain's intervention at the reception. Under judicious prompting, Pallas gave an account of the entire affair, including events in the conference chamber and the role of Carpathia in the Matrin's tentative plans for war. Destan wondered how much Jaynes already knew of the situation from his intelligence network.

But Pallas had failed to mention one point and it led Destan to ask: "I am curious to know how Captain Cardis could be so persuasive and settle such a difficult contention between two worlds, when the Council apparently could not."

"I don't know that much about the Council, but Captain Cardis believed that justice was on our side. He threatened to disqualify Balkin as a terminus world if Salmi didn't cooperate."

"I see." Inwardly, Destan was dumbfounded. Even Jaynes had not thought of that possibility. The implications were enormous.

An idea occurred to him. "I wonder if anyone has ever made such a threat in reverse. Would it matter to him if someone withdrew from the game?"

"Why would anyone do that?"

"I don't know. But why couldn't the pressure be applied in the opposite direction?"

"I'm sure he would never allow it. Even Salmi couldn't pressure him over Io."

"Maybe the Captain's interest in Umber is more important to him than relations with Balkin."

"I don't know why that would be." She looked thoughtful. "Maybe I will ask him tonight."

"Tonight?" Both men spoke simultaneously, wearing equally startled looks.

Pallas flushed slightly. "He invited me—after the meeting. He suggested we could talk about our experiences. He said we would both be fascinated."

"No doubt," said Destan. Would Cardis really reveal any of his background to her? Kyle had given him a warning to be careful—doubtless a superfluous one if he knew anything of Cardis. On the other hand, Pallas Dhin-Asper was not a woman to be underestimated.

Glenn was staring down at his glass. "You didn't tell me that."

"It slipped my mind. Does it matter?" she asked, with just a hint of impatience. "I could hardly refuse him."

"Oh, I'm sure he does it all the time. Many beautiful women visit Cosmopolis."

"As to that, Glenn, I can't say. But it would be strange indeed

if a visiting member of a ruling house were not accorded a private invitation by the Captain of the ship."

Glenn said with an off-handed smile, "Will you go in your role as ambassador to the Concourse?"

"Glenn! Nothing like that will happen!" Catching the connotation, Destan wondered why not. Did she too stand in such awe of Cardis to feel that he was beyond such things?

Pallas put her hand on Glenn's. "You are coming to UMBER to visit me. Nothing will change that. When I see you tomorrow everything will be the same."

Glenn laughed it off and squeezed her hand.

As to that, Destan told himself, he would do his best to find out. There was certainly no way he himself could ever get as close to Cardis as this woman might.

The next afternoon, when Destan arrived at the Intersect Gallery in the very center of the Captain's pod, some sixth sense declared that he was entering the spiritual heart of Cosmopolis. Perhaps for the passengers on the ship the focus of their activities lay elsewhere. But for the vast majority of the Concourse, their only contact with the great vessel came through the broadcasts which proceeded, once each month, from this room.

The Gallery took the shape of a shallow bowl on a broad base. Apart from two narrow segments lying at opposite poles through which access to floor level was gained, the walls of the bowl were tiered with seats holding up to four hundred spectators; access to these tiers lay at six points around the upper rim.

The Gallery floor displayed an array of consoles, a broadcaster and two sets of tables bearing maps and charts, plus attendant chairs. At their focus stood a cube: the Stellar Intersect chamber, walls transparent, to a height, width and breadth of six meters. Within floated five hundred faintly glowing points: the terminus stars; at dead center, a small saucer-shaped disc with a slit rim, through which a thin shaft of blue light spread out in all directions, like a tension film of water dividing the cube into two halves: the movable sextan point.

Destan took a seat halfway down and surveyed the gallery as it filled. Below him in the front row sat Pallas Dhin-Asper and her minister, Dion; but he had decided not to approach her before the game.

Like everyone else, he watched the two opposite entrances to the Gallery floor, awaiting the arrival of the game's participants. Suspended high over one of the entrances and looking down upon the center of the room was a large blank viewscreen, the purpose of which he could not surmise. Over each doorway itself hung a planetary emblem: one, that of Earth which Destan recognized; the other, presumably that of Wexton. Clearly, the players would be making separate entrances.

Now there was a stir at one of the doorways and Captain Cardis entered followed by two high-ranking officers of the ship. The one on the right had to be Kyle, the first officer, Destan noted, for he resembled the man in the old news clip. He and his companion took up positions at the two opposite points of access to the spectator areas, possibly as a security precaution, while the Captain proceeded to the broadcast console, though not without first granting a passing nod and a smile to the Gatrin of Umber. Destan felt an intense curiosity as to what had happened between them the night before.

Several more persons entered. Three assistants took positions at other consoles, evidently to perform duties relating to the operation of the cube chamber and the computer monitor. They were followed a moment later by a familiar stocky figure who placed himself in a chair near the entrance, and from there he watched the proceedings with an impassive face, taking no part. Curious, Destan inspected the man who had encountered him in the Captain's study. What was this Garra's role on the ship? The junior officer had referred to him as a member of the "senior staff." A researcher? A technician of some sort? Once again he wore the same common style suit. He had the look of a 'civilian' about him, in contrast to the officers and personnel Destan had seen so far.

The Gallery filled eventually to two-thirds capacity. The upper doors were closed. Glancing around, Destan noticed Leon Wessel a few rows behind him and at his gesture of invitation the young Grand Master came down to an adjoining seat. Wessel had been at the reception but the two had merely nodded in greeting. Now Destan asked him, "Perhaps you would be good enough to explain any questions I have as the game proceeds."

"Gladly."

"Still no game with Captain Cardis?"

"We discussed some of my ideas on strategy at the reception but he did not propose a game."

"Perhaps you intimidated him." The last was spoken in a half whisper, as the audience hushed.

The Captain addressed the gallery. "Today we play Intersect. Please welcome two worthy opponents: Dierdre Roth from Wexton in the Eleventh Division, who will play red, And Alman Jedals from Earth in the First Division, who will play green." As he spoke their names, the two players emerged from either side of the gallery floor. After acknowledging polite applause they took up positions each at a set of tables on either side of the great cube.

The Captain turned on the broadcaster, moved a switch opening all radio bands to the ship and to the Concourse worlds. Destan knew from the guide book that, separate from the Commu-

nication Center's own equipment on the Alpha pod, the Captain's pod bore its own hyper-speed transmitter for the Stellar Game, driven, as all communication systems were, by an Addison power crystal. Since the Captain was making a general broadcast, Destan knew that it was an open beam system, but he wondered if it contained a closed beam capacity as well, the type on which the Stellar Game satellites were modeled, one that could both receive and send. This would enable Cardis to make his own private contacts with any of the worlds.

The voice five hundred planets and more were waiting to hear spoke into the microphone. "This is Philip Cardis from Cosmopolis. We are about to play the 98<sup>th</sup> Stellar Intersect game. Please ready all satellites." He repeated his introduction of the two players for the benefit of the larger unseen audience. Then the Gallery lights were partially dimmed.

The players began to make their moves. They consulted charts, performed calculations, made checks on their computer terminals. For terminus position they examined the chamber hardly at all. Visual sighting was difficult even using the two movable sedans which could be positioned at any point around the cube and telescoped upward to the cube's full height. The principal reference to the chamber was in the moving of the sextan point, and this Destan found to be the most visually fascinating feature of what went on before him. As a player claimed a terminus, the corresponding flicker of light within the cube increased in intensity and took on the player's color—red or green—but the blue sheet of the sextan light moved and rotated like a ghostly film, passing serenely through the flickering termini without extinguishing them, as the players shifted the position and alignment of the cube's division into sectors. And at each move, each claiming of a terminus world, Captain Cardis opened the bands and broadcast an instruction: "Red move...activate terminus 95."

Destan whispered to Wessel, "I'm not sure I understand. What does a terminus satellite do when it's told to activate?"

"Nothing. It's simply a term of play. Perhaps you could say it's a warning to that terminus that it could be called upon to form an intersect. The same applies to an instruction to deactivate, if a player loses a terminus. But the Captain's broadcast tells the listener what's going on, and some of the networks use his instructions to construct a chart of the game's progress."

The play continued: the stately swing of the sextan light, the activation—and occasional deactivation—of one terminus point after another. After 37 moves and an hour's play Wessel whispered: "I think Roth will have an intersect on the next move...if she slides the sextan out and claims number 107."

Destan looked at him in some amazement. "How do you know? Don't tell me you can identify all those fireflies in the cube from here?"

"No, I simply know them in my head. If she were attempting a new point it would be difficult, but this is one that comes up fairly frequently. You get to recognize the numbers."

Roth followed Wessel's directions precisely and claimed an intersect. One of the assistants ran a routine computer check, declared it probable and with no safety hazards.

Now the Captain opened all bands once more and spoke into the microphone. "Player red will attempt an intersect. Please stand ready." He turned to Roth; she gave him the first two numbers. The Captain repeated them: "Terminus 107, transmit to terminus 50." A pause. "107...transmit...50." The words were slowly and carefully enunciated, each figure separate.

"Remember that the first satellite named transmits the carrier beam to the second," Wessel said quietly. "As soon as the second receives it, it sends back the particle beam."

The Captain broadcast the second set of numbers: "Terminus 95, transmit to terminus 406. 95...transmit...406."

"Does it matter what order the sets are given in?"

"Certainly. The first two are always the ones the player is most sure of. Then the third has a greater chance of encountering some portion of the other two. You see, even though this pattern has been used before, there are modulations over which the player has no control."

The third set went out: "Terminus 271, transmit to terminus 360; 271...transmit...360."

A hush fell over the gallery.

Wessel whispered, "The first signal will probably take at least five minutes. One has to allow for broadcast time, transmission time of the beams, and the discharge signal itself. See: the Captain is turning on the signal receiver." This was a separate speaker mounted on top of the console. "Now he's placing the microphone so the signals will be picked up on the broadcast."

A nice touch, thought Destan.

"How long will they wait if there's no signal?"

"One of the assistants computes maximum time."

"What if something goes wrong, like the first satellite missing the second with the carrier beam?"

"With a cone possibly a good part of a light-year across? It has never happened. The satellite mechanism is too precise."

The players stood silently at their tables. The assistants sat at their consoles, hands resting in their laps. The Captain stood quietly beside the receiver, his eyes closed.

Destan watched the unprepossessing figure and wondered what was going on in that head. Was it experiencing an element of megalomania: the knowledge that countless minds across hundreds of light-years were now focused on his own? Was it really personal enthusiasm for a game to embrace worlds, as he had said at the reception? A grandiose promotional stunt for his ship? Or, as Jaynes and his colleagues now feared, a scheme to establish some form of influence over the entire Concourse?

Or something that none of them had as yet imagined.

Suddenly the lonely figure before the broadcaster grew in Destan's eye to one of cosmic proportion, a gamemaster with veiled face who moved his own pawns and kings around a hidden galactic chessboard.

Still they waited. Perhaps three or four minutes had passed.

A thought occurred to Destan. "Doesn't the movement of Cosmopolis complicate the detection of the discharge signal?"

Wessel looked at him. "Don't you know? The ship always re-enters normal space when the game is played. We stopped an hour before the game began."

Destan was taken aback. "No. I didn't realize it." The knowledge gave him a queer sensation: the image of Cosmopolis itself, like a living organism, hovering in space—waiting, along with the rest of the Concourse, for the intersect signal.

Another minute passed. Destan could feel the tension in the room. Suddenly an audible crackle came over the speaker, followed by a continuous low level of static. There was a little gasp from the audience.

"There: the first two beams."

"I almost missed it. It wasn't very loud."

"The recoil created by two beams is less powerful than the three together. Just wait..."

Ten seconds, twenty, thirty. From the speaker came a second explosive crackle, this one much louder than the first. The wave of static succeeding it was drowned out by the applause that filled the Gallery.

Cardis held up his hand. He retrieved the microphone, spoke to the Concourse. "We have an intersect!" He took a slip of paper from one of the attendants. "The coordinates are: A36 - B20 - C85. Participating worlds: Calydon, New Bristol, Smithers, Blue Star, Zion, Vance."

Destan leaned back in his seat and found that his heart was pounding. The boy had been right: to harness such distances, even in a game. His sense of the bizarre was for a few moments overwhelmed by an irrational feeling of exhilaration.

There were closing ceremonies in which Dierdre Roth, the



victorious player, received the Stellar Intersect trophy, as well as various prizes and invitations. When the proceedings came to an end Destan wondered whether Cardis would use the occasion to approach him, but after a brief address of thanks to the audience the Captain and his crew made an exit. Garra had left immediately upon completion of the game.

The spectators slowly filed out of the Gallery. Destan said goodbye to Leon Wessel, waited and fell into step beside Pallas Dhin-Asper and her minister. She did not seem particularly happy to see him.

"A fascinating spectacle," said Destan. "Now that you've witnessed it, are you anxious to have Umber take part?"

"It is strange, very strange. Why my mother has any desire to get involved I don't know. But whatever the reason, Umber will have a terminus satellite in time for the next game."

"So soon? How is that possible?"

"I will be returning to Umber tomorrow with the construction team on Captain Cardis' research vessel. He says it will take only two weeks to build and put into orbit."

The crowd, attended by the ever-present escorts, made its way by slideway along the single long corridor from the Gallery to the edge of the pod.

"And will you be returning to Cosmopolis?"

"Not as far as I know. Why should you think so?"

"Captain Cardis did not ask you to return?"

After a perceptible pause, Pallas merely said, "No."

Destan realized it would be difficult to press her any further about the previous evening, especially here. In any event, he suspected she would not be candid with him—probably not even with Glenn. He would leave it for a later occasion. In a week or so Glenn Berenson would be on Umber as well.

And Umber was the one spot in the Concourse where a terminus satellite for the Stellar Game would be under construction and accessible. Destan had just decided that maybe someone ought to take a look at it...

Suddenly Pallas turned and looked pointedly at him. "At first I thought your interest in Umber, and me, was only passing because you were a friend of Glenn. Now I'm beginning to think otherwise." Destan was silent. "What is it you want, Miles Destan? Even Glenn is starting to wonder. Who are you?"

"Was that question asked during your visit with the Captain last night?"

She stared at him. "No. In fact, your name didn't come up once. But don't ask me what did. What may pass between Captain Cardis and myself is no one's business but my own."

"I am an Historian, Gatrín Pallas. My specialty is the great figures of the past. I am simply interested in someone who at some time in the future may be looked upon as a great man."

They reached the junction, where some of the people elected to take the outer shaft to the Float. Pallas and Dion were accorded place in the first shuttle car to the Beta pod. Destan stepped aside. Today he would walk the 800 meter passage.

Pallas turned on boarding and gave him a cordial but distant smile. "Goodbye, Mr. Destan."

Destan made a slight bow and a gesture of farewell.

It was another two days before Philip Cardis contacted Miles Destan: the day before the Historian was due to depart Cosmopolis.

Destan approached their meeting with some trepidation. In one way, it seemed unusual that Cardis would allow three days to elapse with no communication of any sort, considering the abrupt manner in which their last meeting had terminated. He feared the interim had been spent in an investigation of one Miles Destan.

What could Cardis have uncovered? There had been a contact man between Jaynes and the Historian in arranging their interview, but the Captain would need an intelligence system to match the Council's to penetrate to him. Then in dismay Destan discerned a simpler approach. Only a single person at the Association of Concourse Universities had been enlisted to provide his cover, and he with only a partial understanding of its purpose, so that a good investigator might expose that cover easily. Cardis had indicated over the pickup that he knew of Jaynes' previous investigations and he would not need proof of Destan's connection with the Council Chairman to be able to deduce who had really sent him.

Still, he decided he had to maintain the façade unless Cardis confronted him with his deception.

The work he had thus far completed on his bogus assignment lay in the briefcase Destan was carrying when Cardis received him in a suite on the main deck of the Captain's pod.

"First let me apologize to you, Mr. Destan. I don't usually run off and leave a visitor stranded like that. I am also sorry that a colleague of mine was less than polite when he encountered you unexpectedly. Garra is short-tempered at the best of times." The man seemed relaxed and affable. Perhaps his security people had failed to turn up anything.

"I may not have been sufficiently respectful, but he wore no uniform and I knew nothing of his status on the ship."

Cardis failed to take the bait. "I'm sure that had nothing to do with it. But tell me, is there any last minute help I can give you on your assignment? Were you able to obtain all the information your sponsors wanted?"

Destan hesitated over the pointed ambiguity in Cardis' words. Had he only imagined the faint edge the voice had seemed to take on? As always, the man's face gave nothing away.

"I think my sponsors will be satisfied with my results. Naturally, more work has to be done after I leave Cosmopolis." He gestured at his briefcase. "I can show you the material I've prepared so far, if you like."

Cardis smiled. "That won't be necessary. But I would ask this of you..." The expression in the eyes became a fraction more intense. What word had Jan used? Disturbing.

"If your sponsors require a personal report on myself, if they seek to understand the motives behind the work I do, I hope you will convey my assurances that I have only the interests of the whole Concourse at heart."

Destan felt himself drawn into the vortex of those dark brown irises. Their suggestion of underlying layers reinforced the hidden layers of meaning which seemed to lie behind the words just spoken. What message—or deception—was Cardis trying to impress on him? To impose on his mind by force of will? Destan felt an urge to reveal all, to confront the man before him with a direct plea for revelation.

Instead, he said carefully: "If my report addresses itself to the mind that originated Cosmopolis and its Library, it may be guilty of reflecting some of my own outlook. I tend to see history as shaped by the great people in it, rather than by large impersonal forces as modern theories like to think. I have been accused of thinking simplistically, but often the simplest explanation contains the greatest element of truth. As well, I happen to believe in the primacy of the individual human personality. In the history of our times I sense a great vacuum, an aura of critical gestation. Unknown to itself, the Concourse is merely awaiting a jolt, a ripple—perhaps it might even be a game move—to turn it in some new direction. In such a time there are those who focus on the unusual man, the enigmatic figure whose motives they cannot perceive. They feel both curiosity and fear. I suspect that in the minds of my sponsors—the ones at the Association—such curiosity has made itself felt. Even in their choice of me."

Cardis' expression remained cryptic. Then he said quietly, "Those who can act only out of fear and curiosity might be better advised to leave the stage to others."

For the longest time, it seemed, the two men sat like silent gladiators, their eyes continuing the ambiguous sparring that revealed nothing. Then Cardis rose and extended his hand. "Perhaps we will see each other again, Mr. Destan."

"Perhaps we will, Captain."

In the early hours of the next morning, Destan was aboard the shuttle on his way to the rendezvous world. The fabled pleasure ship dwindled astern.

From New Ghana Destan traveled by commercial spaceliner to Last Chance, thence to Stevenson's Planet, finally coming to Sigma, assembly world of the Concourse Council. During the waking hours of his two day journey he mulled over the ambiguous results of his sojourn to Cosmopolis. As for hard evidence to justify Allen Jaynes' misgivings, he knew he was bringing back none. As for impressions, suspicions, innuendoes, his own mind was full of them, but he had decided to exercise discretion in presenting them to the Chairman. The main thrust of his report would be the proposal of several options for further investigation, most of which he wanted to conduct himself. It might be some time before he got back to his regular work.

Once again he landed on Sigma in the late afternoon and arrived at the Council complex after sundown. In one of the committee rooms Jaynes was waiting.

The Chairman gestured at a huge star map covering one wall and spoke in a voice that crackled like dry tinder. "We're in the midst of a minor crisis: the governors of Samatri have informed us they are withdrawing base privileges for the Council fleet in that sector. I have a suspicion someone is pressuring them, but so far their delegate hasn't been able to get any clarification out of the board of governors."

The old man looked tired. Why did he stay at his job, Destan wondered, to face frustration, apathy and downright antagonism? He had been reconfirmed in his chair for eleven years—the longest term since Marcus Sand himself. What did he look forward to? Then came the gleam in the sharp old eye and Destan knew that the aged leader enjoyed every minute of it.

"Well!" Jaynes snapped, hands clutching the hips of his formal blue robes. "What of Cosmopolis? Are we inventing a ghost in the closet? Is Philip Cardis merely what he makes himself out to be: the greatest showman in the history of the Concourse?"

Destan indulged in a provocative half-smile. "If you want evidence of his showmanship, you've come to the wrong man. What

I saw of Cardis in his private apartments indicated a man intent on avoiding the limelight at all costs."

The deep set eyes took on a glint like unearthed nuggets. "I chose right. You made it, Miles Destan! Well, out with it, man! What can you tell me?" Jaynes might have been handed an elixir, he seemed to sparkle with ten years of rejuvenation.

"Nothing in a word—or even a sentence." Destan gestured to the table, hefted his briefcase. "Let's take a seat. I may want to refer to my notes."

The Chairman glared at him wryly, as if suspecting he was being deliberately tantalized, and they sat down on opposite sides of the long committee table. Destan, feeling transfixed, took a deep breath.

"Philip Cardis is by far the most enigmatic man I have ever met. To those with whom he is not intimately involved—and the latter seem precious few—he presents an impenetrable mask. Even to long-serving employees. For me, I think he let down that mask very briefly—or at least allowed a little light to trickle through. I am still trying to analyze the face I glimpsed."

"Mr. Destan," Jaynes interrupted with only partly feigned exasperation, "are you always so dillydallying with your students? It's a wonder they don't hang you out the window to clear your head!"

Destan laughed. "Mr. Chairman, my uncertainty reflects the results of my investigation. But of this much I feel sure: Cardis is engaged in some secret undertaking. It might be personal and innocuous; it might be otherwise. I don't know if it involves any of the Hierarchs, but he seemed particularly anxious over Balkin—" He stopped. Had the old man learned?

Jaynes said: "Were you aware of the assassination attempt on Salmi?"

"So you know. They were trying to cover it up."

"They still are. But I have my channels. Suppose you tell me what you know about it."

Destan launched into an account of what he had learned from Pallas of General Salmi's mission to Cosmopolis, the details of their dispute, the imposed resolution by the Captain.

"I seem to remember an item crossing my desk about this little feud—from Carpathia, I think. But I was not aware that a possible war was in the offing. I must confess I've not paid much attention to Umber: a semi-barbaric planet as I recall."

"I don't think the Gatrin would take kindly to that analysis."

Jaynes ignored the remark. "But the method by which Cardis forced Salmi to cooperate: that I find most unsettling."

"That too was my reaction. On the other hand, unless there

are other examples of such pressure, it may be wrong to assume a general intention on Cardis' part to use the threat of disqualification from the game as an instrument of power. I rather think he used it specifically on this occasion because he wanted Umber as a new terminus world." He did not mention the possible added draw of the Gatrín herself.

Jaynes objected. "But why threaten his relationship with Salmi just for the sake of adding another move to the game?"

Destan shrugged. He was not yet ready to plunge into the subject of the Stellar Game, a subject he had spent long travel hours ruminating over, one which had begun to draw disturbing phantoms to the surface of his imagination. He veered off.

"It seems to me that so many answers to the riddle of Philip Cardis lie in his past. No one I talked to on Cosmopolis has any idea of his home world." He opened his briefcase. "Perhaps these will help you ascertain it." He handed over the four pictures of Cardis and two of Garra.

Jaynes' excitement mounted. "These are the best photos of Cardis anyone has ever obtained, Miles. They don't tell me anything but I can turn them over to an Anthropologist for an in-depth analysis. Those boys can pinpoint where your mother's backside was resting from a bump on the nose." He took up the ones of Garra. "And who is this man?"

"That I don't know. He's on the staff, but I couldn't learn his capacity. I understand his name is Garra."

Jaynes peered at the irascible face. "He doesn't resemble Cardis, does he? So it's not likely they're from the same world." He placed them with the others. "We can have him analyzed, too. What else did you take?"

"Only this." He brought out the picture of the office desk top, briefly outlining how he had managed to obtain it, and he could see that the Chairman was impressed. "Anything interesting here?" Jaynes asked, scanning the mix of papers showing.

"Probably not, from what I can recall. They're mostly ship's memos. And a telex strip whose contents I read: about the Umber terminus. You can keep all these, I made seconds."

He dropped the briefcase flap and leaned back in his chair. "I am curious about other things in Cardis' background besides his planet of origin. You yourself pointed out the anomaly about the man: the paradox between the celebrity and the recluse; the apparent contradiction between someone who could invent the Stellar Game and one who writes treatises on Alexander.

"I may be off the mark, but I have postulated the occurrence of some event that changed Cardis' interests, possibly his fundamental outlook. At first I wondered about the fact that the Library

was begun right after the ship was launched whereas the Stellar Game wasn't established until six years later. But then I checked a sequence of Library codes and compared them with those which Cardis indicated were contributed by himself. This is what I found: all of Cardis' personal material is relatively recent. It seems to fall into the latter half of the Library's existence. In other words, about seven years."

Jaynes saw the direction of Destan's thinking. "That would be right after the Stellar Game began."

"As near as I could tell."

"And you think this change in Cardis' interests might have had something to do with the Stellar Game?"

"I'm not sure. In fact, it's the contrast between the two that's puzzling: from a very innovative science to history. But what I am proposing is this: have your archivists make a survey of all media reports and features on Cardis and the ship around the time the game was begun. They'll be fishing, but look for a reference to something, a hint; perhaps an incident on the ship, a change of key personnel, some pronouncement by Cardis, anything that could provide a clue to this apparent about-face."

Jaynes grimaced. "I'll set up the project tomorrow."

"Good. But there's another survey I'd like you to do as well, and this may be more ambitious than the first. For all his glib explanations about reality and myth, there's got to be more reason than that for this total concealment. The idea of a later event led me to think along the same lines for this earlier explanation. If we assume that Cardis has some grand sinister plan, and if a project the scope of Cosmopolis and the Stellar Intersect game is a part of it, the cause may proceed from some major event in Cardis' early life. And that event may also have been a major event on the Concourse scene."

Jaynes nodded slowly.

"It's probably a long shot," Destan continued, but let's say Cosmopolis was a good five years in the planning. That means we would begin at a point about nineteen years ago and go back, say, another eleven years, when Cardis would have been about fifteen. This should be far enough. Look for any unusual political event, perhaps a civil war, a coup in which one party was ousted, an atrocity, especially a betrayal of one world by another; perhaps even a commercial venture through which one world or group of people suffered: something sufficient to cause a reaction that could lead to a plot such as you envision. The explanation may turn out to be something else entirely, but if we have a list of such events we may find a correlation between one of them and some other line of investigation."



Jaynes gave him a bleak look. "You're not asking for much, Mr. Destan. A list like that could be as long as this table. But I'll get on to it myself; Seth and another assistant can help me. And while all these mammoth tasks are being undertaken, I gather you'll be engaged on one of your own?"

Well, here it comes, Destan thought. I cannot put the subject off any longer. "Yes," he said, "I want to do some studies on the Stellar Game."

But suddenly the old man started. "I haven't offered you anything, Miles! I had quite forgot that Seth has refreshments ready." He stood up. "How about some sweetcakes and a bit of Sigma's local fruit? We can have tea with it."

Destan nodded. Jaynes went to the door, stuck his head into the hall, roared, "Seth!" The Historian shuddered. Considering that the Council complex did not lack for technological amenities, it was a wonder that the Chairman could not employ a more sophisticated method of communicating with his assistant.

Seth, evidently, had had an ear cocked. In trundled a silver cart wheeled by the longstanding assistant, bearing the stated confections and a steaming pot. A short spindly man, probably a decade younger than his employer, Seth had eyes that seemed perpetually sleepy. He poured tea, set out platters of fruit and cakes, cautioned the Chairman against too much sweetener, and preceded the empty cart out the door.

Having offered his guest refreshment, Jaynes now gave him little opportunity to enjoy it. Fixing Destan with his stirring spoon, he demanded, "Now what are these studies you want to do on the Stellar Game?"

Destan began: "I think you'll agree with me that the game is the most unusual aspect to the puzzle. It's a bizarre invention and I want to try proceeding on the assumption that it should not simply be taken at face value."

Jaynes looked perplexed. "But we've already discussed Cardis' possible motives behind the game and you seemed to dismiss them."

The Historian plunged in. "Not at all. But I am speaking about the game itself, the actual physical aspect of it: the satellites, the beams, the intersect point. Cardis has harnessed some very inventive science to create phenomenal effects that cover many, many light-years of space. If we assume the game is in some manner a part of his overall scheme, then we cannot afford to ignore any elements about it that might be seen as...disturbing."

Jaynes' eyes narrowed, and he set aside his second rumball. "Are you suggesting that you think the game could be dangerous in some way?"

"First let me fill you in on what I saw and learned of Captain Cardis' Stellar Game." He outlined in close detail the scene in the Intersect Gallery, vivid as the day he had witnessed it, charged with overtones at once exhilarating, disquieting, incomprehensible; the description given by Wessel, the boy's comments during the game's progress.

"So this discharge at the intersect would seem to constitute a hazard?" The Chairman's voice was quiet.

"Apparently so, though I have no idea of its dimensions or its power. But given the computer safeguard, it would seem to prevent no threat to anyone."

"Safeguards can always be overridden."

"Certainly. But you have to realize that neither Cardis nor the players can control the location of an intersect beyond the possibilities presented by the location of the terminus worlds. Wessel told me that the players are always attempting to find new ones, so if any deliberately dangerous configuration did exist, some player would be bound to discover it and point it out."

"I see."

Destan paused. Would Jaynes make a certain observation? None was forthcoming. Good. He preferred not to have the point brought up until he had looked more closely at the location of the game's newest terminus world.

He pushed on. "Still, I want to talk to a Physicist about the Intersect beams. Will you contact the Guild and see if they can dig up anyone who knows anything about the Stellar Game, perhaps someone who's made an unofficial study of it?"

"I'll get in touch with Guildmaster Petrie tonight."

Destan took a long sip of the tea. Its invigorating fragrance had a warming effect on his insides which helped counter the chill in his mind.

"You see, there is another possible angle. What if the intersect and even the entire game itself were only incidental—a camouflage. Suppose the real threat lay in the satellites themselves."

"You mean as weapons?"

"As what I don't know. But every major world has one. Should we postulate that each of them stands under some latent threat, a mechanical infiltrator that will one day turn on them, or be used to apply some kind of pressure?"

"Blackmail!"

"Possibly. To know that, we have to know more about the satellites. Does a single particle beam by itself have any potentially destructive force? Is there another element to the satellite we don't know about? In addition, there would have to be some way for Cardis to control the satellites himself—or override their normal

game functions and the technicians who direct them. Or if not all the way from Cosmopolis, at least from the system itself, possibly through agents."

Jaynes shook his head dubiously. "A network of agents on all the major worlds? Some ripple of it would surely have reached me."

Destan had no comment.

"Is there any way we can examine one of the satellites?" The Chairman immediately answered his own question. "Of course—the one under construction on Umber!"

"Yes, but I don't think the Cosmopolis construction crew will allow myself or a Physicist to poke around in its guts while it's being assembled. But there is bound to be someone on Umber involved, and there will no doubt be blueprints. I make no guarantee that I can bring back anything conclusive, but short of pirating one out of the skies we have no better prospect."

"So you are proposing to go to Umber?"

"Yes." There was another reason which he saw no point in revealing to Jaynes at this time: Pallas Dhin-Asper might still be a source of information. He had yet to learn what had transpired between herself and the Captain, and a further idea was beginning to percolate in the back of his mind.

"In fact, I have several other avenues of investigation to propose, but I suggest we leave a discussion of those until after we have completed our various surveys." Jaynes gave him the access code by which he could use the Council telex and computer facilities and they arranged to meet again in five days' time.

Destan concluded: "Please try to have the Physicist here on the same day."

The Chairman grinned like an old prizefighter who unexpectedly finds himself back in the circle one more time. "I'll do my best, Mr. Destan."

As the two men left the room and made their way to the rotunda, Jaynes clapped a hand on the Historian's shoulder. "If this thing works out, Miles, we may owe a lot to you. The Concourse may owe a lot to you. I made a good choice: you're a very thorough man—one might almost say single-minded. But you don't let too much of yourself out. Sometimes I get the feeling you're doing this as much for your own motives as for ours. You and Cardis make a good pair: both enigmatic."

"I hope you aren't considering me a possible danger to the Concourse, sir."

The old man chuckled. "No, Miles, I won't be putting another investigator onto you."

\* \* \*

On the outskirts of Sigma's capital city Destan had chosen a small and simple apartment: one main room where he would do his work, basic amenities and a cubicle for sleeping. Tomorrow he would set up his charts, his materials and the computer terminal. Tonight he could do nothing: a brooding mood was upon him.

So the Chairman too had called him single-minded. How many others had done the same? The most recent was Jan. Now he remembered he had neglected to call her before leaving Cosmopolis despite his promise. Well, she would not be surprised.

Although Jaynes could not have known it, he had chosen one single-minded recluse to uncover another. Cardis was a driven man, that much Destan could read in the enigmatic face. What made him so? Something in his personal past—some failure, disappointment, rejection? And why did he too turn back to a study of his racial past? What did he hope to discover?

For himself, Destan knew the answers to such questions. When his father's experiment with the new crystal had failed so disastrously, the son, too, came to believe he had failed: he, the budding Physicist, unable to help in his father's research, unable to prevent his untimely death, unable afterward to continue his work. His disappointment at the failure had been exceeded, after the loss of the man himself, only by his disappointment that his father would never achieve the fame and success he had anticipated; and in which his son had hoped to share. But his sense of rejection was the strongest of all. When he had been unable to bear conditions on the asteroid—was it fear or simply a weak constitution?—his father had sent him away. Oh, it had been a considerate gesture, but it was a rejection nonetheless. And he had reinforced that rejection by going ahead with the critical experiment before his son could return.

I should have been there, Destan told himself. If I couldn't help him, at least I should have been there. If I expected to share in his success, I should have been ready to share in his failure. Did I really anticipate that failure? Is that why I drove myself from the asteroid?

I should have been with you, father, even though it meant we would both have died.

The switch to Historian had initially been a simple groping for some distant discipline. But soon there developed the fascination for the great people of the past, and Destan realized that he was seeking to make it up to his father in the only way left. His father had claimed that his invention was destined to make him one of history's great figures. Had he been right? Had the potential been there, thwarted only by some freak accident or ill-prepared experiment?

Did his father have anything in common with those figures of the past whom history labeled great men and women? John Addison who developed the first power crystal, the hyper-speed communication systems, founded New World Enterprises; Joanna Mangin, whose preaching united the warring factions of the Celanese cluster and founded a culture spanning a score of worlds, giving humanity the philosophy of Ultimate Responsibility; Charles Darwin, the first voice to cry out against racial superstition, revealing to humanity its true nature. Even those great figures adjudged evil, founders of recessive movements, he researched: like the Margrave Hoddinott who established the slave societies on Blue Star that led to a century-long war embroiling half the worlds of men; Adolf Hitler, a precursor of the Margrave. And countless other names that lay in the buried vaults of history, from Hammurabi to Joan of Arc, from Lenin to Antonia Fermi.

All had one thing in common: all were driven men and women, driven by voices, urges, ideas, convictions, innovations, discoveries. Surely he could not be wrong in imputing to such figures the power to change the course of history through the exercise of their own free wills? How could other Historians place such things as economic mutation, mass psychologies, theories of chaotic probability, before these overwhelming forces of the individual human personality?

Of course, he had long ago concluded that his father had been just such a man, shared these very characteristics. But still the search went on. Now he confronted another such man, driven, an innovator, already a legend. What voices did Philip Cardis listen to? What visions of destiny haunted his mind?

And if he were indeed bent on evil, what would it mean for Miles Destan if he were the one to thwart him?

On the first day Destan began work on a series of charts, for which he used material retrieved from the Cosmopolis Library. First he identified all the terminus worlds and noted the years they had joined the game. The initial number, before the first game was played, had been 362, and over the eight years that number had increased until the total now stood at exactly 500.

How many years had it taken Cardis to design the game, to organize it, to construct the first satellites? Cosmopolis had been launched six years before the first game: the whole of that time? Was the Stellar Intersect game already in mind when the ship was constructed?

Perhaps that was a key question. Was there a way he could find out? Jaynes had already scouted the company and the shipyard where Cosmopolis was built, but Destan decided he wanted to do an investigation of his own.

He began a review of all the 98 games played, first addressing himself to the locations of the intersects. Adapting horizontal and vertical maps of the Concourse which he abutted on floor and walls in one corner of the room, he made a notation on them for each intersect point. Of the 91 intersects formed in 98 games—seven had played to a stalemate—he found many were repeats. Obviously, the players would have used the same set of terminus worlds more than once. There had been, in fact, only 53 separate points so far.

One pattern emerged, perhaps not unpredictable: a large percentage of the 91 winning intersects had taken place inside a twenty light-year diameter than in any other comparable area of the Concourse. The Council star, Altair, fell within that sphere. Earth itself lay just on its edge. It was predictable, no doubt, because this was the central area of the entire Concourse, and the nature of the game would tend to favor such a central position for the occurrence of intersects.

Going through the game records once again, he now drew up a chart for each terminus world, listing any games in which it had helped form intersects, plus the locations of these intersects. He noted that certain worlds tended to be used more frequently than others, no doubt due to their fortuitous locations; one of these was Balkin.

These 500 charts occupied the whole of the second day and part of the third.

Toward evening of the third day Destan examined the feasibility of the computation he now wanted to do. Could he insert Umber into the pattern and calculate how it might be used to form new intersects and where they would be located? By midnight he had worked out a program for the computer and, impatient for the results, ran it immediately. The machine gave him a surprising list of four probables. Bleary-eyed, he checked the coordinates. None coincided with any solar system, though one lay three light-years from Mirac, and another less than two light-years from Sigma itself. He might have considered the latter to be a provocative coincidence except that this location happened to be more or less the same as one of the commoner intersect points within that central diameter; one that had been used four times, according to his notations on the map.

If he had devised his program correctly, he had effectively eliminated that most outlandish of ideas which had disturbed his waking and sleeping hours since leaving Cosmopolis.

But as a welcome sleep overtook him, it was destined to be disturbed once more. In his dreams Destan found himself between the stars in the cold of space, dodging cone-shaped carrier beams that flashed from satellite to satellite, followed by particle beams

that exploded in intersects behind and before him. He took refuge on a planet well away from any of the beams' regular routes, but then watched in horror as one of the satellites swung itself in his direction. Down flashed the carrier beam; another satellite swung. Down came another, and another. Destan knew that within seconds the particle beams would follow, converge on him, blow his atoms to the stars—

He woke. It was dawn of the fourth day.

Lying in the sleeping cubicle, he tried to dismiss the dream as an irrational—and inaccurate—nightmare. It presumed too many divergences from the normal behavior of the satellite. That someone somewhere could align a satellite to transmit without having a second satellite to receive. That the particle beam would follow from the same satellite as the carrier beam. That several satellites could act together and focus themselves on a single minute object—and a planet was just that—a vast distance from all of them.

If so incredible a thing were possible, it was a completely new game; he could throw away all his computations. In any event, it was not a nightmare he intended to share with Allen Jaynes just yet.

He moped through the fourth day, suffering from insufficient sleep. He had gotten derailed.

He fished out his pictures of Cardis and Garra, stared at them a while. What relationship could there be between the two? Their faces were equally impenetrable.

When he returned them to the case his eye fell on the picture of Cardis' desk top. He took it back to his chair. As he had done several times before, he scanned the papers, the telex from Matrin Fedria Dhin-Asper whose text he could read clearly. There was a batch of papers to one side, skewed one above the other, bits of some tops and bottoms showing. He had looked at the exposed words before. Now one of them jumped out at him. It was part of the heading, evidently the subject of a memo.

It was the name Basel.

Basel was one of the terminus worlds; he had done a chart on it with all the others. Retrieving it, he saw that this world had figured five times in a winning intersect. Hmm...what contact or concern might Cardis have had with Basel? In the photo, no part of the memo's text was visible.

Something surfaced in his memory. Basel had undergone a violent upheaval in a revolution—how long ago? Perhaps a year or two. Checking its chart once more, he saw that after the game 22 months before, there was no further entry. A coincidence?

He connected the phone to the computer, punched the code and asked the Council operator to commission a summary account

of the Basel revolution. He paced the room for thirty minutes until the terminal hummed to life and began to print out the report. He read the words as they flowed onto the paper.

The revolution had taken place eighteen months ago. The rebels, for whatever reason, had sabotaged the terminus satellite during the initial fighting—destroyed it completely, in fact. This faction, after a full year of chaos, had recently emerged victorious, but there was no mention of the Stellar Game satellite having been replaced. He checked his Cosmopolis records: no mention of either its loss or restoration.

It seemed that Basel was the one world ever to have withdrawn from the Stellar Game.

He went back to the chart. Yes, five intersects. It was one of those termini that had been most frequently used. All the intersects fell within that central area of the Concourse where the highest percentage of all intersects had occurred.

But three of them were in the identical location, and he recognized the coordinates without consulting his map: it was the point located less than two light-years from Sigma. He picked up the computer print-out of the four possible intersect points using Umber but he knew he had remembered correctly. The fourth on the list virtually coincided with that intersect near Sigma.

Captain Cardis had been negotiating with the Matrin for over a year to make Umber a terminus world. Did he simply wish to fill in a gap created by the loss of Basel? But why had Umber not been approached earlier, especially as it would have made the game that much more efficient considering the evident versatility of the Umber location? Had Umber society been too underdeveloped? Possibly. A certain level of scientific sophistication was required to run the satellite, as well as an interest on the part of the populace.

On the other hand, might Umber's position have assumed critical importance only after Basel was lost? And something else would have been of critical importance: the prospect of war over Io between Umber and Balkin. No satellite would have been launched as long as such a conflict, or the threat of it, hung over the Matrin's world.

It would seem that Cardis had been forced to tread a fine line: between resolving the dispute over Io in Umber's favor, and avoiding any alienation of General Salmi that might have interfered with Balkin's participation in the game.

To say nothing of two attempts on Salmi's life—

He needed one more piece of information. According to the Basel chart, the telling intersect point had been used in games 6, 31 and 76. He went back to his original listing from the Cosmopolis records.



Game 76. Participating worlds: Mendoza. New Glasgow. Basel. Sleepy Hollow. Wexton. Balkin.

Balkin.

His notes on Cardis' conversation heard over the pickup: Destan brought them out. They covered a single sheet. Part way down the page, after the conversation with Kyle over the question of Salmi's survival, he read:

"We don't need close calls like that with the participating worlds...We can't afford to lose..."

\* \* \*

The Physicist was a short ruddy man with the appropriate if unusual name of Neutron Daly. "My parents were determined I'd be a Physicist," said Newt, "so they started on me early."

"What led to an interest in the Stellar Intersect game?" asked Destan.

"When I was growing up I was a games fanatic. When I was twelve I declared I wanted to be a professional gambler, but my parents wouldn't hear of it, so I ended up a Physicist and when Captain Cardis developed his Stellar Game I was fascinated, particularly since he seemed to employ some advanced science to accomplish it."

"And were you able to learn anything about that science?"

"Bits and pieces. There are two unusual aspects. In a normal closed carrier beam a cone as wide as half a degree would dissipate too rapidly. That means Cardis has adapted the power drive in the satellite so that the beam's integrity will survive the width of the Concourse. My specialty is not communications, and I don't know what that would take."

"And the particle beams?"

"That's the other. Usually a message beam is charged to keep it within the boundary of the carrier beam. But Cardis has also doctored the particles so that the beams attract each other. Again, I don't know how."

"What happens when these particle beams meet?"

"The collision of the particles seems to produce some type of microfission reaction. That's when we get the discharge signal."

"How hazardous would it be at the point itself?"

"You mean for a human being?" Newt laughed. "He'd never know what hit him! Aside from any explosive force, there would be the heat by-product. Also, the reaction apparently causes some of the particles to ricochet beyond the boundaries of the carrier beams so I suppose a bombardment of these particles would be hazardous, although that would dissipate the further they spread outward."

"And how large would this danger area be?"

Newt considered a moment. "That's hard to say. If the particle beams were of the same mass and diameter as the normal message beams...I'd just be guessing to say maybe ten million kilometers."

Jaynes grunted. It was his first comment in the conversation so far.

"That's hardly an astronomical distance," remarked Destan. "But wait—there's a third beam as well. Add another beam and what happens?"

"Well—" Newt cogitated again. "There must be a progressively stronger reaction if only because of the stronger discharge signal. Again, I have no way of judging: tenfold? A hundredfold? And it's impossible to calculate at what distance the ricocheting particles would be physically dangerous. It would relate to their number and density, not to their speed: after all, the beam in the closed communication system poses no problem."

"It would still seem to be a limited distance."

Jaynes asked, "Is this getting us anywhere, Miles?"

Perhaps only if we indulge in some nightmare assumptions, Destan thought. But for now his dreams would remain his own. He asked, "Mr. Daly, is there a university specializing in communication science?"

"Sure, several. Also a few laboratories associated with the product firms."

"Could you make a list for us?"

"Certainly."

"One other thing: if we got some material on the satellite construction: blueprints, schematics, construction reports, would you be interested in taking a look at them?"

"You bet."

The Anthropologist gave his report with a deadpan expression. He pointed to the four pictures of Cardis laid out on the table. "You can see certain facial elements characteristic of the Bayan racial group, the dominant strain in the Bayan cluster, though representatives of the group are found in other widely separated areas as well. Notice the line of the cheekbones merging into this concave area here; the recession of the earlobes, the angles formed by the structural lines of the skull in relation to the jaw."

"There are a dozen worlds in that area," Jaynes protested in dismay. "You can't be more precise?"

The Anthropologist shook his head. He pointed to the pictures of Garra. "As for this man, his features display a certain blend of elements, maybe a dilution or racial mix. I might suggest Earth or Ascension. Or—a distant possibility—certain groups of pirates were known to develop a blend of features due to their nomadic habits and intermarriage over a wide range of the Concourse."

"But the pirates are virtually extinct now," objected Jaynes. "Eliminated by the Council fleets or simply disappeared."

"It wasn't that long ago, Mr. Chairman, and some would still survive somewhere and have descendants. However, I present it only as a possibility based on the photographs. You see this line of the forehead: one might call it prototypic rather than specific to particular modern races. But it could be a result of unusual diluting processes, such as the pirates underwent."

"As did the population of Earth once the space age was under way," Destan interjected.

"Yes, compared to present Concourse races with the rapid divergences undergone on new planets, the so-called races of Earth before space travel bore a strong similarity. Many of those features still survive on Earth today."

"This man spoke only a few words to me, but I feel sure he did not come from Earth."

The Chairman made a gesture of dismissal. "Thank-you, Mr. Quillan." As the Anthropologist withdrew, Jaynes looked after him ruefully. "I guess it was unrealistic to expect he would hand me the address of Cardis' parents."

"And what of your own surveys?"

Jaynes' eyes rolled to the ceiling. "In the case of our media search between seven and ten years ago, the archives came up with nothing definite. Not that there weren't features on Cardis and the ship during that time: I daresay at every hour of the day, someone somewhere is writing something about Cosmopolis. But it's all the same, and all of it's drivel. I scanned a lot of it myself. If Cardis underwent any personal change around the time of the Stellar Game, no clue of it ever found its way to the media."

"I guess it's not too surprising, though I was hoping we might stumble on something. And your other survey?"

Jaynes summoned Seth through their regular channels of communication. The assistant was carrying a folder thick enough to choke a spaceship drive tube, and when Destan's face fell, Jaynes gave him an I-told-you-so look.

"Seth and I have had a page prepared on almost a thousand different events of the type you suggested, all taking place between nineteen and thirty years ago. I had forgotten some of them."

Destan gingerly opened the folder on the table and thumbed through the sheets. Where to begin? Could he narrow the field—

"Where do I find the items relating to the Bayan cluster?"

Jaynes saw his idea and leafed through the sheets, drawing out a group of about forty. "As a matter of fact, this area has been a hotbed of trouble for generations: one interplanetary war after another. There were even a few pirate bases in the cluster. One

world was suspected of supporting one of them—skimming off a percentage of their gains.”

Destan scanned the sheets.

“There,” said Jaynes, pointing over his shoulder. “How’s that for one of your likely candidates? The Montagos on Hadalgo invite the Beckwiths of Eganwale into alliance, and they meet on an island in the Farside Ocean on Hadalgo for a conference. But the Montagos at the conference are really mind-drugged slaves. Meanwhile, the island turns out to be false, the real Montago leaders scuttle it, and the entire Beckwith delegation ends up at the bottom of the sea.” The Chairman gave a huge snort. “Fortunately, some of the worlds in the Bayan cluster represent the extreme of interplanetary lunacy. Otherwise, my job would be impossible.”

“And when did this take place?” Destan checked the date: 1037. Twenty-five years ago. Something like this certainly fitted his order, but the folder must contain many equally likely possibilities, and there was no proof that his underlying theory was correct.

Jaynes was saying, “Actually the Montagos are even more notorious for a war that took place several years earlier—back in 1022—when an innocent bystander was killed. You’ve heard of the Olivar catastrophe?”

“Only vaguely. I was very young.”

“Olivar is on the edge of the Bayan cluster. It wasn’t involved in the war, but somehow the planet’s small population was wiped out. The Council’s very first fleet was patrolling the cluster at the time, monitoring the conflict, but it missed whatever happened on Olivar. Neither side would admit responsibility for it but everyone suspected the Montagos.”

“Or pirates?”

“Pirates weren’t generally that wanton. Though it could have begun as a raid for slaves made under cover of the war. Some of the mining outposts were known to buy them on the sly.”

Destan looked over the list of items relating to the cluster. Six more wars involved the Montagos. Among others were a coup, a business de-merger which ruined a prominent interworld clan, an assassination, and the burning of a monastery by a local population incensed by the resurgence of a much-despised ancient cult.

Destan closed the folder. “I can examine more of these on my way to Umber.”

Jaynes took a seat on the opposite side of the table and glowered at the Historian. “Mr. Destan, I realize that thus far you have handled the entire investigation with creditable efficiency—in fact, more than I had allowed myself to hope. But that doesn’t mean I want to see its direction taken entirely out of my hands. Don’t forget that when action has to be taken—and note that I said

'when' not 'if'—it will be the Council Chairman who decides on it." The Chairman's testy levity gave way to irony. "So how about you letting me in on what you intend to do? You've already been vague about the results of your studies on the game this week. This time I want a clear itinerary."

Destan smiled a little self-consciously: Jaynes was right, of course. But his own conclusions about the game were too critical; they needed further evidence. The Chairman's "when" confirmed his conviction that precipitous action would be the only result if he revealed all his postulations. There was still time for that.

And Destan knew there was something else. Call it the thrill of the chase, but he was beginning to derive an unfamiliar satisfaction from his current foray into the present. Philip Cardis was his, and he was determined to uncover the truth about him, layer by layer. If Jaynes took drastic action now, the course of the investigation would be severed and with it his line back to Philip Cardis. That was the last thing he wanted.

"At this point I have two firm stops planned. First to Umber. If I get the satellite plans there, it will save me going to any of the major worlds to track down one of the satellite technicians. Then I'll go to Merander and visit the Tashkent shipyards where Cosmopolis was built. I'll try to approach one of the architects who worked on it, someone who might be able to tell me something about the ship we don't know. I might also be able to learn who paid for the ship and through what banking institution. From that point, I'll take it by the wind."

Jaynes looked a little skeptical. "The only agent I ever sent to Merander didn't even get in the door."

"It's worth another try. At most, I should be back within two weeks. Then there's a possibility I might want to return to Cosmopolis in time for the next Stellar Game." The Umber satellite would be ready by then.

Jaynes made arrangements for Destan's journey, providing a Council spaceboat with a crew of two, and the Historian received assistance from a local operator in Council intelligence concerning items relating to his plans on Merander.

The next day he was ready to leave. After wishing him luck, the Chairman said as a final thought: "By the way, you should avoid returning to Sigma on the day two weeks from tomorrow. It's a fleet rotation day and several of the patrols will be using the Council beacon to come in from their posts around the Concourse. You might find the airways around the system a little crowded."